NF: My name is Natalia Fernández, and I am here at the Asian Family Center in Portland, Oregon, to conduct an oral history interview. Today’s today is September 18th, 2014. So we’ll go ahead and get started. If you could say your name and spell it out-loud.

DH: My name is Danita Huynh.

NF: Great. And, could you please state your birthdate and your birthplace.

DH: My birthday is September 6th, and I was born in Newport, Oregon.

NF: And, how do you identify yourself in terms of your cultural or ethnic background?

DH: I’m Caucasian, but my background is Norwegian.

NF: And your parents, when and where were they born?

DH: My father was born in Canada, approximately 1932; and my mother was born in Arkansas, approximately 1940.

NF: And you were born here in Oregon, so where did you grow up?

DH: I grew up mostly on the coast in Lincoln City, Oregon, but all over Oregon – Southern Oregon. And I lived in Georgia for about five years and then back to Oregon, mostly in Portland.
NF: And so what brought you to Portland?

DH: Back to Portland, or originally when I was younger? Mostly just being by myself in Georgia, and I missed my family, and the heat. I missed the roots of Oregon; Oregon’s just a beautiful place to be. You have the four seasons, and Georgia is just pretty much spring and summer. So, basically, that’s why I came back.

NF: And how long have you been in Portland since you moved back?

DH: So that was about, probably, 21 years ago.

NF: Great. So what is your current connection with the Asian Family Center?

DH: So, currently I am the manager of our children’s programing, and I’ve been here for about 17 years doing the same type of work, same programing.

NF: And have you had any other positions with the AFC, you said “same type of work,” has that meant different positions?

DH: I started out as a parent educator for a couple years, doing direct services through the Asian Pacific Islander Parent-Child Development Program back in 1997. I stayed with that program for a few years and then got promoted to lead parent educator, and then to coordinator, and then to manager. So, the supervisor position started about two years after I started doing the direct-service work.

NF: Great. What are your job duties, on a daily basis and overall? What do you do in your position?

DH: On a daily basis, my job is to support and supervise approximately 25 home-visitors (we have four program coordinators that also oversee those home-visitors) -- collaboration with other programs; presentations to other community agencies, other communities; monitoring budgets and programing goals and outcomes. It’s kind of — a manager is kind of — I also do some direct-service, about a couple times a year. I do home-visits myself.

NF: It sounds like you have a lot of programs and a lot of services and a lot of people to manage, so can you describe some of the programs, the services that AFC offers?

DH: Sure. So the programs in our children’s services here at Asian Family Center--the two primary ones are Asian Pacific Islander Parent-Child Development service which is funded through Multnomah County SUN Programs. That program serves families with
children living in Multnomah County ages zero to five. That particular program has been with Asian Family Center since 1995. So, Hongsa Chanthavong was the former coordinator for the first years, and he helped to get it started off the ground. Then when he was ready to move on and retire a little bit, that’s when they promoted me to be the coordinator.

The other program is funded through the city, so it’s the Children’s Levy Program, Children and Parenting Success. And, also, that program serves children zero to five and parent’s living in the city-limits of Portland. They serve Vietnamese, Somali, Russian, and some Chinese and Burmese families.

NF: With the work that you do in terms of working with these children and working with these families, do you seek them out? Do they seek you out? How does that relationship begin?

DH: It’s kind of both. Referrals come from a variety of sources. The primary source is, probably, word-of-mouth, and, also, through other IRCO programs and IRCO employees. We get referrals sometimes from WIC, from community health nurses, from community health workers, from doctors, sometimes from DHS child welfare, and sometimes just people walk in and they hear about our service or they read the flyers, they see things on the internet and so they call wanting services.

NF: Over the 17 years that you’ve worked here, how have you seen the needs in the community change or stay the same? How have you adapted to those changes?

DH: The needs in the community have always, pretty much, been the same around needing help for learning how to prepare the kids for school and for kindergarten readiness. That’s really, for both of our programs here at Asian Family Center, the focus. So bringing activities and parenting information from parents as teachers, our evidence-based curriculum that we use -- bringing that information to the families to share with them so they know what they need to know in order to help their own kids be prepared for school. The biggest need is just knowing what subject, what developmental domains, what kind of things do their kids need to know for school here in the United States.

