

**Excerpts taken from Darlene Lee Interview**  
**(as part of the *Oakland Chinatown Oral History Project*)**  
**by Sakura Huang, Alan Wong, Wilson Wong, and Anne Huang on April 22, 2007**

---

**SAKURA:** *How did your family come to live in Oakland Chinatown?*

**DARLENE:** My mom and her family came over because of the big earthquake in April of 1906. So they had to leave San Francisco's Chinatown and they came over on the ferry boat. And then they had to find housing in a hurry. And so a small number of people started living on 3rd Street near Harrison and that was my mom's first home in Oakland.

**SAKURA:** *And so you grew up here?*

**DARLENE:** Yes, I have lived in Oakland all my life.

**ALAN:** *Now if your mother was born in the US and your father emigrated from China, did you grow up speaking English or Chinese?*

**DARLENE:** We spoke both. We spoke mainly Chinese because my dad didn't know any English. Mom was able to speak English however her English skills were pretty limited. She was only able to attend school till the 3rd grade because the family was very poor and therefore required to go to work.

**ALAN:** *What about at school?*

**DARLENE:** At school I spoke English. We wanted to fit in with all our other friends.

**ALAN:** *What were the demographics from elementary school, middle school, and high school?*

**DARLENE:** When I went to Lincoln School it was basically 90% Asians, when I went to Westlake it was probably 50/50, and by the time I got to [Oakland] Tech it was probably 25% Chinese and all the other races made up the difference.

**ALAN:** *So how did the changes in demographics affect how you connected with different people?*

**DARLENE:** At Lincoln School, we thought we were the big cheese and we were very comfortable hanging out with our own groups. But when we went to Westlake and we were introduced to the other races, the best way that we felt to fit in was to participate in sports. So I ended up playing volleyball and basketball and getting letters in several of the sports.

**SAKURA:** *What was Chinatown like when you were young?*

**DARLENE:** It was more of a neighborhood and it was a big group of family-run businesses. We knew everyone in Chinatown and we always would stop. Instead of just going to the grocery store we would stop by and see the lady barber Fong Git Mo on the corner and say hello to her. Or we would stop by Harry's Café and stop in to see my mom's good friend Auntie Jessie and maybe have an ice cream cone and visit a little bit. Then it would be time to go get the food and we often shopped at Wing Cheong and then we went to Yet Sun. And then our trip would be back to home and mom would start cooking. And the trip would start like anywhere from 3 and end at 5 because of all the visiting on the way.

**ALAN:** *So how has Chinatown changed through the years?*

**DARLENE:** Well, Chinatown now is really different because we have a lot of new immigrants. We have people coming from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam. When we were growing up, we had a few people that were Japanese, and a few people who were Filipino that owned businesses, but now we have many other ethnic groups. So Chinatown has started to grow. We are introduced to new foods and new cultures.

**SAKURA:** *How are you currently involved with Chinatown?*

**DARLENE:** Right now I work here in Chinatown. I work at Lincoln Square Recreation Center and my job is to work with the Asian youth. So I have been there for over 20 years.

**SAKURA:** *Why have you remained at this job for so long?*

**DARLENE:** I like being with the young people. I have learned a great deal about life through them and their experiences and I hope that by being older, I can help guide them in some way.

**ALAN:** *How did you come to find this job?*

**DARLENE:** Actually the job fell into my lap. I was hired to be the tiny-tots teacher at the FM Smith, that's on Park Boulevard and Newton. And because Mary Anne Roach needed someone to work at Lincoln Square, I had the afternoons off and so being a part time worker, I would split my time between tiny tots and working with the young teenagers.

**SAKURA:** *Why are you interested in participating in this [Oral History] project?*

**DARLENE:** Well, I think because I have a very deep love for Chinatown having lived here all my life and I always have been collecting old things. And now that I am older I would like to share my experiences with others.

**SAKURA:** *So how come you never left Chinatown?*

**DARLENE:** Well it wasn't really by choice in the beginning, but in the end it worked out well. When I got married, my mom offered us to live in the house next door...[Once I had my daughter, my] mom came over and watched the baby while I finished off some work in school to get my five year credential. And then it seemed like it was a great idea having mom here as an instant babysitter...It worked out really well because my mom lived to almost 90. And she was ill for a short time but I was able to watch and take care of her. When she had a doctor's appointment, I took her. So the jobs were reversed: she babysat for me for my children and I was able to return the favor by taking care of her. So for that reason I never left Chinatown.

**ANNE:** *Can you tell a little bit of what it's like working with the teens?*

**DARLENE:** It's a really fun job. I love it and I don't ever really want to retire from the job. The young people are searching for

something in their lives and they come to the playground and they just hang out. And they are not even participating, except a few do play basketball and a few do play Chinese chess, but they just like hanging around and being with their friends. But I have found that they need to have someone to talk with. We discuss things about abortion. We talk about sexually transmitted diseases. We even talk about what it is like to die and how does one feel when you lose a friend that has been shot on the street. So I am there as a pair of ears and also to advise them the best way I can.

