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University of California  
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Ronald M. Hirano

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Interviews conducted by  
Lu Ann Sleeper in 2013

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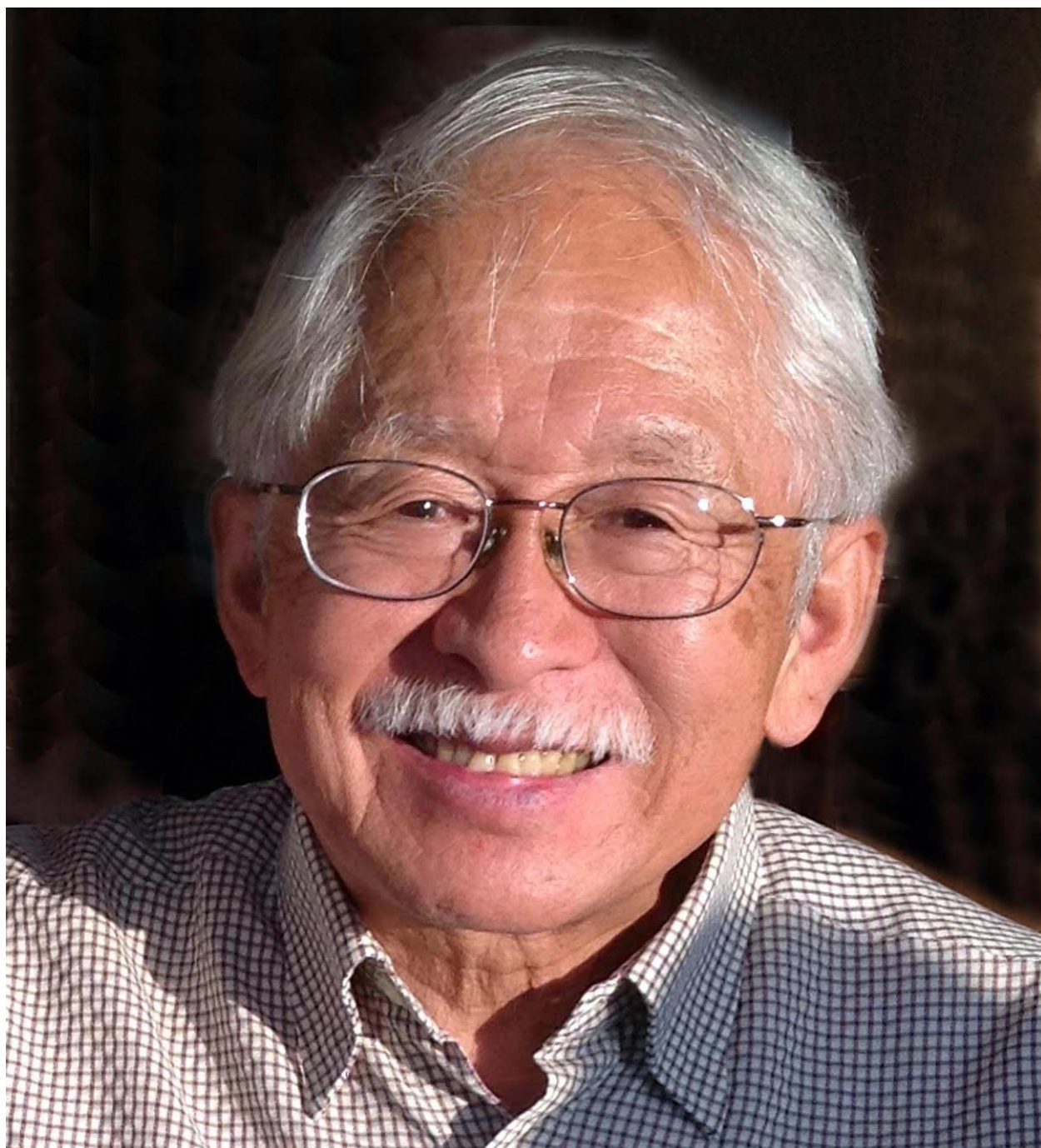
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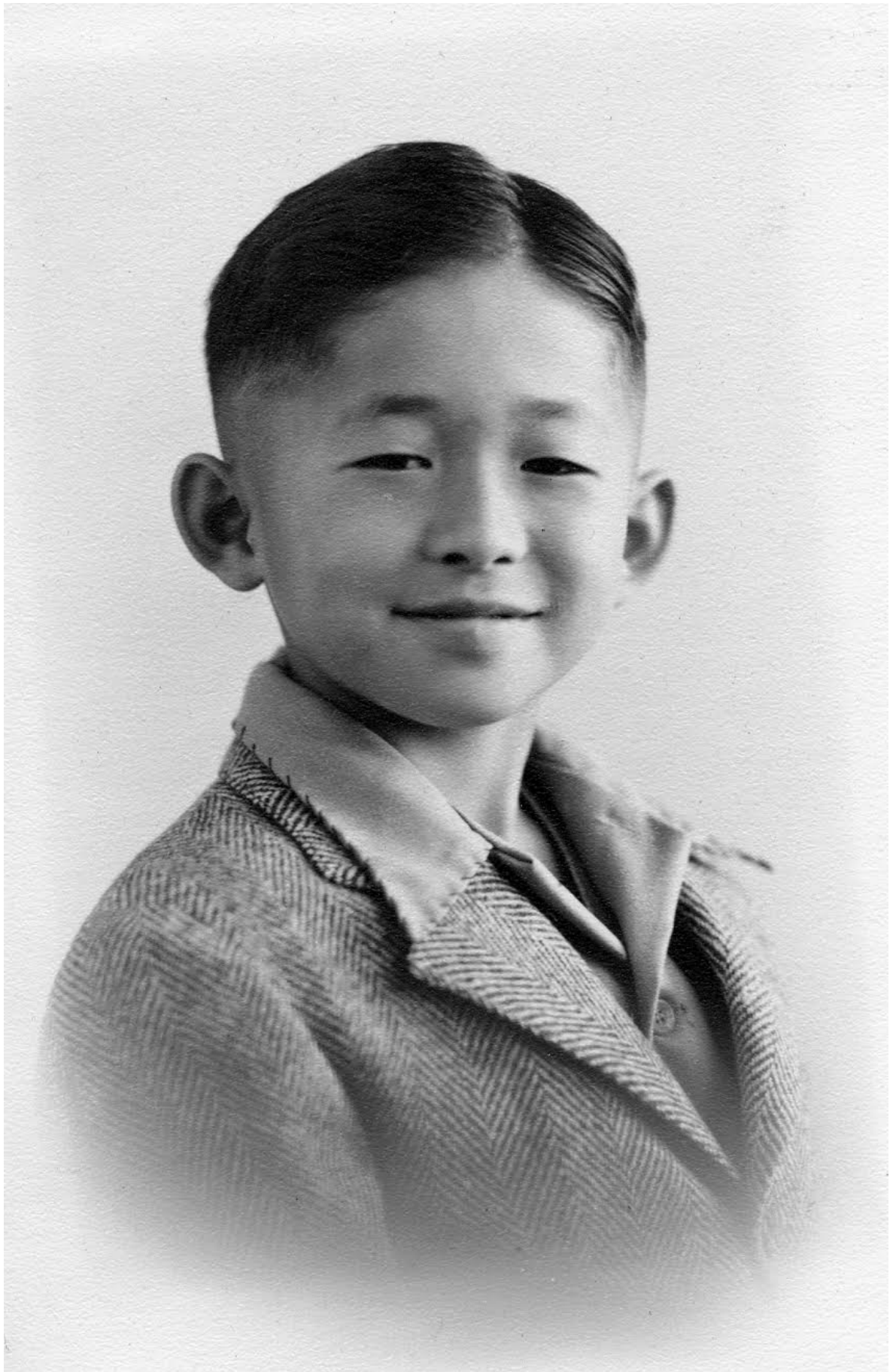
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Ronald M. Hirano



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Interview 1: June 6, 2013

Video File 1

01- 00:00:05

Sleeper: We have one camera on you and one camera on me so we can look at each other.

Hirano: Oh, okay, I'll look at you. Ready.

01- 00:00:09

Sleeper: What is your full Japanese name?

Hirano: You want my full middle name too?

01- 00:00:19

Sleeper: Yes, your Japanese name.

Hirano: It's Ronald Masato Hirano. It's a very common family name, just like Smith or Jones. In local phone books you'll find many Hiranos. I'm a full-blooded, second generation Japanese. My mother is first generation. She was born in San Francisco. I'm second generation. My mother is Nisei—that's the term for someone who's first generation.

01- 00:00:54

Sleeper: Yours?

Hirano: I'm Sansei. Second generation.

01- 00:00:57

Sleeper: I understand. When and where were you born?

Hirano: I was born in Berkeley, I believe in Herrick Hospital on Dwight Way, which later became part of Alta Bates; I'm unsure. I was born on November 28, 1932, during the Depression.

01- 00:01:30

Sleeper: Thank you. Can you tell me about your family background?

Hirano: Okay. My father came to the US with his parents when he was four years old. They lived in West Oakland. My grandfather opened a hand laundry business there.

01- 00:01:36

Sleeper: Did your family on both your mother's and father's side come from Japan?

Hirano: My mother was born in San Francisco. Her parents were born in Japan. My mother's father first came to San Francisco to find work—

01- 00:01:41

Sleeper: And immigrate to California?

Hirano: —but he needed a bride, and as they did back then, he got a traditional bride picture from Japan. She came here and they met and got married. My grandmother was a very shrewd woman. She bought up a lot of real estate while my grandfather worked doing tailoring. They had properties all over in San Francisco, which they later sold.