NF: Once the kids grow up, do you refer them to other programs within AFC, do you keep track of them, do you keep that relationship going? How does that work in terms of as they age and as the families age?
DH: As the children age into kindergarten, we try to refer them to youth programs or academic assistance programs within Asian Family Center and IRCO. For the parents, we try to refer them also to the anti-poverty programs, as needed, sometimes to Care Oregon—Cover Oregon, when we had the grant, to the leadership program. So there are a lot of other programs that we collaborate with, and we do definitely refer the families to those programs as needed.

NF: You mentioned collaboration outside of the AFC: can you talk a little bit about your partnerships with the county, with schools, with other organizations?

DH: Sure. We partner with—formerly we partner with Walla Walla College of Nursing and sometimes we get student interns, nursing interns that will come and help on home-visits with medical or health-related information. More informal partnerships would include: Oregon Food Bank, other agencies such as SAI, Impact Northwest, and Human Solutions for other anti-poverty programs that they may have. We also partner with the different SUN Schools, for both space and programming that they may offer for the families that are enrolled in our programs but also for families that might be on a waiting list. We try to help refer them out to the schools as well. We partner with Mt. Hood and Portland Head Start and Albina Head Start and helping families get either on the waiting list or enrolled in Head Start programming.

[00:10:08]

NF: And does a lot of your programming involve grant funding, or how are these programs financed? Is it part of AFC’s budget? Do you have your own grants that you seek out? How does that work?

DH: Primarily, with the two programs that we have here--in IRCO’s children’s programing we have about actually 13 programs--two of them are sited here, specifically the API PCDS program and that is funded through Multnomah County. We don’t really seek out other grants for that particular program. We get private donations, like from Danner during Christmas-time; they adopt families and buy needed items for the families during the holidays. We also partner with Les Schwab; they have a “Toy and Joy” drive every year, we partner with them to receive donations for those families. CAPS, our other program that serves the more-diverse populations, is funded through the children’s levy which is the city tax-based funding. More we just--we don’t really look for other grants so to say, but we look for donations so to say. Social Venture Partners have worked with us in the past trying to help where the gaps are in services and needs that our programs have. We haven’t quite yet developed some kind of in-kind or grant-funding through Social Ventures but they know what the needs are so they’re helping us to do that.
NF: Can you talk a little bit about the home-visits? What is it that you’re looking for? Is that both for you and the family in terms of building a relationship, building trust? Can you talk a little bit about those specific home-visits?

DH: So the home-visits are typically an hour to two hours in length, one time a month. Some families who need a little bit more support can have up to two home-visits a month. We always meet the family in the home if that’s where they prefer. We bring child developmental activities to do with them and their child. We try to bring a literacy activity at every home-visit to promote literacy skill development. Sometimes, we bring donations from food banks, sometimes we bring food, or we bring gently-used clothing to the home, school supplies that might have been donated, as well as bringing the developmental curriculum from Parents as Teachers based on the child’s age or maybe something the parent is concerned about - we try to bring some research data with us from PAT to bring to the parents. We sit down and talk to them, explain to them how they can—we have some ideas that we try to give them and just really working on a strength-based approach; recognizing that the parents are the child’s best teacher, not us, not the home-visitors or the staff, but just trying to empower them as parents to use some of the tools that we have to just build on what they already know. We also do an ASQ (ages and stages questionnaire), it’s a developmental screening. It is really a parent-based assessment tool. It’s created so the parent can do it themselves, but with the families that we have, the ASQ is only translated into Spanish and English. And also recognizing even some of the families that can read English, their literacy level is under a sixth-grade reading level. Almost always we do that with the parent and the child. We do this about twice a year in both programs, and just monitoring the child’s development. If we see some delays, we’ll discuss it with the parent and kind of work on some of the skills that need to increase those delays, but if they are significant delays, either development, social, or if there’s a speech delay, then we refer them to early intervention for ongoing more-intensive services.

NF: The API community is very diverse, so how do you assess the needs of the different community members? Or is it very much on an individual basis? Or do you see that with children that age that there are mostly similarities amongst all of them in terms of what they need?

