



Jonathan Burgos Oral History

May 7, 2020

Length of interview: 28:14

Interviewee: Jonathan Burgos

Interviewer: Thuylinh Pham

Transcribed by: Thuylinh Pham, Dephny Duan

[Generating and Reclaiming our Wisdoms: A Collection of AAPI Stories at UCSD](#)

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Time	Transcription
00:00	Victoria Pham: Hi, my name is Victoria Pham. Today is May 12, 2021, and I'm interviewing Jonathan Burgos through Zoom for the University of California, San Diego, Asian American Pacific-Islander Studies Community Archival Project. Do you agree to grant the university permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?
00:25	Jonathan Burgos: Yes, I do.
00:27	VP: Great. To start off, could you tell me a little bit about yourself and your background?
00:30	JB: Sure, I grew up in San Diego for most of my life, and I'm the son of immigrants from [the] Philippines. My mom and dad came here in 1970, and they moved to San Diego the year after I was born. So I was born in Reno, Nevada. My dad was in the military and moved to San Diego in 1976, and I grew up in a small town in San Diego, so at the—it's called Palomar Valley, is the base of Palomar Mountain. There's more orange trees than people over there, so I went from going to elementary school—it's a K through eight ("K-8") school so every classroom was its own grade, and after eighth grade, I went to high school in Fallbrook, which is about—about a 40 minutes to an hour bus ride from where we live, so very rural area. And after that, I went to UCSD, and after UCSD, I started working with the county of San Diego, the YMCA. I stopped working in nonprofits for a while, then I opened up my own flower shop and then after that I went back to working with students through Price Philanthropies, and after 13 years I came to start up my own nonprofit.
01:56	VP: Yeah, that's super cool. So you told me that you grew up in a small town, so I'm wondering how was that transition going to UCSD?
02:06	JB: Oh, good question. So in Fallbrook, I believe, when I was in high school, there was about, I think that the total number of Asians ranged from 5-7. So here's—and this was a high school of like 2,500 students, so my little brother and I, when we were in high school, we, you know, made up sometimes like 40% of the Asian population there. So that transition from going to high school in Fallbrook to UC San Diego was totally different, and I think part of it, and—and my identity as just an Asian American student wasn't really...it wasn't amplified until attending UCSD, and I kind of, in a sense, rejected a lot of different things and I felt like I was very American, quote on quote, and I grew up in a very Republican area. My—my parents were Republicans, so it definitely was a change going from high school to UCSD in terms of my own personal growth and development. I learned a lot about myself and a lot of times I kind of like...the things that I rejected I started to understand and appreciate and the more that I learned, the more, I, you know,

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	liberal that I grew, and I really just...I feel like a lot of who I am today has to do with my transition and attending UC San Diego.
03:37	VP: Yeah, thank you for sharing that. So you mentioned that there was a lot of growth for you at UCSD so I'm wondering, what do you think attributed to that growth?
03:48	JB: It...so...I believe it started the end of my freshman year, so you know, living in the dorms, going to school and living in Revelle, I just met some good people there, but I was walking past the Old Student Center one day, and there was a person who asked me if I was interested in joining APSA and you know, I didn't know what the Asian Pacific-Islander Student Alliance (APSA) was and I actually didn't really identify myself, as you know, an Asian American until that person. She—she just reached out to me. Her name is Josephine Chen, and she said, you know, “Are you interested in just checking out a meeting?” And you know, I didn't know at that moment was going to change, like my whole trajectory, but attending a meeting and then from there, being offered the opportunity to run for an officer position...that really helped me find myself, and you know, there was a time where I didn't even want to know who I was because I just...it was just so safe to not do that, and I think they—it helped me realize that it was—I had to be comfortable being uncomfortable and that's that whole growth process and that started with joining APSA.
05:08	VP: You also mentioned before that you became the Chair of APSA, so how was that trajectory becoming chair?
05:15	JB: It was a lot [laughs]. It was pretty—we had a small group so it's almost like—I don't want to say that we all got participation trophies but everyone that...we had like 6-7 people that were in the club, so we all had roles and responsibilities, and so I had the role of publicity and the reason why I chose to run for that position was because I felt so like, welcomed, and I felt like, you know, I was okay with making flyers that why not? And so I think that whole part of me being comfortable reaching out to new people, welcoming people but also like feeling good that, you know, people saw our flyers and they started coming to the organization, it made me realize that we were helping create a—to create a space that I didn't realize I needed and so that process, I think, was really helpful for me and I really felt like if I ran for president, that I could continue doing that on—on a larger scale and so that's, that for me was—I really wanted it because I wanted to give that opportunity to other people that APSA gave me.
06:38	VP: How has your involvement in APSA and community activism affected where you are today?

