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Hello, and welcome to Origin Stories. A podcast by the Immigration Policy Lab that explores migration through research and storytelling. I'm Adam Lichtenheld, IPL's executive director. Across the world, migration has become one of the most contentious political and policy challenges of our time. With branches at Stanford University and ETH Zurich in Switzerland, the Immigration Policy Lab generates rigorous evidence and innovative solutions to help policymakers make more informed decisions on immigration.

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We also try to highlight the human stories behind the data. Our guests in this episode are Stan and Sarah. Stan is president and director of the BK Kee foundation and board president at Community Partners International. And Sarah teaches at an independent school in New Jersey. They both graduated from Stanford in 1990.

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We'll let them take it away.

So, Stan, let's jump in here. Can you tell me a little bit about, like, who you were when you first arrived at Stanford?

I think to answer that, it's. I'd have to sort of start where I was born. I was actually born in Burma in the late 60s and early 70s, and I came to the United States in 77.

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And when I grew up in Burma, it was actually one of the 10 poorest countries in the world, which meant that things like basic sanitation services, for example, were just lacking. So one of my memories of growing up in Rangoon was watching my mom prepare dinner or her meals for the family in the kitchen, and she would hand me scraps of food that she wanted to throw out.

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And I would literally just throw it out the window of the kitchen into the alleyway and watch the crows swoop in and grab it before it landed. And that was sort of how the place I grew up was. We were literally living next to a garbage dump. Although we lived in Rangoon, which was the capital and largest city, it was actually still not uncommon to see a cart pulled by oxen down the main thoroughfare.

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If you wanted milk, a herd of goats would literally come to your building, and you would go down the stairs and bring your container, and the person would milk the goats there and give it to you. I also felt at the time it was a very isolated country.

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Burma had no TVs at the time, very few hours of programming on the radio. The only news we really got was from the BBC, which was for only a few hours a day. And if you wanted news for the outside world, we often had to go to the US Embassy.

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The US Embassy had a bulletin board actually outside, and you could sort of read the news that was sort of posted. The big sort of event in the country anytime a James Bond movie would show up, people would line up for days to get tickets. And that was sort of like the excitement sort of growing up, of course, the military played a huge role.

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A guy named General Ne Win had actually taken power in the 60s of Burma, and he led the country down this really xenophobic, isolationist path. And so the country was in a financial mess, an economic mess. So there were occasional riots. And there was one that was particularly bad in fall of 1974, when the Secretary General, who was actually from Burma, had passed away, and the students in the university in Burma, Rangu Institute of Technology, led a riot that sort of really came, went out of hand.

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And so military curfews were enforced all through the Capitol. There were six o'clock curfews on the street. So, in essence, nobody could be on the streets after 6 O'clock. And I remember waiting for my brothers who were older than me, who were out and about in the city, watching the clock and really kind of just being really anxious, hoping that they would make it home in time, because you were also obligated to be accounted at the place that you were registered.

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So at night, there were party committee officials who would randomly go around houses checking the make sure that you were actually where you were supposed to be. And so it was just a very anxious, fearful time. I remember one time we were walking around the streets with my parents, and you could hear gunfire and the crowds started to run.

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And I remember running with my parents. And so there were some seriously, I guess, sort of dark moments in that place. But I also have very, very positive memories also. I actually had not gone to formal school when I was in Burma. My parents had always dreamt of immigrating to the United States since I was about five years old.

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So they thought since the schools were not in great shape and it might be imminent for them to leave the country, they never actually enrolled me into a school. So I had actually plenty of time to kind of just basically do what kids, I guess, do, which is I spent a lot of days flying kites with my cousin.

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I would make kites out of newspapers, and we would occasionally save up money to buy a kite that was made by somebody else. And we would fly them. And there were all these kite wars inside the capital, and you would fly these kites really high, and we would actually lace the strings with glass because what you were trying to do was cut down the other kites.