DH: Probably the biggest--just across the board in all the API communities, just from experience in working with the families in these past years, it seems like the biggest concerns that we have are probably social, emotional development because families tend to just keep their children at home. Learning their native language, they haven’t been emerged into any English-social activities. They go to church probably, or to a
mosque, or to a temple, and they hear their own language, so we really try to promote getting the child out into the community, to playgroups, to a community center even, a playground, to kind of develop those social skills. Children also, we have found, have—they don’t learn a lot of the literacy skills, so sometimes someone from the outside, for example, an EI or preschool teacher might assess that child as being delayed, but it’s not that they’re delayed because they will eventually, we have found, eventually they will catch up. By the time they are three of four years old, they learn how to speak English; all of a sudden it just happens. As soon as they’re immersed in a social environment where they can pick up on the language, they develop the language, they develop the social skills, I mean, it’s just like it happens just like a shining star—instantly. The parents just, kind of—we just talked about this today in a staff meeting—if parents were to choose between home-visits, which early-intervention also provides, versus a playgroup or a preschool-like program where they’re in a social, school-type setting, the parents would prefer that. Almost 90% of the time the parents would prefer the social setting because they really worry about—those are skills that children are going to learn about by being around other children. It’s not necessarily something that the parents can teach them one-on-one in a home. So, the academics, the word, the letter identification, everything that they need to know, there’s around 80 skills that they need to know before they hit kindergarten—to be kindergarten ready—most of those happen between the ages of three and five. They may not necessarily learn them before age three if they’re not immersed into a social aspect of learning those things. So our families are very, very isolated, lots of waiting lists to get into preschool programs. If they do get into a program other than Head Start, they have to pay and they can’t afford to pay, so you see a lot of the Asian Pacific Islander families staying home because they just kind of, they don’t get into the loop or they don’t know about the Head Starts or they don’t understand the American school-system is free for everybody; they don’t understand that, they don’t know how to access it. So that’s something we’ve been working on is figuring out how to break those barriers of access so that all those Asian families can have equal opportunity for the children to get into school.

NF: Since young children are able to more-easily learn multiple languages, while they’re still young as opposed to adults, do you and your programs encourage that dual-language—so you encourage them to learn English but do you also encourage them to maintain, perhaps, their first language as well?

DH: Yes, yes, and we encourage them, first of all, to maintain their native language because, you know, it’s the cultural aspect; and if they, the children, forget their language or forget their culture, they may never get another opportunity when they get older and they become immersed into American culture they may forget that and then it’s really hard, I think, to teach kids once they’ve forgotten it, how to come back to it again. So we really stress on that. And so many parents, they want their kids to learn
English, and so we just say, your kids will learn eventually once they go to school—not to really stress on it too much at an early age. But, they want to fit in, they want to be like everybody else and they don’t want to be singled out, and they don’t want their kids to, you know, be confused when they get to school because they don’t understand their teacher, they don’t understand their peers. But, they figure it out. By the end of kindergarten, they’re ready.

[00:20:14]

NF: So, in terms of the need in the community, do you see that over the years [it] has continued to grow, has the population continued to increase, and have you continued to expand your programs?

DH: The population has continued to increase. I mean, the specific ethnicity of what Asian or Asian Pacific Islander community has greatly, like, changed over the years. Many years ago, primary used to be Vietnamese, Mon, Lao, Mien, and Cambodian—so the Southeast Asian—and some, some Chinese. And in the last few years, a lot of the Nepalese, Bhutanese, and Burmese communities have migrated to Portland, and, therefore, we don’t necessarily have the staffing or the funding for interpreters. So that’s really where we try to use our resources from within, using other staff from other programs, helping each other, both they help us and we help them. It’s really sad because there’s not enough funding to hire, you know, even a half-time person for each of the needed groups. So it’s something that we voice our opinions to, to the funders, and we, you know, need more funding. But it’s just, it’s sad, but we focus on the biggest population to try to help the most families. But then the families, the populations that are smaller get neglected even though their need is just as strong.

NF: Do you try and match someone who speaks a family’s native language to that family when you can?

DH: Yes, when we can. And if not, we don’t say “no” to the family, but just let them realize that, you know, if you’re gonna join our program then we have to either speak English or we have to have someone from the family help us interpret on home-visits.

NF: And, for the most part, is that also—those language services, is that something that you provide, or you refer them to other programs, or how does that work in terms of the language barrier, if that’s the case?

DH: So, if there’s a language barrier, like I was saying, we try to get other programs to help us, but there’s not really anywhere else in [the] Portland-metro area to refer those families with young children to. No other agency employs, like, Burmese or Nepalese home-visitors with an early-childhood background. So, it’s a huge need.
NF: Definitely.

DH: Yep.

NF: So you’ve been involved with the Asian Family Center for 17 years, how did you become involved with the AFC? Were you recruited, did you seek it out as an organization, did you like what they did?

