Alfred John Young and Connie Young Yu

Al Young was interviewed by Palma You and Steve Haines of the Chinese Historical Society of America (CHSA) via Zoom on November 18, 2020, as part of *Chinese in the Richmond*—a collaboration with Western Neighborhoods Project (WNP) that illuminates the lives of Chinese Americans in San Francisco's Richmond District. Additional memories were submitted by Connie Young Yu in writing.

"Alfred John Young and Connie Young Yu Remember" is an expanded adaptation of the oral history interview conducted by CHSA. Written by Nicole Meldahl, Executive Director of WNP, it places the Young family's story within the broader context of the neighborhood and is not verbatim. A transcript summary of Al Young's interview can be read HERE. A digital recording of this interview and additional primary resources not available online are available for research at CHSA.

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Recommended Citation:

> Transcript Summary - "Alfred John Young" conducted by Palma You and Stephen B. Haines, Jr., Chinese Historical Society of America, San Francisco, California, 2020.
>
> Adaptation - "Al Young and Connie Young Yu Remember" written by Nicole Meldahl, *Chinese in the Richmond*, 2022.

Al Young and Connie Young Yu Remember

by Nicole Meldahl, Executive Director, Western Neighborhoods Project

Al Young and his sister, Connie Young Yu, have certainly left their mark on the world as descendants of a pioneering Chinese American family. With roots that reach back to the Transcontinental Railroad and San Jose's Chinatown, their father, John C. Young, was a trailblazing colonel in the U.S. Army and founded a soy sauce company that has operated in San Francisco for over 75 years. And their mother, Mary Lee Young, was a respected Chinese antiquities importer whose selections now grace the walls of West Coast museums.

The Young family was one of the earliest to move to the Richmond District in 1948. The experience of growing up at 37th Avenue and Balboa Street led Al Young to become a lifelong, award-winning educator in Washington and a world champion race car driver.

Meanwhile, Connie Young Yu is a prolific historian and writer whose family continues to inspire much of her work, including her central role in stewarding the Angel Island Immigration Station.

As Al remembers, “The real stories are far more interesting than what you can make up.” Reading through their story, it’s hard to argue with that statement.

Family Origins

“Both my parents were born in the United States, and my grandfather was also,” Al Remembers Their father, John Chew Young (Chinese: 容兆珍; pinyin: *Rong Zhaozhen),* was born in San Jose’s Chinatown on June 16, 1912. He was the second son of Young Soong Quong (known to the family as “Gung-Gung”), who had come to California as a farm laborer at the age of 11 in 1881. Arriving in the United States before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Gung-Gung was allowed re-entry papers to see family in China, where he married but he could not return with his wife. Consequently, the pair were separated for 14 years until he established himself as a merchant and could legally send for her. Connie still holds Gung-Gung’s resident permit, an internal passport for all Chinese required by the Geary Act of 1892.

Al remembers, “My father grew up in San Jose Chinatown, rebuilt on John Heinlin’s property after racists burned down the original Chinatown in the 1880s. John Heinlin was our hero.” Heinlin owned a ranch about five miles south of San Jose in the 1880s. Al continued, “he leased land to the Chinese to build the new Chinatown. My grandfather had a store there when my father was born, and they registered and purchased the store in my father's name because Chinese could not own property. And since my father was born in the U.S. the building and land could be in his name.” Connie served as a historical consultant on the archeological excavation of San Jose’s Chinatown and most recently co-accepted an apology to Chinese Americans by the City of San Jose for its violence, terrorism and system racism towards Chinese in the city in 2021.

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Photos. 2nd Lieutenant John C. Young at Ft. Worden, Washington, in 1936. (Courtesy of the Museum of History & Industry, Seattle)

After graduating with a junior college diploma from San Jose State College in 1933, John attended Stanford University–applying to graduate from the School of Engineering by June 1935. He stayed on to pursue an advanced degree in Mining Engineering and was also a member of the Stanford chapter of the Society of the Sigma Xi, an honorary scientific research society. While at Stanford, he joined the U.S. Army Reserve Officers Training Corp (ROTC) as a cadet. In 1936, he attended his second consecutive summer training course at Ft. Worden in Washington where he received his 2nd lieutenant's commission. He was the only cadet of color in his entire company and this was the first time he was allowed to bunk with his white peers.

Al remembers that in 1937, "my father graduated with a Master's degree in petroleum engineering from Stanford University" and soon thereafter married Mary Lee Young. The couple would have three children: Janey Young Cheu, Connie Young Yu, who was born in 1941, and Alfred John Young, who was born in 1946.