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And when a kite was cut down, just all the kids would chase the kite and some of them would carry, like, poles with tree branches on the top so that they can actually snag the kite as it was coming down. So that was one of my sort of favorite childhood memories growing up in Burma.

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They also had this thing called Dinga, which is the Burmese New Year festival. And it was a water festival, which meant that you actually can make water balloons. You could actually have water guns. You had buckets of water ready, and anybody who walks by your house or your place, you could actually just go up to them and pour water over them, or you could throw water balloons at them.

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And which kid wouldn't love that, right? So that was really kind of an exciting, fun time. And there were all these, like, floats, or people would take their cars, a few cars that they were around. They would sort of decorate them, drive them around, and you could, like, throw water at them, throw water balloons at them from your flats.

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And it was just a very festive, fun time. So those were also very, very nice memories from my childhood.

So kinda just a homemade water park there.

Yeah, and it was like, just everybody expected it. And it's a tropical place, it's warm. And so people actually welcomed somebody coming up to them with a bucket of water and just drenching them.

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I mean, if you think about how strange that is. In the United States, you just walked up to a stranger and actually poured cold water on them. But that was celebrated, and it was like this fun kind of almost like communal celebration.

It's funny some of the stories, you have shared with me in the past, and some of these are new, but I distinctly remember you telling me about the kite wars when we were back at Stanford.

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I was totally, taken by these images that you created, of these children chasing after kites that had been cut free. And then the book Kite Runner came out, and then the movie came out. It just kind of brought that into reality for me that this is going on in many different cultures.

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So it kinda on that for me.

Yeah, and those kites were elaborate I mean, people took great pains to decorate them. They had like, very long tails, some of them were like, they ruled the sky for days they were kinda like the king of the sky. And they were very distinctive.

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And everybody wanted to take those certain kites down, and when it went down, it was there like a big cheer. And everybody wanted that kite because there must have been something very magical about that kite. So children, these throngs of kids would just literally run around the streets of Rangoon chasing this kite, trying to get at it so.

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Could you tell a little bit about how your family came to the US?

We were ethnic Chinese living in Burma and in the late 60s, the Burmese government actually nationalized all the business holdings of the ethnic Chinese. And they started passing more and more restrictive laws, including things like, not being able to enroll your kids in medical school or professional schools, and not being able to own land and having to hold different types of registration cards that made you basically identified you as an alien.

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Even though our family actually had lived for generations in Burma. And so life was increasingly difficult, and it was pretty clear for my parents that if there was going to be any future for their children, it was not going to be in Burma. And I actually give a lot of credit to my parents, they were not educated, had not gone to college.

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My mom was a housewife and never worked a single day outside the home. My dad had a very sort of low level job in a bank, and they were relatively old, my dad was already in his 50s, my mom in her sort of 40s. And they really made a decision to leave Burma, really for us to find a better life for their kids and, with very few resources, right.

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So when I look back now, I think about how difficult it must have been for them to actually uproot Pennsfeld from everything they ever knew with very little support, very little resources and to move to a completely new country. And it actually took them five years to do that, it was not easy to immigrate from or emigrate from Burma.

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I remember again as a child, I would go I was the youngest, so I actually went everywhere with my parents, they would go at night to various. It turns out they were against bureaucrats who needed to sign off on our papers, and we would oftentimes bring a carton of cigarettes or a bottle of liquor.

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And it was kinda grease the wheel so that this person would sign off on it, and move it to the next person. And it took really all of five years for them to complete that process and get us to the US.

And you were how old when you arrived?

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I was almost 10 years old, and it's funny looking back now up to that point as I mentioned, schools were sort of on and off in Burma, and so my parents had never placed me in their. So I arrived here in the United States actually never having attended a single day of school when I was about 10 years old.

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Incredible, so I'd love to hear you talk a little bit about kind of like, there must have been some culture shock arriving here, but then again maybe eight years later, additional culture shock when you arrived at Stanford.