DH: I sought it out, yeah, I sought it out. I just happened to be at the unemployment office looking for a job back in the late 90s and got a referral, went through the interview, and I was hired. The story, so this is funny about the history, is that my last name back then, when I got hired, was Kang [sp?]. And, as an Asian last name, most of the time, you know, when you’re getting hired, you look at the application, and, if someone doesn’t speak the language—they’re not bilingual, well, why are they applying? So, I got the interview, I’m suspecting from my last name, but also because I had that early childhood background. And then through the interview process, just many of the questions were related directly to both my cultural experience with the Asian community and, also, just my educational background focusing on early childhood. Really, like I said, I sought it out and I got lucky. I really wanted, though, to work at an agency that was working with somewhat of what I had the experience and knowledge [of] that I could give back to the community. So that was really my passion. I used to teach school, and I wanted to be still in that realm of the teaching-aspect. But I wanted to be more hands-on and see more direct-effects of people’s lives and how they could change.

[00:25:02]

NF: You mentioned you had some previous experience with the Asian Pacific Islander Community specifically; can you talk a little bit about that?

DH: Right, well, I was married before to a Cambodian. Just being immersed into that culture, you know, with my personal experience, it really helped me to understand how to approach families, and the “dos” and the don’ts,” but, also, how to work with other staff from different cultures. It helped me to understand a lot about respect and the cultural traditions, the dress, the clothing, the lifestyle, and how to approach and build good, positive relationships with the staff as well. So, it helped me a lot.

NF: Wonderful. So you’ve been here for over 15 years, so can you talk a little bit about your feelings of AFC? Obviously, you are passionate about the mission of AFC and the work that you’re doing. Can you talk a little bit about the overall organization and how you see it in service of the community?
DH: Okay, good question. Um. So working here for 17 years, I have seen a tremendous growth at Asian Family Center. And what I really value is that, in almost everything that we do, we try to seek community input about the gaps, the need, what the services should look like, where should the services be. So again, I see that we really try to focus on the strength-based kind of - an American approach, but we still tie in the cultural aspect of what we do in getting community leader input, getting people from the community to have a voice in how we, kind of, develop our programing. I think that has a lot to do with our expansion and how we’ve done. Having the community support in what we do, and we’ve never really, I don’t think we’ve ever lost that. In fact, it’s just kind of grown. That’s how I see the leadership programs - we have staff who were former clients who became staff, and then became supervisors. And so, they have their own little stories and history behind it, too, and I think having all that and hiring from the community just embraces that family aspect of what we do. There’s always gonna be gaps in services because there’s never gonna be enough money to meet the needs of the community. But, I think that working together with the community is what really makes, especially a non-profit organization that is serving the community, work better.

NF: Can you describe a little bit about that strength-based approach, that model? Can you describe that, how that works, and perhaps give some examples?

DH: Okay so, working from a strength-based approach is just looking at what is it that’s already happening in the community, what can you do in your agency to build on that so it becomes stronger; and so you have more arms to wrap around and to, kind of, support what’s already happening. That’s what I spoke about before--example: In our home-visiting programs where we don’t go in and tell the family, “you’re doing this wrong; I think that you need to do it this way.” We go in and we try to look at something that’s going well. I’m a strong believer that if you look at what’s going well and you build on what’s going well, you’re going to see more good, positive things. The negative things that aren’t going so well kind of go away. It’s kind of like when you’re talking to—I use this example with staff all the time—if you’re--it’s a parallel process--if you’re talking about the children who are having temper-tantrums and they’re just always acting up, always acting up, if a parent is always saying, “don’t do this Johnny, don’t do that, don’t do that,” slapping their hand, just ignoring them, but every time they do something bad just keep on. But, if you go to a child and you see a child picking up and putting their shoes away and you compliment them, “oh nice job,” that child is going to want to do that more and more to get that positive, I call, strength-based approach. So that’s a strength-based approach to parenting. [00:30:06]
If we can continue, and keep that example in mind, as home-visitors, I tell them to look at what the parents are doing well. Compliment the parent on what they’re doing well so that they continue to do those things as a parent well so that that parent will be less stressed and will be a better parent in taking care of their child. I do that with my staff, so that’s the parallel process. I compliment them on what they’re doing well; I try not to focus on the negative things though sometimes you have to give constructive criticism in everything that we do. But if you’re looking at what they do well, focus on that, build on that. So an example is: A staff comes to work on-time every day; maybe you take them to coffee for appreciation for having such good attendance. Or maybe their files are always organized; you, you know, let them know that they’re doing a good job. They’re going to keep doing that. So that’s the parallel process in strength-based approach. I do it to my staff, the staff does it to the parent, the parent does it to the child; so it’s kind of a ripple-effect. And, I tell staff this all the time. So you can take that example, I think in everything that we do, in every program at Asian Family Center. If you focus on the positives, and you build on the positives, that is the strength-based approach.