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06:47	<p>JB:...It's a part of my DNA now, I think that...there was a time where...one of our good friends, Eleanor Castillo, she was also alumni from UCSD, she started a mentoring program with Boone Elementary, and Boone Elementary is a school in the South Bay and a lot of students there were Southeast Asian and so she kind of planted the seed in my head about making sure that, you know, on campus—there was a lot of Asian and not so much Pacific-Islanders, but there are a lot of Asians, and she started to help me understand that we needed to disaggregate that information because there are a lot of Southeast Asians who weren't at UCSD. And so with that mentoring program, we got to know the students and she made sure that we not only understood what our roles were but also helped me understand that there's a bigger purpose, and I think that advocacy was—was huge and being a part of the community was huge and trying to make sure that Southeast Asian students were represented on our campus and not just visiting parts of our community. And—you know, if they are here and, and, and they live here and we are not doing our best to make sure that they're represented on our campus then I didn't, I don't feel like, we were doing what we needed to do, and I think I spent the rest of my life trying to figure out how I could make a difference and I finally feel like I'm doing that.</p>
08:31	<p>VP: Thank you for sharing that. Do you also remember the first time you were ever introduced to Asian American Studies and what impact did that have on you at the time?</p>
08:44	<p>JB: That's a good question, I think I started to understand through ethnic studies about the importance of learning about different histories and also through the lens of ethnic studies lens and understanding that, what the whole overall idea is of having ethnic studies and so...again, coming from a very conservative area, neighborhood town high school, it just—I was, you know—Edwina from...everyone at the Cross Cultural Center put it in such a way that helped me understand like, we're all on this continuum of growth. And if this is like the, towards the final reaches of growth, this is where I was [hand gesture], I was like even before starting on the spectrum and so, learning about ethnic studies was one thing, because in my head I'm like, you know, why do we need to study about everything else? Like, how do we progress if we're kind of looking back? And I never really understood about looking back until ethnic studies and understanding that if we don't know what happened before, if we don't know, and address that this is who we are, then we can never move forward and I think that with learning about like Asian American studies, there was a couple professors at UCSD—Professor Lin, Professor Espiritu, that I started to understand the importance of advocacy work and creating that space, and those are things that I'll always take with me, but again, I was at the beginning stages and it took me a while to really like, have that, those—those seeds, like start to come to fruition so...</p>

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10:41	VP: What are your thoughts about the AAPI program being established at UCSD this year?
10:48	<p>JB: I think it's beautiful...I think that's...it, definitely has been a work in progress, the—the fact that it actually happened, I can't wait for it to be a full major and that's something that I'm looking forward to, to helping my students even, and start applying to, because part of the work that I do in—in working with my high school students is, I have a Southeast Asian cohort and a lot of times when—in the beginning, when they first signed up, they said that “I don't really identify myself as Asian, but I signed up because that, that's the category that I—that I, you know, I fit the most in terms of applying to my program” and I felt...I saw myself in them and—and letting them know like it's...it's that process of finding who you are, takes some time and what better way for them to find out who they are, and—and to be proud of their story then to start writing their personal insight questions for the UCs, right? And so I always stress the importance of sharing their story and through the process of sharing their story, they found confidence in that and confidence in themselves and also started to—many started to identify and bond with being Southeast Asian, especially when we started talking about statistics and how there's definitely a need to make sure that our Southeast Asian students are represented, not just on the college level, but in, you know, executive levels, on board levels and—and everything so those are things that's again, I feel honored to be a part of and to have a program at UCSD, that only not just recognizes that but, is—is dedicated towards...towards helping, you know, move that forward and reaching out to the community—I can't wait to be a part of that and I'm hoping that my students could eventually start applying to UCSD as that major.</p>
12:58	VP: If you could be a part of the AAPI Program, what would you like to experience and what do you most hope is included in the AAPI Studies Program?
13:11	<p>JB: One thing that I would love to—to experience, is to understand some of the local histories, especially for the, for students who are Hmong and Cambodian and Lao and more recently, the Karen students from Burma. Those—those stories and histories are getting lost—a lot of the families live in a situation, even though some of them have been here since the 70s, or, more recently, the refugees from the Karen families, like in—in the 2000s...are families are here, but they're not here...they're not taken care of. They're not provided with the infrastructure for their communities to succeed, and a lot of them have ended up moving to other places such as Minnesota or what have you and for, and for me, that's, that's a—we are losing out on an opportunity to involve these communities, and I hope that, through the AAPI program that we emphasize the importance of Southeast Asians, we start to help the communities themselves advocate for themselves or build those bridges or build connections, so that they see those students there at</p>