Yeah, of course when you come to the richest country in the world from one of the poorest countries in the world.

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It's bound to, sort of everything is a shock, I remember going to the supermarket and noticing that there were actually aisles with pet food, which in cans and stuff, and I thought, this is incredible. In Burma, to get canned food, it was like a luxury item, and they actually have this for pets.

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I mean, it's just unbelievable that they would do that, and you could buy ice cream and you can watch tv. I could watch tv, which I thought like, was just the most amazing thing in the world, since I had never been exposed to a television until I arrived into the United States.

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So, those were certainly some of the early memories of just getting acclimated into the country.

So, I know you play basketball. You have in the past, and you still do for fun, but did you play basketball to kind of try to fit in?

I think I played basketball because my parents were working all the time when they arrived, and I had a lot of free time to myself.

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So, my dad went up to start working, he actually went to Texas as a dishwasher at a Chinese restaurant. And my mom was working in a garment factory actually, she was trying to earn money by basically sewing clothes, and she was getting paid by the piece. So I kinda vaguely remember, it was something like a nickel a piece, and she wanted to pick up extra money, so she actually invested in a sewing machine so she could work at home, and actually do a little bit extra work.

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So, the point is they were very, very busy, kinda just trying to make life for them for their family here in the United States. And so I actually had plenty of free time, and I would go to the parks, and just kinda play ball with whoever showed up.

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So is it okay if we jump kinda to Stanford, and maybe we could talk a little bit about, like when we first met, if you wanna touch on that.

So, Stanford was also a little bit of a transition for me, and I think I met you our freshman year, probably through a common friend.

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And I guess what really drew me to you really was that, up to that point, I really felt that. I guess I didn't have the words at the time, but I felt like, I was invisible. You come from a poor country, you're actually a minority in the poor country.

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You come to a new country, and you're clearly sort of just getting acclimated, and you clearly don't belong. So you're used to sort of being a little bit invisible, and just not being seen, and I think I connected really. With you, because I felt intuitively for the first time that you actually were interested in my story, who I was as a person, I remember we spent one night, I think I borrowed my dad's car and we were parked.

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I want to stay outside of Twilio, and I think we must have stayed up all night just talking and chatting. And I felt a real deep connection because I think I felt that your stories about your grandmother and your childhood growing up in Brooklyn, a lot of it resonated with me and, but more importantly, I felt heard.

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I felt like you saw me as a person, you valued me as a person, I think that was really the start of our bond and our friendship, over 37 years now.

I appreciate that because, I mean, we've never talked about that before, so, but, but likewise, I have to say that you, were the first person I connected with and felt comfortable talk.

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And I think what I appreciated most about you, even though, you felt you were invisible, interestingly enough, I appreciate you because you were always unapologetically, and I felt, I didn't have the confidence to show myself to the world, so in, a lot of ways, you helped me to find my own voice.

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Well, thank you.

So back to Stanford, you talked about coming from the poorest country to the richest country, and then fast forward eight years later, you're at one of the richest schools, right. What kind of social, cultural differences did you encounter?

Well, I think I came to Stanford, look, searching for an identity, frankly, I was, I think like most young people, you're trying to find who you are, what you're about.

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And for many people, the natural sort of buckets are your race, your country, and I didn't really have that. And I, I came to Stanford and I quickly realized that my superficial identity as an Asian American, really, I didn't resonate with me because most of the kids I met who were Asian at Stanford really had very different upbringing, very different background and different values than me and really different outlook.

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And so I think I was really searching for an identity while I was at Stanford, and actually this reminded me of a class I took, Jim Stiers, Professor Stier's class on Introduction to Civil Rights, and he introduced me to the series Eyes on the Prize. And I remember just being very fascinated by the history of civil rights movement in this country, the history of the African American, and up to that point, I really did not know that story, did not really know anything about that.

