

Kim Hoang: Hello, my name is Kim Hoang. Today is May 11, 2022, and I am interviewing Klo Htoo through Zoom for the University of California, San Diego Race and Oral History project. Um so just to start, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Klo Htoo: Um hi I am Klo Htoo, and I am a first year at UCSD and I'm a social psychology major.

Kim Hoang: Um How, how do you like your time at UCSD so far?

Klo Htoo: I think um I think it's pretty awesome, like a lot of people like to hate on UCSD, but I think it's pretty great because of the environment and how much UCSD wants you to succeed because there's so many different resources out there that's available for you like OASIS and the Writing Hub. Yeah i'm i'm really enjoying the people as well they're all really welcoming.

Kim Hoang: Yeah I'm glad you're enjoying your experience. You said you were a social psychology major, can you talk about why you chose that major?

Klo Htoo: yeah um. At first I was a human biology major but, as I continued on throughout the year, um different organizations, I was in in influenced my decision to change into social psychology major because I wanted to be closer to my community and help them but in a way that I was able to interact with them and I realized that in my community, mental health is stigmatized and um it isn't taken as seriously as it should, and I want to be able to change that and show, especially the elders in my community, that it's okay to look after your mental health and you don't have to be strong all the time.

Kim Hoang: Yeah I think that's a really good- or really common perspective that a lot of youth share today. You said you... you were talking about an organization or community that you're apart of. Can you talk about that uh organization and how you identify with it?

Klo Htoo: Yeah um the first organization would be the Karen Organization of San Diego. Um yeah it's it's it's a ethnic based um organization, but more focused on Karen people and I I belong in it, because I'm a Karen person, but I'm also a refugee as well and I realized that the work they've done so far is to help other people in my community and not in like ways that are superficial or like non-important, you know what I'm saying, it's like they actually impact and change the lives of of my people, and I think that's really amazing because um a lot of refugees that come to the um come to America really struggle with the language barrier and financial difficulties and how to find resources and I don't know being able to see it firsthand and seeing how the organization works and how welcoming the community is- because there's not, like, there's not a lot of Karen based organizations, so this one is really special to me because it's really close knit and like, even if it is, like, anyone is welcomed and...it's like you could barely know someone, and they would know your name and welcome you with open arms, like that's how great it is, and I want to be able to contribute to that.

Kim Hoang: I see I see Thank you. Was there any like specific moment that you felt most supported by the Karen organization?

Klo Htoo: Yeah they've helped me with with a lot actually like um...I remember uh during high school...they um, I didn't I don't remember specifically asking for help during that time but I remember, like every time I went to the office they'd be like hey do you need help with anything, or like oh check out this scholarship or internship and like, it's not like I specifically asked for help, but I just think it's like so cool that like well I'm like I just came in here and like they're already offering for help and I didn't even ask for anything. I think- I think like that intention to help and give out is really amazing and like, some- a most recent thing that happened was like I was trying to get into an internship and the due date had already passed and um I was really bummed out by that and um. Nao was able to talk to the uh organization leader and I was able to get in with my um application right, and I think that...that really helped me because...I didn't expect to have such huge support and having an organization that really cared about me this much and went like their way to show it is...really spectacular.

Kim Hoang: Yeah it sounds like they're very proactive and caring for everybody... Um did you want to talk about this internship that they helped you get into?

Klo Htoo: Yeah um I became the...social media specialist for the San Diego Refugee Coalition and yeah basically I just um I create blog posts for the community um for the ethnic based community in San Diego and I conduct interviews, make flyers, and attend-attend events that are happening in San Diego and basically take pictures and um send them to my team so they can post it and let um let people know that these types of events exist, and these resource-resources are available to the community. And yea it's basically more informational based but it feels really, really nice because it feels like I'm actually doing something, and giving out to the community.

Kim Hoang: That's so great. So, it sounds like being a refugee is something that you identify with very strongly and you had mentioned it earlier as well, so how has your experience or identity as a refugee impacted your journey in getting to college or influenced decisions that you've made to get to college?

Klo Htoo: Yeah as a student and a refugee and a woman, I feel like like that intersectionality definitely influenced my decision very strongly. Because, not only am I, like a refugee, so I feel like...there's this strong need to do, above everyone else, because I come from a place that doesn't have as much opportunities, but I want to be able to make my family proud. I um...yeah I've...I didn't take it as seriously before during middle school, but as time passed on um I became very hard working and had like hours and hours in community service and it wasn't just to um prove that like I'm worth more than being a refugee, like that's not my only title, but it was like to show that, like I'm my own strong independent person as well. And I want to be more than just a woman or just a refugee and just a student. And like, but being a refugee is, who I am and I accept it that it's not something that I hate like my previous sentence and may have seen seem that way but it's like a lot of people in America view refugees as like, they have a very negative light on them, and I want to show them that I'm

different you know and, like, I want to be able to become that person, that um that role model that I...that we refugees are not the people that they see us if that makes sense.