01- 00:02:50

Sleeper: What part of Japan is your father's family from?

Hirano: My father was born in Tokyo, but his family originally came from Nagano, in the Japanese Alps, where the Olympic Winter Games were later held. My mother was born in—let me think. No, my mother was born in San Francisco, but her family was from an island in the Inland Sea, across from Hiroshima. My mother went to Japan to research her genealogy using cemetery records and she found records of her family history dating back to 1000 AD. She discovered that her distant relatives, who were pirates from the Inland Sea region, raided and pillaged the coast of China and Korea. It was amazing to learn that about my family history. I think I read somewhere it was because of famine, but I'm not sure, I need to look into it more. I'm not sure exactly why they immigrated.

01- 00:03:48

Sleeper: Wow. Why did they leave Japan and move here?

Hirano: I'm not sure exactly why they immigrated. It might have been because of opportunities, work, way of living, I don't know.

01- 00:04:20

Sleeper: Before World War II, how did your parents meet and get married?

Hirano: It's an interesting story. I need to do some more research, but I believe my father was involved with the Japanese Methodist Church on West 10<sup>th</sup> and Market Streets, that area, and I think they met at a church social. It was Japanese-speaking church, though they spoke English too. I believe they got married on January 31, 1932, then went on their honeymoon to the Claremont Hotel, then to Yosemite, then to Little Tokyo in Los Angeles. I remember my father telling me about it.

01- 00:05:24

Sleeper: The Japanese community? I mean was it Japanese people who attended that church? Ok, Japanese only then. Did your parents or grandparents and other family members experience racism—

Hirano: Good question.

01- 00:06:10

Sleeper: —against them or did the Japanese community experience this?

Hirano: It's hard to say because Japanese culture is self-segregated, so even if I were to ask about that, no one would tell me. There's a Japanese word for that. I don't remember what it is, but from my research into Deaf people's experiences in the internment camps it wasn't something that was talked about. It's a Japanese culture called *shikatanagai*, known as Japanese code of silence, or Japanese for "it cannot be helped."

Sleeper: You mean hearing Japanese people or Deaf Japanese people or both didn't talk about it? So hearing people didn't talk about it

Hirano: Hearing people—it's their cultural norm. People just don't talk about those things.

01- 00:06:46

Sleeper: Where are you in the birth order in your family?

Hirano: I'm the oldest of six. Next in line is a brother who is hard-of-hearing. Next is Janet, who graduated from here. Fourth is my brother Dan, who graduated from the University of Oregon. Then comes my sister Carol, who graduated from San Francisco State. The last is my brother Gordon, who also graduated from San Francisco University. So there's six of us.

01- 00:07:17

Sleeper: And they're all still alive today?

Hirano: Yes, all of us live here in the Bay Area.

01- 00:07:20

Sleeper: Good. How did they communicate with you as a Deaf person?

Hirano: Some, like Dan, we wrote back and forth. Janet could finger-spell. Carol could sign a little, but mostly finger spelled. My father could fingerspell too. He knew some simple signs, but if we needed to talk about something serious, we would write back and forth to make sure there were no misunderstandings. My father's fingerspelling was clear and easy to read, unless he was intoxicated, then his articulation was very hard to read.

01- 00:07:59

Sleeper: Did he speak Japanese to you or English?

Hirano: Oh, just English. I can't read Japanese. I was born here, so I'm too American to read Japanese, sorry to say.

01- 00:08:11

Sleeper: Because many Japanese families speak Japanese in the home, so—

Hirano: Right, true, but I never learned Japanese, just English. Now my father came here when he was four, so he knew a little Japanese, but my mother was born in San Francisco where she lived until the age of five, then she and her sister

went to Japan to stay with their grandparents while their parents were busy with their business. They stayed there until my mother was fourteen, and left just before the big earthquake of 1923, which was a major disaster. They left just in time, so they were very fortunate. Now since they spent so many years in Japan, they had become enculturated into Japanese norms, while three other siblings who were born in the US while they were away, were of course very American. So when they came back they had all sorts of cultural clashes the rest of their growing up years. And that has lasted till today, unfortunately.

01- 00:09:14

Sleeper: Where did you go to school?

Hirano: Well, I was born in Berkeley. Then when my parents found out I was deaf a doctor recommended they see a Miss Delight Rice. She's a CODA. She looked me over and agreed that I was Deaf and recommended they send me to California School for the Deaf in Berkeley [CSD]. She also checked out my brother and said to send him to an oral school, the Gough School for the Deaf in San Francisco. I went to CSD when I was five.

01- 00:09:56

Sleeper: So your brother was raised oral. Does he sign now?

Hirano: Yes, both of us sign.

01- 00:10:02

Sleeper: Now, you understand each other. So you grew up separately, going to different schools, with you at Berkeley.

Hirano: Right.

01- 00:10:08

Sleeper: How many Deaf Japanese students were there at CSD?

Hirano: Good question; let me think. When I went in, the older students—there was one who already graduated. There was Ruth Tagagi. One who graduated in 1940. When I went in—oh, then there were the Ikedas. There was Nancy Ikeda, her brother Ernest and the twins. So there were four, plus me. I'm trying to remember... Oh, and Kazuko Momii. So I'd say there were around six or seven.

01- 00:10:54

Sleeper: Did you hang out with them or identify with them, that is, were you a “pack”?

Hirano: No, we interacted with everyone equally.

01- 00:10:57

Sleeper: Or did you all interact equally with the other students at the school?

Hirano: Our families stayed pretty segregated, but for us, the most important thing was that we could communicate with each other in ASL, so really, I'd say I interacted more with the white students than the other Japanese students. I wasn't close to the other Japanese students.

01- 00:11:14

Sleeper: So you didn't experience racism there?

Hirano: During war time, yes, but not before that.

01- 00:11:19

Sleeper: But not before that?

Hirano: Yes.

01- 00:11:22

Sleeper: So during the war you experienced racism but not before. Tell me more about that.

Hirano: In February 1942 the government issued an eviction notice. My father was very worried because in the camps, there would be no education for deaf students. So he asked Miss Delight Rice if she would adopt me during that time so I could go to school, and she said yes.

01- 00:12:01

Sleeper: Interesting that she had to ask permission from the FBI. How did that work?

Hirano: She requested permission from the FBI to do this, which was granted, and so I was able to go to CSD while my family was sent to the camp.

01- 00:12:14

Sleeper: Like an ID badge, you mean?

Hirano: Yes, the FBI gave me a special permit which I carried in my wallet, and any time I got stopped by the police, I showed them the permit. It was for my protection and I carried that around during my growing up years. And I was only ten years old! It was an ID card, like a driver's license. The FBI would come visit me every month or two and question me. I was ten years old, and they'd ask me all these questions. I was innocent! Ah, whatever.

01- 00:12:38

Sleeper: Before that happened, when Pearl Harbor was bombed, in Hawaii, how did your family react? Do you remember?

Hirano: Oh, it was awful. I remember it very well. On the morning of December 7th, 1941, was when it occurred. Later that evening, I was in the kitchen, sitting across from my father. He was listening to the radio, and all of the sudden I saw his face start to change, and after a short time he exploded and started to cry. I asked him what was wrong, and he wouldn't say. He was just angry. The

next morning I saw the declaration of war in the newspaper. My father was very upset. It was just awful!

01- 00:13:23

Sleeper: What about your mother?

Hirano: I don't know. She stayed wherever she was, so I don't know.

01- 00:13:26

Sleeper: And your brothers and sisters? They could hear—

Hirano: They were very young. I was the oldest at nine, so they were too young to really understand.

01- 00:13:32

Sleeper: When you heard what happened, you were at home.

Hirano: Before that happened, my father had a ritual that he did in the morning. He had an heirloom Samurai sword that he would polish. I would see him every so often, polishing his sword so it would shine. When they were sent to the camp, the FBI confiscated his sword and he never got it back! Ah well.

01- 00:14:10

Sleeper: What about at school?

Hirano: Oh, other students started hurtling insults at me, but I'm no dummy

01- 00:14:12

Sleeper: What was the reaction like in the Deaf community?

Hirano: I found out who was German and Italian and shot right back at them in kind! If they were going to hand it to me, I was going to hand it right back to them!

01- 00:14:37

Sleeper: When FDR signed Executive Order 9066, the evacuation order, forcing people of Japanese ancestry into internment camps, how did your family react?

Hirano: Really, because they are hearing and I'm Deaf, we had very little communication.

01- 00:14:58

Sleeper: What did you see on their faces?

Hirano: They were relocated in April, and right before that, I moved in with Delight Rice. When the buses came to take my parents to the camp, we went to see them off. I didn't think about it at the time, but I didn't actually say goodbye. My mother didn't say anything at the time, but she harbored that resentment for a long time. I did apologize later after I heard the story. Anyway, many years later, after I had gotten married and it was time to buy a house—it was a good time as the interest rates were low—I needed money for a down

payment, and I asked my father if I could borrow \$1,000 dollars. My mother, who was still harboring this resentment, told my father behind the scenes not to lend it to me. So I ended up having to sell off some stocks at a loss to get money for the down payment. From that time on I never asked anyone if I could borrow money again. Others asked my father for a loan and he gave it, but I never said anything.

01- 00:16:23

Sleeper: Was that because you were Deaf?

Hirano: Because I snubbed my mother, and she never forgot it.

01- 00:16:33

Sleeper: How did your family feel about having to give up their home and property?