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	UCSD and, and I think that in itself is something that I would love to have happen and be a part of if I were to take the AAPI Program.
14:53	VP: Yeah, so talking to you, it seems like...there seems to be—it kind of...seems like Southeast Asian history tends to be obscured in these kinds of narratives. Why do you think that is so?
15:09	JB: I think that, there's the just sheer numbers, you know, there's a large Filipino population and me being Filipino, you know, there—there definitely was a process for me to understand and be proud in it. But there definitely is a strong representation of the Filipino community at schools like UC San Diego and the reason why, again, I started my program and specifically wanted to reach out to the Southeast Asian community was because growing up, I guess in, in my work experience and then living in City Heights and understanding where the students from Hoover and Crawford and learning about their stories and their families and just what they had to go through, or what their families had to go through, was so much different than a lot of Filipino families that were able to come here through the—the navy or be nurses and you know, have these professional positions where the, a lot of the other Southeast Asian communities came here because of—as refugees, refugees and wars that weren't talked about, wars that in a sense of, the United States participated, or were in a sense, the—the directors of and...those families weren't taken care of and—and the more that I heard about it, the more that I realized we—I needed to do something different, and—and I think that what I can do to change that narrative is to be more of a local presence. Like even, for example, now for the—with the new mayor who grew up in City Heights, you know, as much as I love and appreciate the work that he did, or does...he appointed a group of AAPI people and the 15 people, none of them were Hmong or Lao or Cambodian or Karen and—and for me that's, that's exactly what's happening on the university level, you know, that it's—it's almost like they're invisible and that needs to change.
17:25	VP: Can you tell me a bit about First Gen Scholars, and how you went about founding the nonprofit?
17:31	JB: Yes, when I left Price Philanthropies, I love—like my dream job, you know, I really enjoyed helping students, especially, you know, City Heights, and there's such a large immigrant and refugee population there and...what I wanted to do was to—I didn't want to lose the knowledge that I had of helping students get into college and so...my—with the encouragement and my wife, we started up a nonprofit here by where we live. I live in San Ysidro, and so a lot of the students that I got to know and care about was the the Chicano/Chicana community over in City Heights but also on, you know, there's—there's more than just that group so

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	<p>like, I—I went to Southwest High and it was October of 2019 and as you know, applying to the UCs, they're due end of November. So going there and they have no idea who I was, but what I did say is that I wanted to help them get into the UCs and into private schools if they're interested and so, you know, 26 students trusted me and—and they worked really hard. Some of them didn't know they were eligible to apply to the UCs so what we did was—well, you know, it's important for us to start writing these essays and then they can use these essays, not just for the UC applications but for scholarships and so that process, in those 6 weeks—it was a lot. It was a lot of time after school with them, we—you know, I used a local coffee shop. And I was there, basically camping out helping students, you know, write their essays or I went to the library and through that process, I started to realize that what we were doing was not just helping them apply to college, but definitely helping them feel confident in who they are, and making sure that they're proud of everything they've experienced and it, it wasn't a weakness. It was a strength and to be able to utilize that experience and be proud of that is—was going to help them do better, not just in terms of retention rate but graduation rate in college and hopefully overcome a lot of the symptoms of like that imposter phenomenon that people that are first gens feel—feel like and so, and I felt really proud that I was able to do that in that short amount of time and just this last year, even during the pandemic, I felt like that there was a need, because a lot of students didn't have counselors in person, that they would usually talk to, where the teachers that usually were the ones to help them with college applications, or even some of the—the nonprofits that usually do that too, like, to—to, everything was online, and so I knew that I—I couldn't personally physically be at one school, so then why not open it up to as many students as possible, because I know that they were missing out on that important resource, but I also felt like I had something that I could offer and share and help. So I reached out to some of my old students over the course of 13 years—a lot of them offered to be mentors; actually, some asked to be interns so that helped me actually help make this happen. I shared with them my vision about—I wanted to create three cohorts, a Latinx cohort, a Southeast Asian cohort and a Black cohort and then through that we'll be able to help them, you know, not just apply to college, but again be able to share their story with confidence and make sure it's their authentic voice that they're being—that they're using and—and that in itself was, I didn't realize how important that was of a tenant to my mission, but now seeing the results and seeing how strong that they've, you know, grew from this process, I know that what we're doing is important, and this is what I want to do for the rest of my life, and I really feel strongly about being able to help students through this process because you know, I've been doing this for like the last 15 years, and it's just gotten better and better every year because I started to realize how we can actually, like, make a difference.</p>