And these kids have been coming to me for over 20 years. I get much joy in seeing the older ones return. I have a lot of wonderful stories. A lot of them have become successful and have nice families and have their own businesses. A lot of them are still locked up in prison and they will never have a chance to be free. So there's always laughter and tears but it's a wonderful job because I think that the young people need someone to care about them and also at the playground we try to offer them some stability.

They know when they come to the playground there are the rules: No smoking, no drinking, no gambling. Even though they attempt to do it, they do abide by the rules and never give us any hard time. So I know that they want guidelines, unfortunately there is no one else out there for them to turn to. Another thing that I find with the young people is that they need to be told that they are important, that they are special. And they are to be recognized for who they are and we should not judge them by their activities.

**WILSON:** *Let's talk about "Mun Fa Yuen".*

**DARLENE:** In 1953, they opened the Chinese Community Center on 9th and Harrison Street. It was a building sponsored by Joe Shoong with a lot of community leaders. They opened this big beautiful building and it had an indoor gym and lots of classrooms. And so that was the first Chinese school that was offered to the community and we didn't have to pay anything. It was free. It was a gift to the Chinese community. The foundation paid for the school, teachers, and the upkeep of the building. And here it was a wonderful time for us because then that's where we had an indoor gym to play basketball. I played basketball on a girls' team called the Royalettes.

Other things that happened at *Mun Fa Yuen* were cultural programs. They would have some dances like Hawaiian dance programs would come and perform. Then they would have Chinese movies that were free. That was a treat because we didn't have any Chinese theatres here in Oakland's Chinatown at that time. So during the early 50's that was another hangout. We went there often and they rented out for dances so we had Chinese clubs called Hi-Chi, that was the club at Oakland Tech, and Chi-Uu, that was the Chinese club at Oakland High. And we would have different clubs sponsor different dances. And some of the dances were held at the Lincoln Square Recreational Center and then also at *Mun Fa Yuen*.

**SAKURA:** *In the 50's, Chinatown became kind of depopulated, and so how did that affect the Chinese?*

**DARLENE:** Well, we were really dwindling because all the homes were taken: square blocks of people had to move out. Even in the early 50's, Chinese people were limited as to where we could live, so there were restrictions. So they started

moving out to East Oakland, and they started moving out to the Lake area, so Chinatown really started changing, because there were less homes.

By this time, the older people passed away and the young people thought they had better ideas, and by the time the 60's rolled around, they started moving out to San Leandro, Hayward, and Fremont. Then luckily, we had the immigrants, and they came back again, and that's how our housing started becoming popular again. You know, people wanted to live back here in Chinatown because this is where they feel more comfortable and then, you know, they knew the language.

The language barrier has always played a role as to where people lived. The people always wanted to live close to family, and that's why they actually started those family associations, so it was to help people to fit in and help them to find jobs.

**WILSON:** *Could you describe how Lincoln [School] has changed from your childhood to now?*

**DARLENE:** At Lincoln School, the boys were in charge of the traffic. There were no traffic girls, when we were young, only the boys. They were the ones who were chosen to go and hold up the Stop signs, and to help us cross the street safely.

And all the girls were complaining: "We want to be in the traffic board." "No, no girls allowed." We wanted to be traffic girls because the boys were offered free movie passes: on Saturday mornings they could go to the movies for free to see cartoons and then the PTA would sponsor a benefit, where they fed spaghetti to kind of honor the boys. And so, we thought that wasn't fair, the girls didn't have a chance. And I think probably in the 70's, then they started or I think maybe late 60's, then they started having girls, but during the time when we were at Lincoln School, we didn't have the chance to be any of the crossing guards.

And then we had some outside programs that we participated in. One was the Spring Ensemble—singing. We would meet other schools, and that was the first experience of meeting people from other schools. Anyone who had a choral group or instrumental group would meet in the Oakland Auditorium, and that was where we had competitions, we would sing, and try to get points and win a blue ribbon.

And then, we have also participated in the Christmas Pageant, and this was done through the Park and Recreation Department. Every Christmas, there was to be a Pageant, and Louise Jorgensen was the lady who led all the different schools....Lincoln School children, we were the Snowman and Snowwomen. And that was a fun time for us.

All these activities helped us to fit into the American way of life, even though most of us stayed here in Chinatown. So the schools really did a lot to help us to fit in, and the teachers, they were another way to introduce us to the American way of life. We dyed eggs in schools, we exchanged Christmas gifts, and Valentine cards. We tried to do some community service: we helped the Red Cross by collecting sundries: toothpaste, toothbrushes, and we also had washcloths and we packed them in little boxes and they would be shipped over to people in the war zones or some other area that needed their help, that the Red Cross sponsored. So we were taught many things, and it was basically through the schools to be more Americanized. At home we were more Chinese.