Hirano: The house we lived in was rented. That was on 2809 California St. in West Berkeley. My father owned a large supermarket on 14<sup>th</sup> near Webster in downtown Oakland. He it was time to sell it and fortunately just happened to sell it a few days before December 7, 1941, the Pearl Harbor attack. My uncle also had a supermarket in East Oakland, and he eventually sold it at a large loss. Rumor had it in a local Japanese community that my father was a spy. It wasn't true, it was just coincidence.

01- 00:17:28

Sleeper: What about your family's belongings, their car, household items, etc., having to pack it all up and get rid of it?

Hirano: I don't know. Well, their belongings went into a storage room at West Tenth Street Methodist Church. It was under protection by its Caucasian associates during the war. After the war they got everything back safe and sound.

01- 00: 17:52

Sleeper: How did you feel about being separated from your family and living with Miss Rice? Is that her name sign [D at chin]?

Hirano: Yes, that's her name sign.

01- 00: 18:01

Sleeper: How did you feel about that?

Hirano: Oh, that had a big impact on me, it really impacted my life. When I was at home with my family, my parents didn't sign. My brother Robert would gesture. So we had barely any communication, and I had very little access to information. When I moved in with Miss Rice she signed fluently, and it just opened my eyes and I learned so much. She interpreted radio—this was before TV, and movies—and I just took it all in. She took me to the Deaf clubs, and I met and interacted with people. It changed my whole life. With my parents, I barely had any of that. It really changed me a lot.

01- 00: 18:39

Sleeper: I mean more like being separated from your parents when you lived with Miss Rice. Did you miss them when they were sent to the internment camp?

Hirano: No, no, I was very happy with Miss Rice because we could communicate. With my parents, we couldn't communicate.

01- 00: 18:48

Sleeper: It was a long time. How did you feel about the separation?

Hirano: That's what it's all about, communication.

01- 00: 18:59

Sleeper: Where was the first temporary camp your parents were sent to?

Hirano: It was called Tanforan Assembly Center. It was in San Bruno. It was formerly a racetrack facility which had been converted into a temporary holding center with the stables being used as sleeping quarters. I went to visit my parents therewith Miss Rice in May of 1942 and when we got there I saw that my parents were sleeping in what were stables! That was quite a shocker for me at ten years old. My parents introduced me to a Deaf man there named Tadishi "Tad" Yamamoto. He had graduated from CSD in 1938

He told me about what happened to him, quite a story. He was living in an apartment in Oakland, and because he was Deaf he hadn't known about the evacuation notice in February. One night, the FBI abruptly barged into his apartment, grabbed him, gave him no time to pack, and drove him to Tanforan. My parents helped him out by giving him clothing. Really an awful story.

01- 00: 19:11

Sleeper: T-A-D? What happened to him? Did he survive? Did he come back? Have you seen him?

Hirano: He came back, yes. I saw him at the club. He was profusely thankful to my parents for all the help they had given him. He died around 1980.

01- 00: 20:30

Sleeper: You said you saw the dismal room where your parents stayed, and it was pretty small?

Hirano: It was a stable, long and narrow.

01- 00: 20:41

Sleeper: Did it smell?

Hirano: No, it didn't smell.

01- 00: 20:44

Sleeper: Do you remember how long they stayed there?

Hirano: It was pretty clean. It was from April of 1942 until July—well, that was just a temporary place where they kept people while they were building what were they called? Internment camps. They built ten of them. So people stayed in this temporary place in the San Francisco Bay area until the relocation camps were ready, then they moved everyone to those camps by train in July.

01- 00: 21:15

Sleeper: Where were your parents relocated to?

Hirano: My parents were sent to Topaz, Utah. That was Central, Utah; there were four. There was Manzanar Internment Camp near Lone Pine, California, for internees from Southern California.

01- 00: 21:20

Sleeper: All?

Hirano: They were all over. The ironic thing was, while those from the Pacific states were forced to leave there were other Japanese residents living in Idaho, Utah and other places who were allowed to stay and not forced into internment camps. And what's more, there was a camp in Idaho where people were brought from the Pacific Northwest, but Japanese people living right around the camp in Idaho were not forced to live there! It didn't make any sense!

01- 00: 21:59

Sleeper: Maybe they were also under observation?

Hirano: What's worse, there were many Japanese people living in Hawaii and none of them were forced into detention! It wasn't fair!

01- 00: 22:12

Sleeper: I didn't know that. Okay.

Hirano: I think because on the Pacific Coast there were few Japanese people in a majority white area so it was easy to oppress them. In Hawaii Japanese residents were about 40 percent of the population, and the Hawaiian economy would have collapsed if they had been interned.

01- 00: 22:24

Sleeper: So the whole extended family was in Topaz?

Hirano: When the order was enacted, entire families were interned, including some white people! If a white person was married to a Japanese person, the white spouse was interned right along with their spouse.

01- 00: 22:29

Sleeper: Grandparents? Aunts and uncles were all together there?

Hirano: Right.

01- 00: 22:39

Sleeper: So while your family was in the camp, you continued going to CSD. How was that? Did everything go along normally?

Hirano: Everything went along as normal.

01- 00: 22:48

Sleeper: During war time?

Hirano: Right, everything just went along. It was really interesting.

01- 00: 22:53

Sleeper: What kind of changes did you see happen here during war time?

Hirano: At that time, people were scared of a Japanese invasion—

01- 00: 22:57

Sleeper: Like, was there heavy security?

Hirano: —so people kept their car headlights low, kept their curtains drawn, and hunkered down. Food and gas were rationed. We used ration books. Everything was in limited supply.

01- 00: 23:24

Sleeper: Did people wonder what you were doing here as the only Japanese in their midst while everyone else was interned?

Hirano: I really didn't notice anything. I was very naive.

01- 00: 23:34

Sleeper: I mean people saw you here, so—

Hirano: I just felt like an American so I really didn't get what was going on.

01- 00: 23:42

Sleeper: What about other people who saw you here. Nothing happened?

Hirano: Really, nothing happened. One time, someone whacked me on the back of the head, but I don't remember the incident. Someone told me about it.

01- 00: 23:56

Sleeper: When the war was over, and your parents came back here, what was that like for them? Were they happy or how was it?

Hirano: In August, when the war was almost over, my father came and checked everything in the church storage in West Oakland and a residence in San Francisco and made sure everyone was okay, and then said it was okay for everyone to move back. That was August of 1945 and we moved in to my grandparents' house in Japantown in San Francisco. They had bought it before the war and kept it. They had come here as immigrants and built up their lives

from scratch. Then after the war, they had to start all over and build up their lives again. It was very sad.

01- 00: 24:53

Sleeper: Were your parents happy to be back or were they still feeling the pain of having been interned? How about your siblings?

Hirano: Because of the lack of communication, I really don't know. When he first came here, my father worked as a servant and then did gardening, but he got a lot of rashes from working outdoors and it was dirty work. Then he did income tax work for a while, then became a wholesaler and importer of Oriental goods, a furniture store in Japantown and was quite successful, and he stayed with that.

01- 00: 25:36

Sleeper: What does that sign mean?

Hirano: It means servant. He did that to earn income.

01- 00: 25:40

Sleeper: Oh, I get it. When your brother and sister came back, did they have any painful feelings or harbor any resentment or was it back to life as normal?

Hirano: They never said. My two younger siblings, they remember the internment camps. The younger ones were born later so they didn't know what was going on. So it was just the two older ones who had any real memories.

01- 00: 26:08

Sleeper: Did they tell you about what happened there?

Hirano: My brother Dan and then the next to last one were born in the camp. He visited there with his wife Coleen and cried—that was a few years ago, but I heard the stories.

01- 00: 26:23

Sleeper: Could you explain more about that?

Hirano: Not much, not in depth.

01- 00: 26:27

Sleeper: You said your brother is hard-of-hearing, oral, and was the only one in the camp. Did he struggle with communication, or was it okay?

Hirano: He never said. My brother Bobby can speak well, and he gets along fine. I don't speak at all. He can sign too, and speak, same as his wife.

01- 00: 26:56

Sleeper: One sec, I have more questions here.

Hirano: Can you sign? Do you understand me? Good. So you don't need interpreting? Good.

01- 00: 27:32

Sleeper: Did you have a question for the person off screen?

Hirano: No, it's okay.

01- 00: 27:37

Sleeper: When you saw other Japanese people who had returned from the camps, when you were in school, did you meet and interact with them?

Hirano: Yes, very much so. When school started in September, 1945, the first day I met someone who had been interned, named Teruko "Teddy" Kobutso. She graduated from Gallaudet. She taught at the CSD in Riverside and has since passed away. But I met four Ikeda siblings and then, one by one, others came back and pretty soon life was back to normal.

01- 00: 28:09

Sleeper: Did they tell you about their experiences while they were interned?

Hirano: Not much. No one talked about it much.

01- 00: 28:16

Sleeper: I understand. We already did that one. Within the Japanese community, being Japanese-Americans, they were citizens and understood citizenship and loyalty because they were born here. Because they lost their citizenship while they were interned, was there any redressment? Did they get their citizenship back?

Hirano: Yes, but we got it after my father had passed away so he wasn't able to benefit; only survivors received anything. Lots of people did get money back but I felt I did not qualify since I had not been interned. My siblings were trying to convince me to apply but I resisted. But my uncle said the military and others were getting it too, so finally I relented and applied and I got \$20,000 tax free, so—it was called redress. There was never any loss of citizenship.

01- 00: 29:40

Sleeper: Oh, reparation. Did your parents get money too? What year?

Hirano: My father had already died, but my mother got hers around 1990.

01- 00: 30:09

Sleeper: And your mother was alive until?