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But I think that helped me start to shape my sort of identity, sort of being more drawn to people who have been excluded, people who have been discriminated, especially by systems and powers and governments, and so I think that was sort of, you know, sort of my evolution.

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I'd love to hear you talk more about that because I know, you know, with the work that you do today, you continue to focus on that.

Yeah, so about in 2005, I still vividly remember I had actually just spent 10 years working on large sort of corporate mergers and acquisition transactions.

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And I had gone on to law school after Stanford, and even though I intended to actually specialize in immigration law, student debt and otherwise sort of took me down the path of joining a big corporate law firm. And I basically spent a decade doing that work, I really didn't enjoy it, and I transitioned to being an assistant general counsel of a Fortune 500 company.

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And it actually promised me to elevate me to the general counsel position because the then general counsel was thinking about retiring. So I was in this doing sort of, I guess, the young person, ambitious person path of trying to advance your career. And I'm riding my bike, exercise bike at home, and we're raising two kids at that point, my wife and I, and I get a call from my aunt, who is actually also from Burma, and she had, in Silicon Valley parlance, had a liquidity event.

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And she had made a lot of money, and I knew she had a company, but I didn't realize how well she had done, and when she told me, I was, I was frankly astounded, and she had sold her company to a private equity firm. And what was really interesting was she wanted to set up a foundation to go back and do development work in terms of helping with health and education in Burma, which was by that point really isolated.

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There were sanctions against the country, it was really on a no touch list by most western nations. The U.S treasury had all kinds of OFAC rules or, rules against doing any work or any contact in Burma, and so the people were quite isolated. And my aunt wanted to really do something in the country, and she asked me if I would quit my job and head up the foundation to do that work.

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I thought, well, you know, I could try it for maybe a year, and if I don't like it, I just sort of go back to my life being a corporate lawyer, but this sounded like an intriguing opportunity. So I did it, I took it, and I went back to the country and really got to know the country as an adult for the first time, traveling around, visiting all the different ethnic groups and all the different regions in the country and really learning more about the country.

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And it's been now almost 18 years, and we sort of lean into supporting work for, again, groups that historically have been persecuted by the military government. In Burma, for example, the Rohingya crisis in 2017, where roughly close to a million Rohingyas were driven out by the Burmese military into Bangladesh, helped sort of jump start some programs in refugee camps in Bangladesh.

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And it's really sort of informed our work over the years.

That's just, it's just impressive, admirable work, that's truly thankless. But I think you're one of the few people, who really have the opportunity and the privilege to be able to, return to, one's home country and do that, so.

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The interesting thing is I get asked oftentimes by some folks as to why I am doing work in Burma, because the country essentially exiled us and kicked us out the country. And it's very interesting to me, even to this day, whenever I go back to Burma, people there oftentimes ask me basically my identity, they try to get me to identify myself as Chinese, even though I speak the language.

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I have, I speak the language with a kid who grew up in Burma, but they say, well, you don't look Burmese, you look Singaporean, or you look, this or that. And so people ask me, why do you work in a country where basically they sort of disowned you or they're not really part of your tribe, so to speak?

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And I think, I think the answer is, really came from my time in Stanford, the start of that, which is the evolution of my identity. Which is, I really don't identify so much with any particular groups as, it's just people who are discriminated against who I think have suffered some great injustice.

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And that really is kind of the motivation for that work. Anyway, I'd like to kinda maybe turn the table around and ask you some questions if I can, Sarah, so why don't we get to start? I've heard lots of stories about your growing up in Brooklyn and coming from a family with parents who had immigrated from China, and I know you particularly had a very close relationship with your grandmother.

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Can you kinda just tell me more about that?

I think before I arrived at Stanford, I had grown up kind of a poor inner-city kid, Brooklyn born and bred. My father had emigrated to the US at age 17, and he had used false papers. I guess in many people's eyes, he'd be considered an illegal immigrant.