Kim Hoang: Yeah definitely that's a very thoughtful answer and I'm, I share that same kind of um those those same feelings as well and I'm sure a lot of other people can too. So, can you describe what it was like living in a refugee camp?

Klo Htoo: um. I was very young, when I came to the United States, so I wouldn't be able to fully tell you my experiences because of memory, but I can tell you about my parents' experience if that's okay.

Klo Htoo: Yeah yeah um. So for my family and my parents, it was extremely hard living in a refugee camp, because um well the one thing they would always tell me is that no one had shoes. We would walk bare feet on the ground in the dirt wherever we go in the river and...yeah. When you think of a refugee camp you wouldn't think of something that is like a five star hotel right it's like yeah it's like. The conditions are not very good and although you can receive education it's low level as well, and it's like you have to make ends meet and sometimes you wouldn't even be able to provide food for your family, especially if it's large and you would starve for days, and then you wouldn't know when to get food again and my mom really um, both my parents actually had to work very hard to provide for my siblings and my cousins and extended family members as well because, like even though... I don't know like even though it would have been easier, I guess, to only look out for yourself, for your own family...Karen people (laughs) us Karens we don't like doing that, like we interact with our neighbors, we talk to our friends, we talk to other people as if they're our own family members so even during the difficult times, living in refugee camps it's as if we're still a community because...I remember my mom telling me that, like, mm...One of our neighbors were struggling when like our uh extended friends, they were struggling with like food and like, even though we weren't doing so well either she gave them food as well, because you don't really turn away someone who is in need and especially not someone who you see as a friend either, even if you have family, like everyone matters and that's something that stuck with me till this day because...it's better to not have an individualistic point of view and I don't know like it's better to not have an individualistic view and...to recognize that other people are not just other people and that you have a responsibility and duty to look after them as well, because that extended kindness won't only pass around between you guys, but the world as well, as you know it because that kindness doesn't stop at just there...yeah.

Kim Hoang: Yeah it's very touching and I can definitely see the care that the Karen people put into other people. Um, you had mentioned that you came to the US when you were really young, but how long was your your family at the refugee camp and what was what was the process like in deciding to leave and what kind of what steps, did they take to get the US.

Klo Htoo: Um...I am pretty sure that for my parents, they needed to wait before being able to come to the United States and um it wasn't a very easy process as well, because there was

existing language barrier issues so. Especially because there aren't many existing Karen translators so there was a problem with that as well, so my parents needed to learn English and very quick and get used to the new system and coming to the United States and settling down wasn't something that was very easy because we were in a completely new place and I'm sure that everyone in our family felt alone and...they felt alone, probably because, well, you're in a new place you don't really...you're not really well adjusted and it's hard to get to know other people and to ask them for help. So, yeah my uh...It was hard asking for help. And it's not like we were able to look for help either, especially because we didn't know any existing programs or resources available to us. But...yeah um, there were still social workers that had helped us but it didn't make anything less difficult, I would say, because even then there were still financial issues and then this stigma around having to tough it out and not show your kids like any issues and that was my parents experience...Definitely wasn't easy for them and it wasn't easy for us kids either. Me and my family-I mean me and my siblings (laughs) Um yeah like going to school you definitely, you definitely felt like um you were different because (laughs) There uh there's this Karen saying, where it's like "You don't know English very much so your English is broken." That's what they say, your English is broken. So yeah our English is broken and yeah we had a lot, a lot of difficulties going to school. My siblings they got into a lot of fights, and me...I had a lot of trouble making friends and it felt it felt weird, I would say, trying to talk to other people, because they weren't, I guess they weren't like me in in my aspects, so it was...So like, for the first few years of my life, or I guess my first 10, 10 to 11 years. I wasn't able to make any friends or to talk to anyone 'cause I felt mm...I felt different. But I was able to get out of my comfort zone and to become the person that I am today and I'm really happy that I did but there's definitely this like um like, like feeling that you don't belong...is what i'm trying to say yeah.

Kim Hoang: So you're talking about school when you first came to the US what were some other uh differences between living at a refugee camp and coming to the US and was the most difficult or even the easiest change.