Hirano: My father died in 1980 at age eighty. It was around in 1990 when people got their redress. Until age ninety-one. She died in 2001. My father died in 1980.

Interestingly, my father died in 1980, at eighty, and three years later his mother died at age 106. My grandmother, yes, she lived to 106.

01- 00: 30:28

Sleeper: Your grandmother?

Hirano: Yes.

01- 00: 30:31

Sleeper: Your mother got money too?

Hirano: There were so many people and business that lost so much, it wasn't enough.

01- 00: 30:35

Sleeper: What did you say to that? That they owed you a lot of money?

Hirano: Some businesses were worth at least \$50,000, so really, \$20,000 wasn't enough. Very sad.

01- 00: 30:50

Sleeper: So you got that too, right?

Hirano: I got it, yes.

01- 00: 30:53

Sleeper: What did you think of that?

Hirano: Really, I didn't need it, as I was never interned, but they persuaded me to do it, so I did.

01- 00: 31:03

Sleeper: They owed your family, I guess.

Hirano: Yes, right.

01- 00: 31:06

Sleeper: The relocation camps around the country were later turned into museums so people could remember what happened. Do you think that was appropriate, for them to be turned into museums?

Hirano: Yes, because many Americans don't know one of the darkest chapters of American history and aren't aware of it, so the more exposure, the better. Interestingly, I was teaching at SWCID—the Southwest Collegiate Institute of the Deaf, in Big Spring, Texas—that was around 1983 when the Iran hostage crises happened and 400 Americans were taken hostage. I had five Deaf Iranian students in my class, and there was a lot of hostility being directed toward Iranian-Americans. I had to calm the students down and reassure them that they would remain safe. I told them they were fortunate because of the internment of Japanese -Americans during World War II.

01- 00: 32:20

Sleeper: Oh. Have you been to the camp where your parents were interned?

Hirano: Yes, twice. The first time was in the winter of 1942. I went with a white American friend from church named Miller something. His father was white too and they took me on a train to visit my parents. We got permission and were able to visit my parents for two weeks. And then again in the summer of, I think it was 1944, I went with Miss Rice and we took the train and visited my parents and took pictures. It didn't look like a prison camp, it was more like a fenced in city. They had a school and a hospital and no one was wearing POW uniforms. It looked pretty normal. The camp consisted of forty city blocks, each of which contained a mess hall and lavatories in the middle. Barracks were located along its outer perimeter. It was the largest "city" in Utah with 8,000 internees.

01- 00: 33:43

Sleeper: Did you get lost there with so many people around?

Hirano: Oh, it was big! People [could leave] and go to Middle West and east coast, but not California. People in them were more sympathetic to the plight of the Japanese. But California and all over the West coast it was very racist.

01- 00: 34:08

Sleeper: When you went in to see your parents, with permission, did you have to wear

Hirano: Yes.

01- 00: 34:14

Sleeper: A special ID badge or was that not necessary?

Hirano: No, that wasn't necessary, we just went right in. Miss Rice took a look at how they were living, and then we went to Delta, a town about ten miles away, and bought meat and other food for them using war rations. Everything was rationed at that time so we had to use war rations.

01- 00: 34:36

Sleeper: When you visited your parents, what did the room look like there?

Hirano: It was about the size of this room. It was divided into sections. There was a wood stove and a chimney, with a heat barrier, and blankets were hung for privacy since there were no walls. On the outside, the buildings were covered in tar paper.

01- 00: 35:20

Sleeper: Did you sleep there? What was the temperature like?

Hirano: I did sleep there, yes. I don't remember. I did sleep there but I was young and excited and naïve, so I don't remember how I felt there. I was just happy to see my parents so I didn't think about the environment.

01- 00: 35:40

Sleeper: How did your parents feel about being in the camp, did they keep silent on that? Were your brothers and sisters happy to see you?

Hirano: They just went about their lives as they would normally and never mentioned any bad experiences or talked about it. Yes, and my grandparents too.

01- 00: 35:58

Sleeper: You said the younger ones were born in the camp, right?

Hirano: [Bobby] and Janet were interned, yes. They were eight and six.

01- 00: 36:14

Sleeper: So your mother gave birth to the younger ones there?

Hirano: Yes, the last two were born there. Yes, right, the youngest two.

01- 00: 36:25

Sleeper: So that was the first time you met your two youngest siblings? And then you saw them again after they came back and had grown older?

Hirano: They had grown a lot. Yes, right.

01- 00: 36:43

Sleeper: How was your relationship with them?

Hirano: We didn't have much of a relationship. I was close to Bobby because we were both Deaf, and he could sign so we could communicate. But the others, since they couldn't sign we weren't close. But when we got older we were able to communicate better.

01- 00: 37:03

Sleeper: When you left the camp, were you sad that your parents had to stay there while you were able to leave with Miss Rice?

Hirano: No, I didn't feel anything. I was just happy to get back home and school, where we could sign and communicate easily. When I'm around hearing people that can't happen. I wasn't unhappy to have left my parents. The important thing is communication.

01- 00: 37:40

Sleeper: After you grew up and graduated from the CSD, did you keep in touch and interact with your classmates and other Asian people in the community you knew from that time?

Hirano: No, I just went on about my life and didn't think much about that time. But, one time I had gone to a bowling tournament of Pacific coast states— Washington, Oregon, California and Idaho—and there were a few people therefrom Sacramento. One man, Shigeo Nakamura, came up to me and stared at me. Then he got mad at me and said he was jealous because I didn't have to

go to the camp. I couldn't have helped it. What could I do? But he was mad at me and jealous because I didn't have to go. I couldn't help it.

01- 00: 38:35

Sleeper: One from Oregon?

Hirano: No, from the Woodland area. His parents owned a furniture store called Nakamura, and it was their son who was mad at me. There was nothing I could have done. No one else had a problem with me. There was one other Deaf person from Idaho who was also never sent to a camp.

01- 00:39:02

Sleeper: After you graduated from high school, what did you do?

Hirano: After high school—well, actually before, in 11th grade, I passed a test that would allow me to go to Gallaudet, but I decided to wait a year to stay with my class. I would have been thrown going all by myself. So a year later we all went to Gallaudet together after we all graduated. That was in the fall of 1952. The first day of school we had a hazing, they used to do that back then.

01- 00: 39:33

Sleeper: What does this sign mean?

Hirano: Where the upper classmen would order the preparatory students as we were around and make them do all the dirty work. But oddly, no one ordered me to do anything. I thought that was very strange. That went on for a month. Then one day, someone asked another student if they knew me and if I had experience with karate or judo. He said no, and that was it; they all came after me after that. I had no idea that's why they had been leaving me alone.

01- 00:40:04

Sleeper: While you were at Gallaudet, did you meet other Deaf Japanese students who had been in the camps?

Hirano: Yes, there were other Japanese students. There were Teddy Kubotsu and Ernest Ikeda who came in—

01- 00:40:13

Sleeper: At Gallaudet?

Hirano: —a year or two later. And there were several from Hawaii but they were never in camps so they were fine, they hadn't had that experience.

01- 00: 40:28

Sleeper: Interesting to see.

Hirano: When I was a prep student, we had roommate assignments, and there were three of us assigned, me, Truman Diot from New York, and Robert Chesney from Texas. Now Truman, whose bed was across from mine, was always watching me. All night long he would watch me, every day. This went on for a month. Finally one day he came up to me and said, "I have to admit, I'm sorry." I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "You're not gay." I said, "What do you mean?" He thought I was gay. It turns out the year before there were two Japanese students, and one of them was gay, was harassing people. So he thought I would too. It was just a stereotype. I'm not.

01- 00:41:22

Sleeper: So it was just a mistake.

Hirano: Yes.

01- 00:41:28

Sleeper: No other experiences of racism at Gallaudet?

Hirano: No, nothing. There was one time when I was a freshman, a hazing incident. There were some students from New York, and you know how New Yorkers can be with their attitude. Well, they were being very rebellious and ordering others around and expecting me to be subservient. I found out later they thought Japanese people were easily intimidated. Again, just another stereotype. I wasn't scared of them.

01- 00:42:04

Sleeper: Interesting. While you were at Gallaudet, what did you study, what was your major?

Hirano: My first three years, prep through my sophomore years, I studied Liberal Arts, so not a real major. Mostly during that time I was involved with intercollegiate sports. In the fall I did cross country, wrestling and track and field. Intramural sports was quite popular, but I wasn't so into that. I preferred to compete against other schools, mostly small schools. I studied grammar. There was also a Discovery course that was required every year. Then in my sophomore year I saw that there was a new program being offered, an AA degree, and I decided I wanted that, so I filled out the application and submitted it to President Elstad. The other students started asking me where I had found out about it, saying they didn't know about it, like it had been some big secret. I said it was right there, in print. They had no idea about it. So I went into the program and graduated with an AA degree. Everyone was wondering again how I found out about it, and I just pointed out that it was right there, in black and white.

01- 00:43:28

Sleeper: AA—that was a cert—?

Hirano: Associate of Arts. It was new. Once I showed the others where the information was, lots of students started going for their AA degree. They learned about it from me, so I started something. From then on, a large number of students from California registered that program and made the superintendent of CSD upset. That continued for ten years, then stopped.

01- 00:43:54

Sleeper: Where did you get your BA degree?

Hirano: That was later.

01- 00:43:58

Sleeper: That was later.

Hirano: I got my BA from San Francisco State University.

01- 00:44:06

Sleeper: So when you came back here to California, did you interact with the Japanese community? The Deaf community?