NF: Wonderful. So for your community assessment, and when you’re working with the many groups that you work with, do you take part from the data and in the programs like the IRCO needs assessment every few years, or do you have smaller, more-focused groups specifically for families with children? How does that work? How does that play into the larger organization?

DH: Good question. So, really like every program, every one of our children’s programs has outcomes, goals, and objectives that we need to meet—not always tied directly to IRCO’s overall goals or Asian Family Center’s overall goals. Example: 80% of the children will be on-target for development, and any child that’s not on-target we refer to early-intervention. Well, that doesn’t have anything really to do with the overall goals of IRCO, but if you’re talking about a parent has shown increased knowledge, now that’s a goal that I can see as directly related. If a parent has increased knowledge of effective parenting skills by the time they exit our program--almost 99.9% of the parents are going to say yes--so really, we’re creating self-sufficiency which is IRCO’s overall goal. Asian Family Center is to create identity in the community and help to promote leaders. I think that kind of thing is all related, but—can you say your question one more time because I’m not sure I totally understand.

NF: In terms of needs-assessment--so I know that IRCO as an organization has, every few years, a really large, community needs-assessment where they’re working with all the communities that they serve, not just the API community. So, do you take part in that? Do you take away from that research and data gathered or do you have your own needs-assessment that you do?
DH: I don’t specifically participate in the needs-assessment, its—for this last year, we had the leaders in the community participate in the needs-assessment. Some of IRCO’s staff were a part of that by volunteering during the event. But, I haven’t seen the write-up or the results of that needs-assessment yet. If there is something directly related to, I think, a specific program that comes up during that needs-assessment, then the manager is informed about that and then brought into that conversation or that planning of how can our program be [cognizant] of what that need was that was spoken in the need-assessment, and how can we interweave that into what we do in our programs. Definitely. But, I haven’t really seen that as it’s related to our programing in the parenting programs.

NF: Right. So that’s more of a big-picture, and then what you’re doing is more-specific with these families, with API community.

DH: Right. I think that ours is just, like, the base, the stepping stone because we’re working with the real little ones and the parents. But I think that what we do does directly affect—because eventually those parents will probably be, or some of them are, leaders in the community. They will learn through our positive reinforcement, our strength-based approach. We’re working on building up the parents’ self-esteem, being proud of who they are, what they’re doing as a parent, being a great parent, and they’ll feel more empowered to participate in the other things in the community such as going to the community needs-assessment or participating in other Asian Family Center programing. Then, it’s kind of like, you do that and then you create this ripple-effect and they’re going to talk to their friends, or their family members, or their community members to have more supports within the agency and the community.

NF: That’s wonderful that you see yourself as the base in terms of early development and education that then leads to leadership in the community which is what you’re aiming for. And so, what are some of your recommendations? Perhaps not only for your program, but for AFC as a whole in terms of the needs. Obviously, more funding and more staff would be great, and more people that know more languages, so in addition to that, what role do you see playing—what do you think your recommendations are?

DH: Well there’s always a need for more-diverse staff. But I think, like, I’ve talked about this before, the way that you’re going to make that happen is to make that need known at the college level. So many people at all these different colleges, whether a technical school, or whether it’s, you know, a community college or university—letting them know that there is such a huge need for social work-type positions within the ethnic-specific communities. If we can promote that somehow to get more people—even volunteer or, you know, do an internship within our agencies—they can see that need.
And then, maybe finding a more-diverse workforce is definitely, I think, the huge need that I see that there needs to be a change.

NF: You’re background is in education, early childhood education and teaching, are those the types of backgrounds and studies that you’re looking for? What types of other skills do you think are needed in this type of work?