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And I think it wasn't until many years later I would say probably 15 to 20 years later, that he finally was able to get amnesty from the government. So he came here and at around age 30, he brought my mother here. He went, he went back to Hong Kong to find a wife, and he was a bartender.

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My mother was a seamstress in one of the Chinatown sweatshops, and they were always working. My father was actually quite lucky because he had a union job and he worked at Windows on the World, the bar and restaurant at the top of one of the Twin Towers. And so my parents were working a lot and my grandmother raised us and she kept us off the streets.

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We grew up with immigrant families around us. There were many who were left to fend for themselves when their parents were at work and some of them became addicts or join gangs. At the time, growing up in New York city in the 70s, it was probably the worst time in New York City history filled with corruption and poverty and gangs.

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So there were lots of Chinese gangs forcing boys to join. So really, my grandmother kept us off the Streets. And I would have to say, books kept me off the streets. She was in many ways, one of my most important role models. She became a naturalized citizen in her 80s, and she was so proud.

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But she always set an example for me because, although I absolutely do not have the courage she had, she kind of recreated her own little village in Brooklyn when she was transplanted here. She knew all the neighbors and their business because, she grew a garden, and she always shared vegetables from her garden, something I think, she learned to do back in China when they had to kind of live through famine and World War II.

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So the idea of sharing was an important part of her makeup. So she'd kinda walk every day, tended her garden, and she'd stop and talk to everyone, absolutely everyone on the way. And you have to understand, my grandmother did not speak English, but somehow she knew which neighbor was away on vacation and where.

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She knew the daughter of that neighbor was having trouble with her boyfriend. She knew Maria suffered from diabetes and had to get her leg amputated. She knew everything. And every time I walked out of the house, people would always ask me how my grandmother was. And everybody knew my family because they knew my grandmother.

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And I tell them this or that, and they'd say, yeah, yeah, I know, your grandma told me. And how the heck she told them, I really have no idea. But I knew she had no fear in using the words, the few words that she knew mixed in with a whole lot of toys on and hand gestures and a whole lot of understanding and empathy and big smiles.

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Any examples of what you think you wouldn't have done but for your grandmother's examples or influence?

I think she taught me to connect with people. I think by nature I'm an introvert, but, I mean, she taught me just not to be afraid, even if you don't speak the language, and I think I carry that with me.

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And I think sharing from your garden, I kind of broaden that to kinda mean, it doesn't have to be squash, it doesn't have to be winter melon you're sharing, it might be stories, it might be poems. I probably wouldn't have explored writing were it not for her.

So let's talk about that.

[00:30:10:023]

One of the things that has always, Sarah, fascinated me about your choice of what you studied at Stanford is literature in English is that it was so atypical of people from an immigrant background. You were a poet, you were celebrated actually at Stanford for your poetry. I distinctly remember you were actually picked to read your poetry in our junior convocation in the fall of 1988.

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And I remember being extremely proud of you because you were up there in Memorial Church, Manchu, with a bunch of Olympic swimmers and gold medalists. And I'm like, wow, my friend Sarah is recognized amongst some of the best in the world at something, that's incredible. So why don't you tell me how it is that you were able to do that given your background and in your time at Stanford?

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Well, first of all, I don't think I should have been up there with those Olympic medal winners. I think part of it, exploring, writing, it came from the fact that my parents were pretty liberal and progressive for being working class immigrants. I know a lot of children of immigrants felt the pressure to be that doctor, be that lawyer, engineer, accountant, anything that would give us stability, economic stability, and advancement, right?

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But my parents really quite simply wanted us to be happy. And when I first decided on Stanford, I had a talk with my oldest sister, and she's older by five years, and I said, college is gonna be expensive. I mean let's take, I feel like I should go there and go pre med or something, and my sister, who was, what?

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She must have been 23 years old, wise beyond her years, she said, you gotta study what you love. And, I just took that and ran with it. I took this amazing class from Denise Levertov, I believe it was my sophomore year. It was advanced poetry writing, and I took a class from Adrienne Rich and her partner Michelle Cliff.