Hirano: If my parents did, I tagged along. Mostly, I just ate the American food. Most of the people I interacted with were white. I was the only Asian person in the crowd; that's what I was used to.

01- 00:44:26

Sleeper: I mean, as time went on, there were more Asians here, more Deaf Asians. Did you interact with them?

Hirano: Not much. They were pretty spread out. I wasn't close with the Asian immigrants that came here. They didn't want to interact with me because I was too American. They pretty much stayed to themselves and didn't want to have much to do with Deaf Asian Americans. It was just what they were used to, so—

01- 00:44:55

Sleeper: What about today, has that changed or is it still the same?

Hirano: It's still the same today. It's a very segregated community. For example, I was the chairman of the Deaf Seniors of America conference in San Francisco. We had 2,300 people there, and everything went very smoothly. I don't believe in micromanaging. Micromanaging, meaning I do not interfere. I let each committee do their own work and report back to me. I don't need to get involved in everything.

But there was another meeting, an Asian Deaf meeting, and no one got along. Everyone was still hung up on events from way in the past, from their school days. This person didn't like that person, and that person didn't like this person. I thought, "Just forget it, and let's talk about what we need to and get on with business," but they were completely hung up on things that had

happened in the past and couldn't let it go. With the American group, we took care of the business at hand and went on our way. The Asian group couldn't that. They just wouldn't let go of the past. It's still that way today. I had enough and left that group. It's hard.

01- 00:46:24

Sleeper:

You mean Asians that live here couldn't get along with each other?

Hirano:

Right. Everyone's held on to these things from the past to this day; nothing changes. Americans and Asians are very different.

01- 00:46:41

Sleeper:

Any other memories or experiences from the past?

Hirano:

Good question. Yes, when I was around six or seven, at CSD, everyone signed ASL, and classes were taught in ASL. But for one hour, every afternoon, we had speech and lip-reading class. That was the requirement back then. All the other students got good grades but I consistently got F's. I hated oralism, but my parents wanted and encouraged me to speak and lip-read. So I showed them by pointing to my brain and my mouth. In other words, "Which is more important, your mouth or your brain?" They had nothing left to say after that. I told them!

01- 00:47:30

Sleeper:

And your parents supported you? They believed you that education was more important than being able to speak?

Hirano:

Right, yes.

01- 00:47:40

Sleeper:

Were there any negative experiences that your grandparents had in the camp?

Hirano:

No, nothing.

01- 00:47:46

Sleeper:

You said your parents didn't. What about your uncles or cousins, do you remember?

Hirano:

My uncle, two uncles actually, were in the military, the 442nd Battalion. It was a very famous Japanese-American regiment. Their motto was "Go for Broke." Some of their families were interned, and they did get the \$20,000.

01- 00:48:08

Sleeper:

They came back?

Hirano:

The second one joined the military before December 7th, 1941, and he never had any problems. It just happened.

01- 00:48:17

Sleeper:

They came back alive?

Hirano: They're both deceased. They survived the war but have since died. They were old.

01- 00:48:25

Sleeper: Do you have any more questions?

Hirano: Oh, good question, ha! My favorite teacher was Ed Scouten. You remember him?

01- 00:48:33

Sleeper: Oh, go ahead.

Hirano: He taught literature my prep year. He signed very clearly in his English sign and had clear fingerspelling. He always wore a bow tie, and he was also a counselor of the prep students as well as a teacher. One time, my prep year, one student didn't show up for an 8:00 class. He had overslept. Scouten, this was his name sign, told the class to hold on. He went over to the student's room, grabbed him and deposited him in class. Whew, he was tough!

Oh, one other. There was an American guy by the name of Carlson. His name isn't mentioned a lot. He was a wrestler from Minnesota. Did you know him? He wasn't a great student, and one time Scouten gave us an exam on Shakespeare's Macbeth speech. We had to memorize thirty-two lines of text. So we all memorized it. But Carlson typed it up and hid it in his jacket. The next morning, we all went to class. Scouten, who didn't know about this, gave out the exams, and everyone put their heads down and started writing. But Carlson kept moving his head back and forth. Scouten noticed this and walked right up to him and said, "Good Morning, sleep well?" took his paper and gave him an F! We were all in shock! Fortunate how that worked out! Scouten spoiled me because I'm Asian. He favored me over the others. Dr. Powrie Doctor spoiled me too. I got all A's from him; both of them spoiled me just because I was Asian! Not something I could help! Yes, he was popular. He spoiled me and gave me good grades just because I was Asian. I couldn't help that I was Asian!

01- 00:50:32

Sleeper: Was Dr. Doctor popular with the students? What did he teach, English?

Hirano: What did he teach? What other courses? I don't remember. Scouten taught literature, and I think Doctor did too, I think they both did.

01- 00:51:02

Sleeper: Any other teachers? What about Miss Peet?

Hirano: Oh, yes, Peet! At that time she was a supervisor, technically Dean of Women. She was very old and had retired. If you go into Chapel Hall, there is a long row of sculptures. When passing by them, some students often moved a hanging window pull cord to under a nose of one of the sculptures.

Whenever Miss Peet saw that situation, she removed that cord from the nose each time. There was a story about her. What was the sign? Oh, "bullshit." One time she saw someone signing that and asked what that sign was. The person tried to cover it up and said, "Oh, good morning!" because the movement is similar. Then she went around saying, "Good Morning" to people using the sign for "bullshit." How embarrassing; the person told her the wrong sign. You get it?

01- 00:52:06

Sleeper:

Was Miss Peet hearing? Was she a CODA?

Hirano:

She was hearing. I don't know if she was a CODA, if her parents were Deaf. She was from New York, I think.

01- 00:52:20

Sleeper:

Any more memories? Oh, what about Dr. Hall?

Hirano:

Oh, I hated Hall, Jr. He taught math, and I hated his teaching. His explanations weren't clear. If we asked him to clarify, he just said the same thing over and over again. We finally gave up. Leon Auerbach was much better, very patient and explained math very clearly. One stupid girl would ask a naïve question, would repeat something after he had already explained it, and he would patiently explain it again. Very annoying. But I dealt with it.

01- 00:53:05

Sleeper:

So you had a good experience at college. After that, when you finished school and came here, what did you do?

Hirano:

Oh, I enjoyed learning, yes. When I left there, I came here and went to a hearing college and studied architecture at Heald College. I was there for one year and eventually transferred to City College of San Francisco. I once met a Deaf lady and she suggested me to see her nephew who worked as a draftsman. It was how I got in through the back door and then stayed there from then on.

01- 00:53:39

Sleeper:

As an engineer? So you got a BA degree in engineering

Hirano:

Architecture.

01- 00:53:43

Sleeper:

Or was that later?

Hirano:

I was successively employed as an architectural draftsman, an engineer and finally a project manager at various firms. I taught at Ohlone College part time. Then, I taught a drafting technology at SouthWest Collegiate Institute for the Deaf in Texas for two years. During summer breaks, I studied at San Francisco State University and finally graduated with the

Bachelor in Vocational Education. Then, I returned to my previous architectural work.

01- 00:54:18

Sleeper: It was an experience.

Hirano: Well, also, I led backpacking and mountain climbing trips for sixteen years. I learned about that through my working colleague and through scouting and got more involved in the Sierra Club and every summer and winter we went on trips varying between a weekend and two weeks. We did seventy-five peak climbs along California's High Sierra. I really enjoyed that.

01- 00:54:47

Sleeper: And you're still doing that today?

Hirano: I stopped. I've got arthritis and because of age. I also worked for an income tax service, helping Deaf people, and hearing too, do their taxes. I did that for nineteen years too.

01- 00:55:04

Sleeper: Serve—?

Hirano: Income tax service for Deaf and hearing people for nineteen years. And led backpacking trips for sixteen years before that, so I've had several different vocations. Then I became a newsletter editor. I did that for a school and also for the Bay Area Coalition of Deaf Senior Citizens, Inc. I wrote their newsletter for six years. Then I became president, and now I'm writing a book. I enjoy that.

01- 00:55:40

Sleeper: And then you became a writer? What are you writing?

Hirano: A book about my foster mother, Delight Rice.

01- 00:55:47

Sleeper: Can you tell me more about her?

Hirano: Her parents were Deaf and went to the Ohio School for the Deaf in Columbus, Ohio. Her father went to Gallaudet in the class of 1879, but he never finished because of financial problems. Miss Rice had a relationship with a Deaf man. After she graduated high school, Gallaudet had opened a new normal school. She applied to that never heard back, so she decided to go to the Columbus Normal School to get her teaching certificate. They didn't have degrees in teaching back then. She taught at the Ohio School for the Deaf for a short time, then taught three Deaf-blind girls at Wisconsin School for the Deaf as a special teacher. Most of the time people taught one-on-one, but she was so good she could teach three simultaneously by herself.

She was there for three years, then went back to the Ohio School and taught Deaf-blind children. Then she saw an announcement that there was the US Civil Service examination for the position a teacher for the Deaf in the Philippines. This was after US military occupied the Philippines during the Spanish-American War of 1896, so she took the test, passed, and went to Manila and established a Deaf school there. That was in 1907. Anyway, I'm writing a book about her story. She occasionally went to California for recovery from exhaustion and stress, and her parents came here too and stayed with her and went back and forth. She encouraged bright students at CSD to go to Gallaudet after they graduated, four in particular, but they never made it. So that's what I'm writing about.

01- 00:58:00

Sleeper:

What was the relationship like between Miss Rice and your parents? Did they have a good relationship?