**WILSON:** *Were there gangs when you were younger at the playground?*

**DARLENE:** Yes, well, they weren't so prominent. I think our Chinatown being smaller, the gangs were probably just all in San Francisco. So the gangs probably became more powerful here in Oakland's Chinatown in the 70's, when we were seeing more [ethnic] groups. It was a way to protect themselves.

Many of our young immigrants went to school, and not knowing the language, were made fun of. So they did not fit in. So they got beat up, they got jumped. So, hey, this was not the way they wanted to live. And they escaped life, from Vietnam, from all these terrors, so they decided to join forces with people, and join a gang. And there were older gang members who were always looking for new members, so it was easy to recruit, because they knew that they had to have someone to help protect them. So the gang life is really a form of protection. It is unfortunate, but because our families cannot fill the gap for these young people, they join the gang, and they feel very happy, and comfortable with them.

The person in charge of them, their Dai-Lao [Boss, *da-lao*], treats them with respect, teaches them everything: he's very patient, very kind, very rewarding, they do a better job than many of our parents are doing today. So the child who joins this gang, falls into a groups of people who he feels very comfortable with, someone who loves him, someone who would do anything for him, and he would do anything for them.

So the gang people, once they get them to be comfortable with them, they can send them to do anything, and know that these kids would do the job well. If your father told you to be a good boy, you don't listen. The Dai-Lao tells the kid to be a good boy, he listens. He is taught very well; they can get anything you want done quickly, and then, they know that by using the young people, the young people will only get a slap on their wrist.

They will not spend a long time in prison, so these young people have, in their minds, nothing to lose because they are not going to be locked up forever. However, they do not realize the consequences down the road. Once you are in this mode of thinking, and there is no one else to step in to break that mode, you're stuck, and that is your life journey. I have a young friend who tells me: "I cannot stay out of prison, because I don't know how to act when I am outside. There's nothing for me, no one wants to give me a job."

And so the prison life becomes a way of life, and they cannot change because they have not been prepared; they don't know how to read, they don't know how to write, and if they did, it's not done very well. And when you consider how many people are out there competing for that one job, you know very well that it's not going to be the criminal that gets that job, when there's 199 other people out there better than he is.

I'm not saying these kids are bad: they are all special and they are all very smart in their own ways; it's just that they don't have the right connections to build up their confidence, to be who they can be, and so they are just stuck. And the criminal life is very sad, because they can never own anything. Someone is always going to be owning them, they are going to

be controlled the rest of their lives. So you're just stuck, and this is the saddest thing, and this is the hardest thing for the young people to realize. Unless they are willing to step away from the gang life, they will always be controlled by someone else.

**SAKURA:** *Obviously there is a cultural difference between your generation and the modern generation, or the young generation. What do you think? How could your generation's culture help our generation?*

**DARLENE:** Well it depends on your background. If your parents are very strong advocates of a good education, if they are a strong advocate of hard work and respect, then you will reap back information, and you will become a successful person, but the seed has to be planted much earlier. You know, you have to start early in life. The child learns everything he needs to know by time he is age 6. You don't have a lot of time to instill all these virtues in the child about respect, love, kindness, and so if we don't reach a child early in life, it just won't work.

So you need to go back to parenting. If the parents have good parenting skills, they would do a good job. If a parent has not been taught anything, they can't provide that strength for the child to be a good person. I have this mother who has all these children, and she doesn't know—she came to the playground asking me, "My daughter cries; she doesn't know how to draw." And yet, the mother had no clue as to how to help her child, and she has older brothers, and older sisters, and the little girl would ask the brother to do her homework for her. I told her then "Go to the library, get a book on how to draw." I said, "Let her watch how the brother forms the shapes." But this mother had no clue how to help her child, and many of our Asian parents are in that same boat: they have no resources.

We need to implement a program where we teach the parents where they can go for help. We need to lead them. And so this is what they are trying to do I think with the **Hundred Families**. We have a program where we try to bring parent and child together, and do things, do artistic things, and go to the museum, different things like that, so that we can guide them to have exposure. But we need to do that for everybody, not just a few, but this is where the problem lies, because I work with my teens and I ask them to volunteer.

But they aren't interested in volunteering. The first thing they want to know is, "What's there for me?" You know, "What am I going to get out of it?" I say, "Pleasure, for doing something for someone else."

I have them do a puzzle, they go ahead and do the puzzle. "I'm finished, now where's my prize?"

"No prize, personal satisfaction."

But they don't understand that, and so again it has to do with the family: **you have to nurture that child, otherwise, I tell the people, "You plant a seed, you want a flower to bloom, you have to water it, you have to put fertilizer, you have to have care. You want a weed, you throw it out, and it would grow wild, and that's the type of the child you will get."**