DH: So definitely there are more, how can I say—there are definitely more therapeutic counsellors needed for children. There’s not enough culture-specific counsellors out there that can work with the diverse cultures that are coming to Portland. So, there’s definitely a need for therapeutic counsellors, a need for home-visitors, parent educators to be more diverse from the different ethnic backgrounds. Typically, they, I would say, they go to school for business—most API communities, they go to school for business; they don’t look into the social service field or working with young children. So, they have the experience, the life experience, but they don’t have the technical background or the education about child development, parenting education, what to teach, how to teach it, the theory behind all that. So I think that we could do more outreach or more...just like at PSU or different schools within Portland, at least.

NF: Can you talk a little bit about your personal and professional achievements in terms of what you have felt have been your successes here at AFC, I’m sure you have many. So what do you think are some of your proudest achievements in terms of programs or how you’ve helped staff or if there are specific stories from families you’ve assisted that you’d like to share?

DH: Hm. That’s a good question. Probably just my biggest achievement, I think, is how long I’ve been here. Most people are just truly amazed to see a non-bilingual person stay at IRCO this long. You know, it’s just, most of the supervisors or managers of IRCO are from the ethnic-specific communities; you don’t see many Caucasian mainstream supervisors. They come and they go, but not too many stay more than five years. The pay—but it’s just it’s the passion, it’s not about the pay, it’s about what you do and what you believe in, and, you know, that you can make a change. [00:40:17]

I think my hugest, I guess, success is teaching people what I know—just like the theories and examples I’ve given you, passing that on to them and teaching them how to be effective communicators both verbally and written and to teach people how to be non-judgmental. I think those are my hugest successes. And just helping other people within IRCO; mentoring them around not so much the business piece of what we do as supervisors or managers, but about the human relationships and how that is way more important than how you fill out a form or, you know, how you do your time-sheet, or
whatever. It’s really about those human relationships and how you interact with people. Teaching people how to be good listeners; everybody wants to tell their story, but in order to be a good storyteller, I think, first, you need to be a good listener. So, I think, that’s kind of my motto and my way behind what I do; I try to really listen to people first before I speak, and sometimes people get upset with me because I’m so laid back and I take a long time to get my thoughts out or I don’t respond right away, and it’s just because I want to really think things through before I act. Think before you speak.

NF: As you described that you’re not bilingual and being a Caucasian woman in an environment where most of the people that work here, as you mentioned, are from the ethnic communities they’re representing, has that ever been an issue? Or because AFC is very welcoming, they just value your expertise and your knowledge and that’s what’s most important?

DH: Yes, yes. That’s it.

NF: Wonderful.

DH: Yeah.

NF: In terms of the work here that you do and in your experience, can you talk a little bit about your mentors or who has inspired you in the work that you do? That can be outside of AFC or it can be your supervisors or colleagues here that you work with.

DH: So, my first inspiration was probably--everyone calls him Mr. Hongsa, I can’t say his last name, but he was probably my first inspiration. He took the time, he was a really good listener; he took the time to train me how to do the role of a lead parent educator. [He’s] very, very detail-orientated, and that’s how I became just like that. [He’s] very organized and very compassionate. He taught me all that in a very little time, but he took the time to teach me and I think that’s what was important. I knew that he’s a big, big leader in the Lao community; and from Laos, he’s also a former king. I really respected and I know how important that is even though he’s not there. People take that understanding of who he used to be, and they never forget that. I think that’s, kind of--when I know about somebody’s history, if it’s a good history, I try to never take those things for granted. I was just truly amazed, like: here’s this Caucasian woman coming to Asian Family Center and this big leader in the community took time to teach me how to do this job. Something maybe he saw in me that, you know, I could do this job, or that I had the passion for it, or whatever it might’ve been. He was my inspiration to, just, take one step at a time and anything can be accomplished; it doesn’t matter who you are or where you came from or what you’re doing right now, you can
do anything. Probably I would say my other inspirations, I would honestly say, is just all of the supervisors that are under me: Pam Richardson, Chow Lance, Svetlana Svachedah, and May Chow [sp?]. They have all been supervisors for more than five years, each of them. In our department, we’ve all been together, so they’re almost like sisters, but they are the supervisors and I’m their manager. But, they respect me, but I respect them. They’ve really been my inspiration and my support system while I’ve been at IRCO. We set professional boundaries, but, yet, we can all still be sister-like to each other and I’ve really, really appreciated that. I guess that’s why I’m still here; I would say it’s just because of that support I’ve got from all of them.

[00:45:36]

NF: And you mentioned that you took over Mr. Hongsa’s position, is that correct? That he mentored you and trained you into the position?