Hirano:

Oh yes, they had a very good relationship. They were very grateful to her for having taken care of me during the war. While my parents were interned, I grew up, and they were very grateful. When my mother was pregnant with her sixth child, they decided if it was a girl they were going to name her Delight Rice. As it happened, they had a boy, so they named him Gordon Rice. They felt they owed her a debt of gratitude. If there was ever any family function, she was always invited and welcome as part of family. They were very grateful.

01- 00:58:45

Sleeper:

So you had a relationship with Miss Rice until—?

Hirano:

We remained in contact, and I regularly visited her until she died. We had a very good relationship.

01- 00:58:57

Sleeper:

Thank you very much for this interview. It's been very interesting to learn about your story and experiences. Did you have a question? Hold on for a minute.

Hirano:

If you'd like to do more of the interview, sure, I'd be happy to. Switch out the tape, and then we can do more. Sure, I'm happy to.

## Video File 2

02-00:00:16

Sleeper:

I'd like to backtrack and ask you some questions about the FBI concerning what questions they asked you.

Hirano:

No, no.

02-00:00:25

Sleeper: As you were reading, can you remember any further details about the FBI's situation, about your time living Dr. Rice.

Hirano: No, it's very vague.

02-00:00:35

Sleeper: Could you tell me more about that?

Hirano: Like I said, I was naive. I was very young.

02-00:00:43

Sleeper: I mean, through research, have you found out more?

Hirano: I haven't done any more research on it. As I write my autobiography, I'm looking into it more and asking my family. But right now, no, I don't know.

02-00:00:54

Sleeper: Not enough.

Hirano: No, not enough. Right.

02-00:00:57

Sleeper: Secondly, what about daily life at school during the war? You said dark window, radio.

Hirano: Good question. Interesting, hmmm.

02-00:01:06

Sleeper: What was everyday life like? How did you pass the time?

Hirano: I don't remember much about that from school. At home, yes, we kept the shades drawn. But at school, I can't say because I was a day pupil, I didn't sleep at the school. And I wasn't interned in the camp, so I didn't have that experience. I just went to school during the day.

02-00:01:24

Sleeper: Go on, go on. Talk more about that.

Hirano: I lived at Miss Rice's house near Shattuck and Dwight Way. One street over was Blake Street, and there was a bus on Dwight Way. Sometimes I'd ride my bike back and forth to school. When I lived with Miss Rice I learned a lot about Deaf culture. I was ten or twelve years old, and I learned about the Milan Conference of 1880. I learned about George Veditz. I was surprised to learn about the John Tracy Clinic. I learned about the Volta Bureau. Strangely, Miss Rice subscribed to the Volta Review. She got publications from the John Tracy Clinic and other publications from all over the world. I got subscription cards from all of these places and collected them. Miss Rice was a strong believer in the combined method. Same thing as bilingualism. She taught speech and lip-reading if it was beneficial. She didn't believe in

forcing it on anyone. She never forced me to speak or lip-read. We only signed, for which I am grateful.

02-00:03:02

Sleeper: So she didn't teach you oral at all?

Hirano: No, never. She did teach other people to speak and lip-read though, and was very good at it. She was one of the pioneers in speech and audiology testing in the Berkeley public schools. That was in 1925 when they first started doing that. Before that they used to do it using a written method, and it was very tedious. After this new way was developed she got a commendation from the audiologist who invented audiometers and hearing aids. I saw that and will write about it in my book. Yes, right.

02-00:03:46

Sleeper: So Dr. Rice had a good reputation in the community? Many doctors knew a little about various levels of hearing loss and so on.

Hirano: Right, right. Yes, from 1923 until she retired in 1949. Then she went back to LA, to the Hearing Society of Metropolitan Los Angeles, to do trainings and presentations for three months and ended up staying. While she was there she stayed at CHAD the California Home for the Aged Deaf. She was a resident manager while working for the hearing center. One summer she interviewed at the College of the Pacific before it became a university. She was interviewing to teach audiology. Now she didn't have a degree, mind you, but she was selected to teach over others who had PhDs because of her experience. And she taught there for several summer breaks from the hearing center.

02-00:03:02

Sleeper: Dr. Rice didn't work at the CSD?

Hirano: No, never.

02-00:05:25

Sleeper: Never?

Hirano: Yes, and she would encourage and recommend students go to the school—

02-00:05:27

Sleeper: But she had a relationship with the school.

Hirano: Well, let me back up, good question. Interesting story here. Miss Rice would often visit the Berkeley public schools and find students who had been placed there and mislabeled as mentally retarded because they couldn't speak. Including George Attletweed, the first Dean of Ohlone College! When she discovered he was Deaf and not mentally retarded his parents recommended he be placed at CSD, and he took off! Another one was Dan Lynch. His parents strongly supported oralism and had him placed in the oral school when he was five years old so he could interact with other students there and learn.

His father was a judge, and he was finally placed at CSD. There were many students she encouraged to go there. I was another one. So yes, she had a very good relationship with CSD.

02-00:06:34

Sleeper: So do you remember what happened during wartime? Do you remember much about what happened, any normal activities at school while the men were off fighting the war?

Hirano: Yes, right.

02-00:06:43

Sleeper: Were there many USOs [United Services Organizations] in town? Do you remember much about that? What were other Deaf peers in the area doing?

Hirano: It was interesting. During the war, every week I would go to Oakland and watch newsreels at Telenews Theater and learn about the war, Europe and what was going on. I really enjoyed that. I'd also get the San Francisco Examiner and put up these big war frontline maps clipped from the newspapers and play with those, redrawing the frontlines. I learned a lot and really love learning about history.

02-00:07:29

Sleeper: At the time, that day, you were young. Do you remember much about that?

Hirano: I'm a real history buff. I went and watched the Telenews while I was growing up and learned about the war.

02-00:07:36

Sleeper: You went to the movies when you were small. What were Deaf adults doing on campus at the time?

Hirano: I met one Deaf man who was a proud German and he became a good friend of mine because of the war alliance of Germany and Japan called Axis. Then after the war when I was working as a draftsman, people from Germany would talk about how we were friends because of Axis and chatted with each other on friendly basis. At school, well, I didn't sleep on campus until 1949 and then participated in interscholastic competitions.

02-00:08:22

Sleeper: Yes, I understand.

Hirano: Or if there were announcements about it. I was just a day student.

02-00:08:28

Sleeper: That's a good explanation.

Hirano: I do remember there were air raid sirens in the towns and in case of an invasion

02-00:08:36

Sleeper: What happened with that?

Hirano:

They were set to go off, but that never happened.

02-00:08:46

Sleeper: Did many hearing teachers at your school, the California School for the Deaf, start leaving? Hearing teachers?

Hirano:

Not that I noticed, no.

02-00:08:55

Sleeper: None of them? None of them left for the army?

Hirano:

No one left for the war efforts.

02-00:09:02

Sleeper: Were the majority of teachers at your school Deaf?

Hirano:

Most of the teachers were hearing. There were very few Deaf. There were only two Deaf teachers, Leo Jacobs and Emil Ladner. Oh, and a third one, Catherine Marshall Ramger. But just those three. Everyone else was hearing. Everyone stayed. No, no one.

02-00:09:22

Sleeper: They stayed? They didn't have to join the service?

Hirano:

No, there were no changes.

02-00:03:02

Sleeper: Did that school support any wartime charities?

Hirano:

Oh, yes. During the war when I was living with Miss Rice there was a Deaf girl who lived across the street who collected empty jars and sent them to support the war effort. There was also the school newspaper; we collected old newspapers for the same purpose. Certain foods and meat were strictly rationed. And after they graduated, many Deaf people went to work in the Richmond Shipyards building Liberty ships for the Kaiser Company. They could turn those around in 30 days! It was amazing how fast they worked! I do remember that.

02-00:10:36

Sleeper: Many Deaf people worked at Kaiser.

Hirano:

They worked there building ships. Then that was later turned into a Ford assembly plant before it was relocated to Milpitas.

02-00:10:42

Sleeper: Yes, the Kaiser building. You met many there?

Hirano: I don't know how many, exactly, but there were a lot. Also, during the war there was a big migration of black people from the South coming to work in the area. In Japantown, where it was mostly white, and in East Oakland, which was primarily Italian, those areas became predominantly black. Things changed a lot during the war.

02-00:11:25

Sleeper: Did you have a question that came up?

Hirano: While the Bay Bridge was being built there were ferries that used to shuttle people back and forth. And you know Treasure Island? The land used to build that was dug out at that time from where the caissons were sunk to build the bridge. Treasure Island was then used as the site for the Golden Gate International Exposition. My father took me there every week. That was there for two years, 1939-40. I really enjoyed going there and seeing everything there.

02-00:03:02

Sleeper: What was that like?

Hirano: They had fireworks and movies and new inventions, a waterfall, all sorts of things, a carnival. It was really great.

02-00:12:19

Sleeper: What art sculptures did you see at the fair?

Hirano: There was one long, tall structure called the Tower of the Sun.

02-00:12:25

Sleeper: The works of art in the area.

Hirano: It's a bit hard to describe. It was an art deco piece. It took up quite an expanse of space and was really beautiful. That's gone now. It was just temporary. Oh, it was beautiful. I remember it well.

02-00:12:41

Sleeper: It was really beautiful?

Hirano: It was in the modernist style. Really pretty. Yes, various pavilions were represented by Japan and other nations.

02-00:12:49

Sleeper: What did you think about the negative aspects of Japan? How did Japan affect your family? They came from there. Do you have any examples?

Hirano: I don't really remember. I just wandered around.

02-00:13:11

Sleeper: You felt no connection to their culture?