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And I had always been attracted to writers who were writing about marginalized experiences. And it's funny that you talked about Professor Steyer and his class and how he opened the door for you with eyes on the prize. I also felt most attracted to African American writers and LGBTQ writers.

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So, I was not your typical immigrant student.

Now that's fascinating, how did you carry that forward once you left Stanford?

I ended up getting my MFA in poetry, and I went into education, because I had always loved children and I had always loved reading and writing, and I thought partnering the two would be a good thing.

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I think, I've been working with children for decades and I still write, mostly for myself. But it's interesting because, I do think it's part of my DNA, because my father, who really had a sixth grade education back in China, it was interrupted by war with Japan. And he ended up educating himself, as an adult, and he was always fascinated by poetry.

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So when I was writing poetry at Stanford, I had no idea he was writing his own poetry back in Brooklyn. And he's 92 years old, he still writes every day. He gets on the blower with his friend who's, I think 95 years old, and they still workshop their poems together on the phone.

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You guys should jointly publish some works together. Do you think that some of that work just kind of trying to dive into a little bit about your teaching and working with kids. That show up sort of in different ways in terms of the things that you stress or the kind of works that you pick and

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Sure, yeah, I mean, my focus is to help, I work with sixth graders, or have done so for the past about over 20 years. And I think one of my main jobs is to help them find their voice, in discussion and in writing. I teach at a K to eight independent school, and I've always chosen writers from different backgrounds.

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And when I was the chair of the department, I had always pushed to make sure that our reading lists were inclusive. So, and even now, maybe in 2021, Illinois was the first state to adopt a requirement that would include an Asian American unit, Asian American history unit in their K to 12 curriculum.

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And then New Jersey, became the second state to adopt that. And as I live in New Jersey, I kind of I encouraged my head to be one of the first schools to adopt an Asian American history unit. Now that is yet to come, but I will continue to work on that.

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I hear you're a tough grader so, take it easy on those kids?

Yes, well, actually one of the key lessons I teach them is, don't be afraid to ask for help. I think when I arrived at Stanford, that was, something I hid. I needed help and I never really, came out to say, hey, I need some help over here.

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But that is an important thing that I teach my students as well as my children, so.

Any advice to young Stanford students or anybody else slightly up?

I think making connections with people, making sure you make connections with people outside your dorm, outside your major, outside your department, outside your culture.

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Outside your socioeconomic background, they might not look like you. They might not have had the same upbringing, but be prepared to be surprised and to find that you might have more in common than you expect.

Yeah, there are certainly, as I look back on the years at Stanford, I met a lot of people from very frankly interesting stories and backgrounds.

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And I wish I had spent more time, really listening to them and listening with your stories and getting to know them. And that's something that my daughter, who's there now, I try to tell her and emphasize.

Yeah, I think I finally found my people when I joined this graduate student eating club back in Toyon, and it was filled with graduate students from all over the world.

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And in many ways, I felt like I had come home. They were welcoming, they were interested, they were, and interesting. And, I met people from France, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Guatemala, and their perspectives were all varied but similar. Even though we had all grown up in different countries and I think maybe what drew me to them, was the fact that they too felt separate from the American community.

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So even though I had been born here, I felt that separation keenly.

Yeah that's interesting, it makes me think about the fact that, as I traveled now all over Southeast Asia, working with communities that are oftentimes marginalized. People with very different backgrounds, so, for example, the Rohingya is a predominantly Muslim.

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It's, first glance, you would look and you think, well, you don't share anything. But, my conclusion, having spent a lot of different time with a lot of different groups is, at the end of the day, we are all human beings really searching for the same things, right? So, to your point, when you were meeting people all over the world, you felt like, a lot of them you felt connected to.

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And I think if you actually listen to them, we're underlying sort of the surface, we're all pretty much the same, actually.

And I think that's a great place to end.