DH: Mm-hmm.

NF: In your transitions and moving from being more of the worker that did most of the home-visits and then moving up to manager and now you manage the supervisors, how has that worked in terms of—basically, the changes that have happened, and over yours of experience, have you moved up? Do you apply? I’m curious how that works and just the internal workings of IRCO.

DH: Like how did that happen? How did I go from direct-service to manager?

NF: Mm-hmm. Was that that the programs were expanding and then with your expertise, you were moving up?

DH: Yes. It’s just, I think, keeping the Asian Pacific Islander PCDS program over all these years—you know, it’s been up for a grant renewal and other agencies could apply for the same funding and the same programing. I don’t know if others did, but we still applied for it every time it came up for refunding. But we were always the one granted back the API PCDS; nobody else has ever had that. Only us. There’s a Slavic PCDS, there’s an African immigrant PCDS, and there are regional PCDSs, and there Native American, African American also. So we’ve always kept the API; the other ones have kind of come and gone. I think building on the success of that specific program, I think, has helped us to expand on the other programs that we have.

NF: That’s wonderful. And you mentioned that really AFC is the only agency that provides the services in the way that you provide them, is that correct?
DH: Well, I’m not sure the details of what the other culture-specific agencies...how they adapt their program so that they are culture specific. I can only speak for what I know at AFC. My sense is that every ethnic community-based organization does things in their own way. I would say we have the staff from those communities for which the communities we serve, and I think that’s what makes us unique. Even though, like we mentioned before, the funding, there’s a gap in funding for the newer Asians that are coming to the United States; but, you can’t always meet the needs of everybody. You know, we have a Mien and a Vietnamese-speaking home-visitor in our Asian Pacific Islander PCDS. Although there’s a need for many, many others, those are the ones that we have that are trained in the curriculum who have the knowledge and the know-how to help do the program effectively. You can’t just change staffing because there’s another entity; what we need to change is our funding sources. So we still need more funding so we can hire additional people.

NF: And that training, is that something that you and your staff provide? When someone new comes in, they may come in with that early education background and they may have that degree, but in terms of that culturally-specific training, then do you provide that or is that something that you have to learn as part of the process of working with families?

DH: A lot of it is learning as you’re going.

NF: Wow.

DH: Yep. And learning from other staff. We have them—I have every new staff at least observe at least three different home-visits from three different cultures. They may never, you know, serve this specific culture over here, but I want them to learn that they may run into that sometime down the road while they’re in this department. They may work another program, they may diversify the programing that they’re working in; so it’s always good just to see another approach of how things are done, and then you can adapt it, as you need it, for your particular family that you’re serving. So we do that. And we also—we share stories among each other in our staff meetings. We share food, we do—two times a year, we do annual get-togethers. During December and then in June, we do a whole department get-together where we share time, we do teambuilding activities. So a lot of that also is from peer to peer learning.

[00:50:30]

NF: Wonderful. Do you find that that coupled with the in-class academic experience is a really good way of enabling staff members to serve their communities?
DH: Right, I don’t think that you can just go to a training and listen to somebody talk about a specific culture and say, “oh, now, I’ve gotten diversity training,” no. I really think the diversity training happens from life experience and being immersed into a particular situation at a time, and learning how to maneuver your situation or figure it out. And we learn from our mistakes, and you adapt. And, I think that our staff also go to each other on how to deal with a certain thing; whether it is, you know, you have a child with a temper-tantrum who is a Pacific Islander child, or you have a child who’s Chinese and they have a different type of way of dealing with that temper-tantrum. Well, maybe, you know, I might be Chinese and I don’t know how to deal with my family over here because I don’t know anything, even though I’m Asian, I don’t know how, if it’s the same as my culture. So I always tell them: “don’t ever assume that you know how to deal with a situation; it’s better to go talk with another staff or someone from the community that--maybe, try to figure out how you’re gonna resolve that situation before you make a wrong judgment.”

NF: Excellent. How do you feel—you may not feel comfortable speaking for your staff, but how do you feel that your staff have been able to adapt and work with the different communities? Is that something that you, as a manager, have seen their growth? Is that something that you look for as one of your goals as manager?

DH: I don’t know. I think I’m just very, very fortunate. The staff that we have had, none of them have ever said, or came to me to say, “I feel uncomfortable working with this culture-specific community.” They’re all just very passionate about what they do. Nobody has ever left our programing because of, you know, they felt uncomfortable working with a specific culture. I can’t say that there are any negative things to say about the staff and their relationships with different cultures.