Hirano: Nothing was really culturally relevant.

02-00:13:16

Sleeper: Japanese? Maybe Gallaudet? None?

Hirano: No, nothing really. I feel more American than Japanese, other than eating the food.

02-00:13:20

Sleeper: Do you have any examples? What happened when many people went there?

Hirano: Oh yes, many people went over the course of two years. Before that there was another one called the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. That was in 1914-1915. An older Deaf friend said that one was even better than the one in 1939-40, much prettier because it was on the marina that was later converted to the Marina District. The structures there were made of plaster of Paris, so they were just temporary. The last surviving structure called the Palace of Fine Arts was restored by converting from plaster of Paris to concrete and steel.

02-00:14:16

Sleeper: What do you remember about the building of that bridge, along with the Golden Gate Bridge? Did you visit San Francisco much? Did you see many soldiers there in San Francisco during wartime?

Hirano: Yes, there were military and a lot of Navy people and a lot of USO.

02-00:14:39

Sleeper: There were many?

Hirano: Oh, yes, because it was so close to the port which was accessible to the Pacific Ocean. There was a lot of comings and goings.

02-00:14:44

Sleeper: Was it really crowded in town?

Hirano: I don't remember. It's much more so today than back then. Today there are 38 million people in California. At that time, there were only three million. California had the sixth highest population in the country, whereas New York was fifth. Then the population exploded with so many people moving here. So it's much more crowded now than it was back then.

02-00:15:21

Sleeper: Because soldiers weren't permanently stationed there?

Hirano: There was a lot of turnaround with people coming and going. There were several military bases; there was Mare Island where they built submarines and Alameda had construction going on and quite a few others. But those have since closed as they're not needed any more.

02-00:15:52

Sleeper: Do you remember anything during that time, any kind of threat of Japanese ships invading San Francisco?

Hirano: There were fortifications along both sides of the Golden Gate. But they were never needed and are now just sitting there. There are even some left from the Spanish-American War and World War II, and they've just been left there. The guns have since been taken and used for scrap metal.

02-00:16:16

Sleeper: After the war, did everything eventually go back to normal after 1945?

Hirano: The war workers weren't needed any more, and everything settled down.

02-00:16:33

Sleeper: What happened at school? Were there more kids? More teachers?

Hirano: The Japanese-American internees came back and later there were more immigrants' kids so the population really grew. There were more Vietnamese from the Vietnam War, so there were a lot more people.

02-00:16:49

Sleeper: Did the Deaf School grow in size? Were there more kids?

Hirano: The Asian population grew a lot. When I first went to Gallaudet there were only a few Asians. Now there are a lot; it's very different. I remember when I first went to Gallaudet in 1952, we went to the Mason-Dixon Conference basketball championship. It was a sports competition where we competed against other Deaf schools from all over the East coast. When we got there, everyone was just staring at me, like they'd never seen a Japanese person before. Everyone was white. They asked me if I was from Japan. I said no, that I was from California. And they just kept staring at me. What a trip that was! I was the only Asian. It was literally white.

02-00:17:47

Sleeper: You mean you were the only one? No others?

Hirano: This was during segregation.

02-00:17:53

Sleeper: No black students or anyone who came from a non-white background?

Hirano: We went to Vermont which was completely white; I was the only Asian person there. This was 1952-53.

02-00:18:07

Sleeper: How do you feel about that?

Hirano: I felt like an alien. It was very disorienting. Today, of course, it's much different and everything is integrated. Not like it was in '52-'53.

02-00: 18:19

Sleeper: Did you ever feel uncomfortable, with people always staring at you?

Hirano: It was very uncomfortable. In New England it was rare to see an Asian.

02-00: 18:30

Sleeper: While you were at Gallaudet, barely anyone there was Japanese. What happened to the black Deaf people at college?

Hirano: Before forced integration there were separate movie theaters and restaurants for blacks and whites. I remember at Gallaudet there was one black woman and one black man. After an intercollegiate wrestling match we went to a restaurant, and we were told, "We do not serve blacks." We said okay and told the person to wait there, and we went inside and bought food and brought it outside so we could all eat together. There was another time when we went to a picnic and were told blacks could not go in. So we all huddled together and surrounded our friend so they couldn't be seen, went into the picnic, and later when we left, did the same thing and smuggled our friend back out. We protected our black friends. Actually, I was viewed as white.

02-00: 19:30

Sleeper: So you could relate to the way they felt?

Hirano: If I went to a restaurant or any place, I was looked at as white, not black. One time, after I graduated from Gallaudet we took a bus to New Orleans. When we got there we got on another bus which was segregated, with whites in the front and blacks in the back. The front of the bus was full and the other white people wouldn't sit in the back so they stood. I didn't care so I just sat in the back and no one bothered me. I was an outsider from the West Coast, so I didn't care. No one bothered me. Now if the situation had been reversed and it was a black person sitting in the front of the bus they would have been attacked and beaten. But having me sit in the back wasn't a concern of anyone.

02-00: 20:31

Sleeper: At college, you saw black people stick together as a group.

Hirano: No.

02-00: 20:36

Sleeper: Were you able to integrate with others on campus as you were pursuing higher education?

Hirano: No, it was integrated at that time.

02-00: 20:42

Sleeper: At that time, the buildings were segregated.

Hirano: Now, today, there are 2,000 students at Gallaudet. But back in my time there were only 225 students there. It was very small. Everyone knew each other and got along. So it was really fine. There was no racism.

02-00: 21:02

Sleeper: They had a building next to Ole Jim specifically for black students. It was Kendall School for the Deaf Negroes. They were kept apart and didn't study with other students.

Hirano: Oh, yes, you're right. The black students stayed in one place.

02-00:21:11

Sleeper: That's what I mean.

Hirano: I didn't really notice. Then later it became integrated.

02-00: 21:25

Sleeper: What do you think about that? Was it difficult to keep in touch with black students as they were kept apart?

Hirano: Really, I don't remember. The school itself was integrated but I didn't see where they stayed. The campus itself was integrated.

02-00:21:47

Sleeper: After the war in '49 when Miss Rice left the area, what it was like moving back in with his family? Was that a big adjustment?

Hirano: Yes, right, I moved back in with my parents. It felt quite normal, it was something I was used to, so no big change. I did miss signing and communicating easily, that was the one thing I missed. Just with my brother because we could sign.

02-00:22:23

Sleeper: Were you able to develop a method of communication with your brothers and sisters?

Hirano: With everyone else there really wasn't much communication. With my family, since they were all hearing, I felt out of place. If I went out with my friends from San Francisco, we were all Deaf, and that was much better. I was much happier, more so than with my family. Yes. Of course. At that time there were 300 to 400 students at CSD. Now there are 500. It has stayed pretty consistent at around 500.

02-00:23:14

Sleeper: That's all. Do you have more to say?

Hirano: Do you know about oralism? Miss Rice told me a story about the Clarke School for the Deaf, which is an oral school. They sent one woman to Japan around 1920. Now the Japanese Diet—it's the equivalent of a Congress—

proposed a bill making all schools for the deaf oral. The bill passed, and Miss Rice was furious! When she told me this I didn't know anything about it and was shocked to learn about it. Then in 1991, people from the WFD, the World Federation of the Deaf, went to see for themselves and saw oralism was still being practiced in many places. Yes.

02-00:24:17

Sleeper: You briefly traveled to Japan? I'd like to ask you a question. What feeling did you have about Japan, where your family and ancestors came from?

Hirano: Interesting. Good question.

02-00:24:28

Sleeper: Did you feel a strong connection to Japan?

Hirano: When I went to Japan—now I don't have any family there, but when I talked to Japanese Deaf people they looked at me as someone completely different than them, how I looked, behaved, my signing. Everything about me was completely different. I was 100 percent American. Now understand, I've traveled all over the world, but when I went to Japan I was in a bit of culture shock! People there are very educated, sophisticated, have good jobs, Deaf people, I'm talking about, much more so than American Deaf people. I was very impressed. There were poster promoting Deaf photographers, architects, et cetera. I was very impressed with their accomplishments, more so than with Americans', admittedly so.

02-00: 25:23

Sleeper: Did your parents pass down any cultural traditions from Japan to you? Your grandparents are also from Japan. Did they bring their culture with them?

Hirano: Really, no, nothing. No connection. The only connection we had was that we were Deaf.

02-00: 25:34

Sleeper: No, I mean your family. When your parents came here from Japan, they brought their culture, their traditions, which influenced who they were. Did your parents instill a sense of Japanese culture in you?

Hirano: They really didn't have much influence on me in that way. No, no.

02-00: 25:51

Sleeper: They didn't force Japanese culture onto you? You said when you traveled to Japan, you experienced culture shock.

Hirano: Right.

02-00: 25:57

Sleeper: Meaning, you had nothing from your experience with your grandpa?

Hirano: Right, I didn't have that kind of experience. Growing up I was just influenced by American culture. But, I did notice growing up that Chinese and Japanese cultures were very different. For example, Chinese culture is very family oriented. When Chinese people move here, they insist their children retain their language. Children go to regular school Monday through Friday, then on Saturdays they are required to go to Chinese school to learn Chinese so they can preserve their culture. Japanese people couldn't care less about preserving their language. The Chinese and Japanese are very different.

02-00: 26:41

Sleeper: Nothing, only Japanese food?

Hirano: I do enjoy eating the food, yes, so that part of the culture I enjoy.

02-00: 26:45

Sleeper: Nothing else?

Hirano: But everything else, clothing, etc. is not of concern. A lot of people look at me as too American. I am American. Period.

02-00: 26:58

Sleeper: Did you visit any historical sites in Japan?