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22:05	VP: Working with these students, what do you think is the most rewarding aspect of it?
22:14	<p>JB: ...I think when...like...they send me messages and they share with me their success, and they say that, like, "I got into this college or I got this scholarship" and it was—it was from the essays that we've worked with them over the summer for and that just shows that the system that we've created is—has been really effective and—but I guess, in addition to that, what's also rewarding is when they share with me that they didn't get in, or that they're really frustrated or that they're not sure if they want to, you know, continue applying to scholarships because they're just not getting responses and...and the fact that they feel like they can trust us enough that they could talk to us in that—in that way, and know that we could hopefully help them, that's rewarding because a lot of them I've never met in person and for, for us to develop this—this sense of, of safety, a sense of—just as a resource and also that they know that, you know, they could—they could trust our advice, because they—they feel like we've been able to guide them so far with one of the most stressful times in their life at that moment, right up to that point, so that's rewarding. It's—it's something I don't take for granted, and I hold that in high regard, and for them to be so honest with me and everything, that's something, again, I always let them know how much I appreciate that so...</p>
24:00	VP: How has the COVID-19 Pandemic affected your org, and what are the ways you have tried to navigate those challenges?
24:09	<p>JB: [laughs] It—we felt like a Pokemon trainer. I just wanted to help out as many as I could at the moment, so instead of like scaling down we just ramped up everything. So we increased everything threefold, right, so I went from 26 students to 78 students and then I helped them out throughout the whole summer with those three cohorts and then they felt confident enough to help their friends with college apps, but then they kept on asking me the same questions because their friends were, you know, they were basically doing what I was doing with their friends, and so I said, "You know what? Let's just do another cohort, a nice like four weeks session and hopefully I'll answer all their questions" because I'm just working with them on an abbreviated scale and we did that, so I mean we helped out essentially over 100 students during the pandemic, and when other organizations that I heard, you know, that used to do like 400-500 only ended up working with 100 or 200 and in like one year, we did basically the same that they were doing, but then our results were, you know, we got nine that were QuestBridge finalists and so, we got 4 that were matched, that are going full rides to Ivy League schools, are going to Stanford, they're going to Claremont McKenna. I got 2 that are Gates winners right, so they have a full ride to whatever school they want to go to, and I felt like what we did was we did our best to do our part,</p>

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	<p>but I think we knocked it out of the park, because we were just so determined to make sure that—that anyone that we helped didn't fall through the cracks. But the thing like in the back of my head, I felt like, there's so many more that—that—that did, that I wish we could have helped, but you know, we had to focus and you know, since I'm—I'm literally the only employee, I knew that I hit a max when I worked with 100 students in that span but I wouldn't change it at all because, like you said, during the pandemic things were different, and since my family, were—we weren't going on—on field trips or family trips, and we were all here, then I felt like well, then I'll just use this time right now to help out as much as I can, so that—because that's what they deserve.</p>
26:35	<p>VP: Thank you for sharing that. As a closing statement, could you tell me one fun fact about yourself?</p>
26:41	<p>JB: One fun fact...yes. If I wasn't doing this, I would have a food truck and it would be related around rice, and so I just think there's so many different rice dishes that I love from all different cuisines, right. So there's this Lao dish that is like, kind of like has this crunchy rice and—and it's just, it's—it's just has so many unique ingredients that I really just love and different flavors or just a, with you know, I'd make spam fried rice and—and other types of just rice dishes that I think would be like, even like a...I love dolsot bibimbap; I love that crunchy part from—from Korean food too so yeah, I would love to have a food truck [laughs]. I mean, it's just as much work as what I'm doing with my students, but you know, everyone loves food, and I do love cooking and you know, maybe when I retire after helping out all the students, I could just invest in my own food truck and not worry about losing money because I'll be loving what I'm doing so...but until that moment, I'll continue doing this because I truly am grateful to be in a position to help out some of these students so...</p>
28:08	<p>VP: Thank you so much for your time and sharing all that.</p>
28:12	<p>JB: You're very welcome.</p>