NF: That’s wonderful that you have such great staff and that you’re able to have that peer to peer exchange of knowledge and experiences. That’s great. So is there anything else that we haven’t discussed? Any programs that we’ve missed that you’d like to share more about? Or any topics that come to mind?

DH: You know, in our department we probably have 13 different programs. Some are sited here, some at Africa House, some at IRCO. Some of the staff that are in the API PCDS program though, they also work in some of our DHS foster care prevention programing so they kind of do both so they get some experiences in working with high-risk families also. They kind of— they’ve learned to be adaptable and flexible, and, like I said, not only in the ethnic cultures that they serve, but in the needs of those cultures; they’ve been able to be flexible in working with both low-risk and high-risk families.

NF: That’s great. And so, do you see the program just continue to expand? Do you see potentially more programs? If there are funds available, then yes.
DH: If there are funds, I see definitely like building upon the ability to serve more communities, definitely. I wouldn’t change the way that we’re doing things or the approach that we take in working with families; I just say we need to be able to provide more families with more services. Yeah.

NF: Wonderful. And then you can continue to be that base, that foundation for the rest of AFC, for the rest of the organization.

DH: Absolutely, absolutely. We see our families, kind of, trickle through other programs and get ongoing support services as their children grow.

[00:55:07]

NF: That’s wonderful. Alright, anything else for closing, any closing remarks?

DH: No, thank you very much.

NF: Alright, thank you.

DH: Okay.

Interview paused and restarted.

NF: Okay, as a quick success story, could you share one if you have one?

DH: Sure. So I was working in our DHS IHSRS program, it’s called In-Home Safety Reunification Service, and it is a program funded through DHS child welfare in district two in Multnomah County. I got a referral for a Filipino, single mom with two children, one was two years old and one was newborn. She was living in a shelter about 45 miles from Portland and no other agency wanted to travel to provide the services. So, she needed a non-offending parenting curriculum delivered to her. And so I piloted a curriculum through modification—every home-visit modified it based on what was going on with her. I travelled past Woodburn once a week for three hours for 12 weeks and provided supports to her, delivering this curriculum. She finally realized, you know, over time, the reason that child welfare opened her case was that her former husband of her kid was a sex-offender and he was charged with that. He went through his treatment but he never finished. So, when she had her baby in the hospital here in Portland, of course, due to his actions in the hospital, — he was a little violent, yelling at the nurses and the doctors, “why this? why that?” — DHS got involved in that case. Then they found out that he had never finished his treatment, so it was a safety risk now for mom and the kids. They made a safety plan with her; put her in a shelter.
So I had to go to the shelter to visit her every week. It was very successful at the end; she really, kind of, finally took the information in. In the beginning she was a little resistant, “my husband would never do this; this was in his past.” But, he never had finished. What she couldn’t understand is he never finished his treatment, so he was never fully finished with his therapy which meant he probably could reoffend again, and that was DHS’ concern—he could reoffend to the children that they now have together. She finally got the concept that maybe that could happen. So now, she had a set of tools, she had many handouts that she could refer back to in case something happened, she could say, “yes, this is what Danita taught, I remember this, I gotta be strong, I gotta protect my kids.” So she had a plan in place, she had a curriculum in place, she had the information to build on her strengths and to let her make decisions around choices that she needed to make to keep her kids safe. In the end, she wanted to move back to California, so the shelter bought her a ticket—a one-way ticket to California. And I went and got her at 3 o’clock in the morning and picked her up from the shelter, took her to the airport, got her in the airport, got her checked in, and then she was on her way. She called back about 3 weeks later from a blocked number, but just, you know, “Danita, I’m fine. I want to let you know, I appreciate everything that you did, and me and my kids are gonna be fine now.” So it was just really, really, like, even talking about it gives me goose-bumps because I know that she may have been okay later in life, but now I know she is going to be okay later in life. If he ever comes back to her life, she’ll have the tools of knowing how to deal with the situation, and knowing that yeah, maybe she will take him back, but maybe she can also say, “you know what, I want you to finish your treatment, so that I really, really know that me and my kids are gonna be safe around you.”

NF: Wow, that’s a wonderful success story. Thank you so much for sharing.

DH: Yeah. You’re welcome.

NF: Alright, thanks.

[end of interview 00:59:46]