On his mother's side, their "great-grandfather came over in the 1860's to work on building the Transcontinental Railroad. We are a pioneer Chinese American family," Al remembers. Lee Wong Sang came from the Sze Yup region of Kwangtung along with his cousins to work on the Iron Road for the Central Pacific Railroad. He quickly became a foreman and was responsible for laying track through Utah and helped to build the railroad across the Sierra Nevada Mountains. He would go on to open an import-export store with partner Quong Shin Lung in San Francisco's Chinatown, where he raised four children with his wife, Shee Chin, and became a respected member of the community.

His great-granddaughter, Connie Young Yu, would co-edit "Voices from the Railroad: Stories by descendants of Chinese railroad workers" published by CHSA, and she would speak on behalf of all descendants of Chinese Transcontinental Railroad workers at the United States Department of Labor induction of workers into the Labor Hall of Honor in May 2014. Additionally, she gave the opening Commencement speech at the "Golden Spike" Ceremony at Promontory Point, Utah in 2019. In this she followed in her parents' footsteps. Her mother was the only present descendant of Chinese railroad workers at the centennial anniversary of the Transcontinental Railroad in May 1969, and Connie wore her mother's dress to the ceremonies in 2019.

Their mother's history gave the family Catholic roots. Her grandfather, Yoke Suey Lee, had been born in San Francisco. Despite the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, he was able to hold onto his citizenship paperwork. Connie remembered in an article in *Asian American News*, Yoke "rushed back to the store…to retrieve his birth certificate, and was bayoneted because the soldier thought he was a looter. Luckily, his wound was

not deep and he managed to hobble to safety with his papers stuffed in his heavy jacket. He risked his life to save the proof." (1) Yoke worked for the family company and eventually married Shee Wong, whom he brought back to America. He then took a position based in Shanghai as an agent for American goods with The Oriental Trading Company, working for Levi Strauss & Company and the Haas brothers. He brought his family to live with him in Shanghai, where they put their children in Cantonese School, but traveled frequently between China and San Francisco. He was aboard a steamer to China when he died of liver cancer in 1922. What happens next would connect the family to the Catholic faith, according to Al.

"I never knew why I was Catholic. I would ask, 'Mom, why am I Catholic?' And this is a true story, she said, 'Well, your grandmother went back to China to pick us up after he died en route from cancer, and Grandmother returned to San Francisco with her children—my mother included. They let the children in, but they wouldn't let her in,'" Al remembers. She arrived in the Port of San Francisco aboard the S.S. Cleveland from Hong Kong on January 15, 1924. He continued, she "was classified as an alien ineligible for citizenship according to the law of 1924 and detained at Angel Island. She was married to a U.S. citizen, but when he died, she lost all status and was to be deported to China." Additionally, a medical examination at Angel Island found her to have a liver fluke, or filariasis. "She was imprisoned on Angel Island while her family and the Haas brothers fought in the courts for her freedom." She would be there for nearly 16 months. "My mother was allowed to visit her every week (twice a week, for 15 minutes), but she wasn't allowed to be within sixty feet of her for almost a year and a half. We had finally exhausted almost every legal means when she heard the rumor that there was a Catholic priest that knew how to get people off of the island. So my mother approached him: 'I understand you know how to get people off of this island.' And he replied, 'Yes, I do, I can help your mother get off under three conditions: she becomes Catholic, you become Catholic, and all of your children become Catholic.'"

Connie remembers that Shee Wong's eldest daughter "appealed to a white business associate of her father who hired a lawyer. A first appeal was denied, a second appeal took months…Finally, United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled that Mrs. Lee be released on the grounds it was inhumane to separate her from her children, and that it was proven she had a curable ailment." (2) On April 29, 1925, Shee Wong Lee was released from Angel Island. In 1974, Connie returned to the island with her mother for a documentary by Freida Lee Mock. "My mother had never been to the barracks before, only the Administration Building (which is no longer there) standing inside the Detention Barracks. She told me tearfully– 'Here is the window where she would wave to me–I could see her hand waving when I was on the walkway going to the ferry.'" (3)

Standard Oil to Soy Sauce

From Stanford University, John C. Young began working in his field. “Standard Oil hired him not knowing he was Chinese. After about a year he was told by several people that there was no future for him at Standard Oil because he was Chinese. So then he worked for the Conservation Committee for a while when we lived in Los Angeles, and then we moved to Whittier,” where his mother also had a gift shop.

All the while, John C. Young was a reserve officer until called to active duty with the United States Army on February 20, 1942. That December, he was assigned to the China-Burma-India Theatre where he served as U.S. Army Combat Liaison Officer between Chinese and American troops, working under the command of General Joseph Stilwell. In this role, he organized the airdrop of supplies to troops and he spent more than two years along Burma Road, training and advising Chinese troops in ordnance activities. At the Battle of Mount Song (Songshan Mountain), he, Peter S. Hopkins, and Carlos Spaht helped to design and implement a strategy of tunneling and placing TNT charges that destroyed the core of a Japanese stronghold in the area. He then saw to equipping members of the Chinese army with American weapons.