Hirano: No, not at all. I have no connection to family at all.

02-00: 27:03

Sleeper: Any fishing villages or anything like that?

Hirano: I just hung out with the Deaf people, that's all.

02-00: 27:05

Sleeper: Did you visit any graveyards?

Hirano: Family was not something I had any interest in. My mother did; that was her interest. I'm much more interested in socializing with Deaf people than with hearing. I also visited Russia. Oh my, was I impressed! We had a hearing interpreter and saw the hearing sights, not much of the Deaf world, and through the interpreter I learned a little. I went with a travel company called Hands On Travel, and in each city we went to we had a local Deaf tour guide who signed ASL. I was amazed! In Moscow we had an ASL signing guide. Again in St. Petersburg. Again in Helsinki. We went to Estonia, and the guide there used their sign language and some ASL. Then in Latvia the guide signed ASL, and we visited Deaf clubs. I was very impressed. Then in Lithuania they signed ASL. In the Ukraine it was a little more iffy, but we did okay. Then we were in Moscow and had an ASL interpreter/guide named Victor Palenny. And wow! He's known as the Jack Gannon of Russia. You know how Jack Gannon has written two books? Well Victor has written five! Three are on Russian heritage, books about Deaf culture. One is on Deaf arts. And one is a manual for hearing doctors and audiologists about Deafness to give them an

understanding of Deaf people. We have nothing like that here in America! Why is that!? Audiologists here are just in it for the business! They care nothing about knowing how to sign! He wrote those books and distributed them all over Russia! I was very impressed with how they emphasize signing there.

02-00: 29:24

Sleeper: Do you mean during the time of the Soviet Union?

Hirano: I was just there two or three years ago!

02-00: 29:28

Sleeper: Oh, recently. So impressive.

Hirano: And he has a PhD! He's incredibly intelligent. I was so impressed. The Deaf clubs there were supported by Soviet government until its 1989 collapse. I looked at what they had in the museum, and there were exhibits on communism, the military, wars, aid. Then I saw a big picture of a space shuttle! It was a copy of an American one, but it was designed by a Deaf person! Vladimir Galchenko [1937-2003]. He was a Deaf leading designer of a space shuttle. I was floored! He's since passed away. There was a bust designed by a Deaf person. It was Konstantin Tsiolkovsky [1867-1935], who was Deaf father of modern space theory. His name is identified on the far side of Moon! Really amazing! So I've written about all this on my website to share this information. Deaf people here don't know about this. If you want I'll send it to you too. I learned so much, it was just incredible. There are brilliant Deaf people there and incredibly skilled artists. I was so impressed! And we went to St. Petersburg. Have any of you been there? It's a beautiful city, even more beautiful than Venice.

02-00: 31:02

Sleeper: I haven't heard of that.

Hirano: Really something! Then we visited a Deaf school in Pushkin, not far from St. Petersburg that was built from a house donated by a Russian queen in the 1700s. There were a lot of beautiful paintings on the walls; it was really amazing. It was divided into two parts. On one side was a trade school and on the other was a college, so everyone signed. Really a clever way to do it. I was quite impressed. It was very advanced. Then we went to a museum in St. Petersburg that was dedicated solely to Deaf art. Imagine! Only art by Deaf people! Incredible skill on display. I was so, so impressed. They're very well educated. And there was a teacher in the St. Petersburg School of Art named Nikolay Suslov. He could sign ASL fluently, and write English even better than me! He wrote like a hearing person! And he was Deaf! Amazing! We've kept in touch through Facebook. Very nice and smart guy.

02-00: 32:37

Sleeper: Are you involved in many activities here in the Deaf community?

Hirano: Oh yes.

02-00: 32:43

Sleeper: You only travel around and take up here?

Hirano: I'm very involved in Deaf organizations. I was president of the board of D E A F Media. I was board treasurer for DCARA [Deaf Counseling, Advocacy and Referral Agency]. I was involved with the Bay Area Coalition of Deaf Senior Citizens, Inc. [BACDSC]. I moved up in the ranks there and became president. I did that for 15 years. I was appointed treasurer for the Deaf Seniors of America which I did for six years. I'm the only Asian in an all white organization so when I go to conferences and meetings, everyone comes up to me and remembers me because I stand out as the only Asian. With everyone else being white I don't recognize people. Let's see, what else? Oh, I'm involved with the Bay Area Asian Deaf Association [BAADA] just in an advisory capacity. And I'm involved with the CSD Alumni Association [CSDAA]. So I've been around a lot! So this is my last position now being Vice President of the CSDAA, which I'll keep while I focus on writing my book. A lot of activity! Whew!

02-00: 34:10

Sleeper: Good.

Hirano: DSA. Yes, I was chair of the Deaf Seniors of America conference in San Francisco. That was a huge task and quite a challenge! It was a new experience for me. I proposed having it there and had been involved in lots of conferences all over. I accepted the chairmanship of running the conference and it was six years in the planning. I did the negotiating with the San Francisco Hilton Hotel, room reservations, working with interpreters, meetings and all the planning. We won the bid and all in all it was very successful. That was in 2005 and since then, everyone says the San Francisco conference was the best. There were always things that happened at the other conferences but in San Francisco, everything went smoothly. I don't mean to brag. My previous work experience helped it all go smoothly.

From working as a draftsman and moving up in the ranks to project manager building buildings, that gave me the experience, and the job was very similar. When I was working as the draftsman I was stagnating in my position. All the hearing people were getting promoted all around me, and I wasn't. Finally and couldn't take it any more and confronted the president of the company—it was a small company—and said I wanted a promotion. They called in an interpreter, and the president said "okay," gave me a new title as Project Manager. Then to rub it in he gave me an assignment that was much more complicated than everyone else's. Everyone else had to construct regular shaped buildings, and I was tasked with constructing an odd-shaped, angular building, which was going to be quite an engineering feat. He figured it would take one year. I said it would take three years, and if it went into debt that was

his problem. So I put on my hard hat and went to the construction site with an interpreter. One person there looked me up and down and said, "You're deaf?" And I said, "Yes." "And you're going to build that building?" And I said, "Yes." And the person's jaw hit the floor. He couldn't believe it. It was no big deal to me that I could do the job, but he couldn't believe it.

Another time I flew to LA. The company paid for it. And I met an interpreter there. And the same thing happened again. I got really pissed off. We went to the construction site, donned our hard hats, and rode the elevator up. There was a construction worker there who was a real redneck. He was sitting as an elevator operator and started talking to me. I indicated I couldn't hear, and he said, "Do you know sign language?" and held up his middle finger. Oh, I was livid! I was going to punch him, but I was held back by my colleagues. Oh, was I mad! Imagine! "Do you know sign language?" and flipping me off! Oh, I was so mad! I wanted to let him have it! I'll never forget that experience.

02-00: 37:06

Sleeper: Were you successfully promoted?

Hirano: Oh, very successful. I built buildings, yes, very successful.

02-00: 37:11

Sleeper: You were promoted.

Hirano: I showed that Deaf people can. After that run in, I moved right up.

02-00: 37:16

Sleeper: Things were tough, but you did it.

Hirano: Then I worked for another small company that sent monthly company investment report. I was checking with a foreman in shop, and another worker who knew I was Deaf looked at me, and I signed a thumb down. Well, that person looked at me, and he later told the president of the company what had happened. The president came to my office, and I asked what was up. And he offered that I be on their investment committee, which I accepted. Amazing how these things work out [laughter]

02-00: 37:55

Sleeper: Is that all? Do you have more experiences to share?

Hirano: I hate seeing when anyone is given a task or something to do and the person says, "I can't." I hate that. I always say, "You can do it and learn and need to face the challenge." And just keep going. If you hit a wall and are not able to do it, backtrack and try again, and keep on trying until you find a way or a workaround to be able to do it. If you fail, backtrack and do it again. I love a challenge! I refuse to give up! I keep on till I can do it and prove it to the naysayers. My motto is: "Making a mistake is my teacher."

You mean organizations for the Deaf? I'll try. I was president of BACDSC—the Bay Area Coalition of Deaf Senior Citizens. And how I run things is, if there are no more confusion, and I need a volunteer for something and ask around, and everyone says they can't do it, or makes excuses, I don't say anything but I hold on until a new opportunity arises. Then I see if someone might be a good fit for it and ask them to do it. If they can I hand it over and take a back seat. I'm not one to throw everything to the wind and let it explode. I'd rather hand out tasks when there is a good fit and then remove myself. It all works out well. I don't like to throw things into chaos.

Yes, I understand. With cochlear implants, the technology is moving so fast. For deafened people I think it's fine. For Deaf people, I'm not so sure. It depends on the individual. If the person can speak, fine. If they can't, it's just not worth it. Some people who can't speak get one, and they say they enjoy the sound of when they pee or hearing car and traffic noises. Which I think is a little ridiculous. I talked to one Deaf man who got one at the age of forty, and he said it was like starting from scratch, learning how to hear, like he was two years old again. What a waste of time! That's my opinion.

02-00: 40:54

Sleeper:

So do you think the same way? Are you afraid of what might happen if technology continues to improve? Do you believe that there won't be any Deaf people in the future?

Hirano:

No, no. There will always be deaf people, from war, from illness, et cetera.

02-00: 41:04

Sleeper:

You don't believe that?

Hirano:

Deafness will never be eradicated. People become Deaf from war all the time. Thank you. Genetics advances might take care of illnesses and get rid of some Deafness but it will always happen another way.

02-00: 41:32

Sleeper:

Thank you very much for this interview.

[End of interview]