Klo Htoo: Yea um...You definitely don't see a lot of people that are like you, like, not only with appearance or their culture, but also how they talk and how they sound. Everyone is different to you, I guess, and that's because there's still a lot of Karens and um in refugee camps and but like it's a lot different now, which I appreciate because we're growing in numbers and I'm really happy about that, but yeah when I was a kid um. No one else looked like me, sounded like me, or like even ate food like me, so I felt kind of...It was like. I- there- it was like I was like in a bubble, and everyone else was outside of it, I would say, and yeah like I would, I would feel embarrassed, I guess, like this is dumb, but I would feel embarrassed to bring my own traditional food into school because of like how it smelled like, how it looked like. So yeah it was just this like pressure to fit in and this pressure to not only fit in, but to do like beyond what I'm capable of just because I came from a place that didn't really have much and...Even then, like the difference between being in a refugee camp and in America, it isn't...While America definitely has more opportunities, I don't...I don't really think that like, that-that makes it that makes refugee camps, a lot worse. I mean well, you could say that it does, because the conditions aren't very good, but like that was...our home for a very long time for

my, for my family so I don't want to say that it's better or any greater. But that they both have their own positives and negatives, I guess. But it was, refugee camps were my family's home for a long time so I don't want to say that it was any worse than coming to United States.

Kim Hoang: mm hmm I see, so there's- you're still kind of like torn between two places.

Klo Htoo: Yeah it's that intersectionality I guess.

Kim Hoang: What are some challenges that you still face as a refugee in the US, because you've had a lot of time to kind of overcome a lot of challenges, but what are some that you still think that you experience?

Klo Htoo: Besides the ones I have already talked about um I would say. Hmm...Give me a second. (laughs)

Kim Hoang: Yeah no worries no worries, take your time.

Klo Htoo: I guess there are still like challenges the challenges for me, I guess, it would be...Okay. I guess the current challenges that I'm still facing as a refugee is...taking care of my mental health and helping my self-esteem, because—excuse me—because it's very well known that um in a traditional Asian family where mental health is the stigmatized and getting help and receiving help is very um...it's not often talked about and it's...I guess you would say. I struggled a lot with these issues and I still do because as a refugee kid...These things were often like not touched upon, and are not up until like my teenage years, so these uh these habits and...These habits of like not taking care of my mental health or taking care of myself still stay with me and like. I feel like I always have to be strong, like that's just wired in my brain and that's um that's something that I'm trying to change and while it's very hard, I really appreciate the fact that like organizations like um KOSD exists because they give out resources on mental health and spread it around the community. And that includes like parents and family members as well and, like the older community, so it lets them know that like it's okay to not be okay, you know? (laughs) So that's able to be passed down to the younger generation and they won't need to struggle as much with mental health because it's not talked about so yeah this is that's something I'm still struggling with that I'm trying to get over.

Kim Hoang: Yeah thanks for sharing I definitely know how you feel. So for my last question...As an older use member of your community and as someone who has started college, which is a big accomplishment, what is a message or piece of advice you have to your younger peers?

Klo Htoo: So I would say, like to not take it too hard, like life is serious and all that but to remember to I guess have fun and enjoy it because, for me, I uh...Throughout high school year to now I, I did not take any breaks like I just went and went. I was like a car, you know, driving without any brakes and...I realized that I did a lot of things during high school and got straight A's and um a higher GPA than 4.0 but, honestly, the way I see it...That really doesn't matter I guess if you're not enjoying yourself or you're not enjoying life. And yeah, I would just say to

not take it too hard and to remember to take care of yourself, because you can-you can still strive for greatness, you know? You can still reach for the top, you just don't have to destroy yourself in the process of it and I see that a lot of youths these days are pushed to be stronger to um to get beyond what they're capable of and, and I just want to remind them like it's-it's okay to like, to like have a break sometimes, because I didn't have any. (laughs) And yeah that really affected me and my mental health and yeah, so I would say, like if you really, really want to achieve for the best you can go for it. And you can do all that, just remember to take care of yourself, and you know, to enjoy doing what you do, while you're at it, because at the end of the day, like does it really matter if you don't, if you're not able to talk passionately about it you're not able to to enjoy yourself? I think, uh, I think if you do something, just to do it it's not really genuine, like...find something that you enjoy and then spread it around the community like yeah like that's-that's all it is, like just spreading around like genuine passion and love and taking care of the community out of the kindness in your heart, and you know you're all set to go. You don't-you don't gotta like be Einstein. As long as you have something you can talk about that you love that you're passionate about, that you feel great about, that you can spread around, though I think that's that's pretty solid you know?

Kim Hoang: Yeah very real and inspiring message, and I wish I had heard that when I was a kid growing up and...going on um trying to find my way in the world.

Yeah (laughs) I wish I heard that too when I was young. But times are changing now and I'm glad it is.

Kim Hoang: Yeah, yeah. Um any last thoughts or comments you have?

Klo Htoo: Um I think I spoke my heart out (laughs).

Kim Hoang: No, I thought it was really good, very thoughtful answers. I'm very grateful that we had this experience and thanks for sharing everything that you did!

Klo Htoo: Thank you for interviewing me yeah. I'm really happy to be able to do this. (laughs)

Kim Hoang: yeah so if there's nothing else then this concludes the interview. Thank you again for taking time out of your day to do this and I hope you have a great rest of your day.

Klo Htoo: Okay, I hope you have a great rest of your day, thank you.