Al remembers, “My dad fought for two-and-a-half years overseas without rotation. I mean, now you get rotated out after eight months or something and you go back. Upon leaving overseas in June 1945, my father went from Kunming to Casablanca to Greenland, and finally landed in New York City just before the war ended. The first thing he wanted to do was to buy a drink. He went downtown into a bar and the bartender goes, ‘We don't serve your kind.’ My father pointed to his lapel and goes, ‘See this: it says U.S., U-S!’ I don't remember what happened after that, if he drank the drink, but it was probably a bittersweet one.”

Al continued, “He then flew to San Antonio, Texas, to go to Fort Sam Houston where he was supposed to report, and he goes in and there's a civilian secretary there. He checks in and asks, ‘Where am I going to bunk tonight?’ At the time he was a Major, but she gave him a telephone book and said to him, ‘See if you can find a Chinese American family to live with.’ My father was totally outraged. I mean, here he is, he’s a Major in charge of 800 people, two and a half years fighting for this country, and she tells him that he can’t stay on the U.S. Army base he was assigned to. He demands: ‘I want to see your commanding officer right now!’ The commanding officer comes in totally embarrassed because he had stayed stateside, and here was a person who had done the fighting and came back. He gave my dad the quarters for generals only. These were the only two stories he ever told—he kept everything else quiet but we knew the undercurrent of what was going on. ” For his service, John Young was awarded the

Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal in December 1945 and discharged with the rank of major.

“When Dad was overseas, my mother opened up a Chinese gift shop in Whittier,” Al said. “We were the only Chinese people in Whittier. At the time it was an ‘in’ thing to have something Chinese. All the rich people felt that if they owned something from the Orient, that was cool. So she picked up on that, very astute, and she made a very good living. I’ll give you an example: she opened her first store; it did okay. But when she moved to a street that was more populated, her store took off. For her grand opening, she brought in 430 pairs of chopsticks to give to people as souvenirs, and she ran out within an hour. And Whittier was a very small town. Just to give you an idea of how astute a business woman she was.”

Al is right: his mother was very savvy in catering to prevailing tastes but her gift shop actually dates back to before the war. A September 1939 article in *The Whittier Times* notes her participation in the East Whittier Woman’s Improvement Club meeting that was arranged with a “Chinese motif.” Mary loaned decorations from her gift shop for the meeting, which featured “Miss Helen Broadwell, who sang a group of Chinese folks songs…dressed in an authentic Chinese costume” followed by a speech given by Helen Lacy, “wife of the Reverend Henry Lacy, who has been a missionary in Foo Chow China for many years.” (4) Also attired in Chinese costume, she spoke on the subject of women in China.

Photos. Lt. Colonels John C. Young and Keith Bering showing a machine gun and mortar round to a Thai colonel who was in San Francisco to acquire arms to fight a Communist insurgency in 1956. (Courtesy of Al Young)

Al remembers, “After a while my father decided to go into business in San Francisco’s Chinatown where he can actually have a business without being impaired by his racial status in America. He built a business producing soy sauce.” Beginning in 1942, John Young built the Wing Nien Brand with his brother-in-law, George Hall, L.C. Lee, and George Chew. It was the first factory in the United States to manufacture soy sauce using the old Chinese fermentation process, and their first batch was created in the basement of an old bank in Chinatown. “At the time, trade with China was difficult so imported soy sauce was expensive and my father and his brother-in-law saw the need,” Al continued. “They felt that if they produced soy sauce domestically for the restaurants and all of the other Chinatowns in America, that that would be a viable business. The original factory was on Montgomery Street. That became too small and my father and his partner moved the factory to Sansome, maybe just down the hill from Broadway. I ended up when I was about 15 years-old to 17 years-old as a delivery driver for soy sauce in Chinatown, as my summer job. So you can imagine someone like me, who can’t speak Chinese very well, running through Chinatown hauling and delivering barrels of soy sauce!”

Young and his partners continued to expand the business. In 1946, Wing Nien outgrew its original basement location and took over an entire building in Chinatown, allowing the company to start importing and exporting goods, creating the United Enterprise Company. In the 1950s, Wing Nien went into business with Johnny Kan, with Young and Hall becoming part owners of Kan's Restaurant in San Francisco, and the company also invested in Ming's in Palo Alto. A *San Francisco Chronicle* article from 2003 described these as "among the first elegant Chinese restaurants to cater to Westerners in the Bay Area. Trained as engineers, the pair introduced such touches as a lazy Susan for restaurant tables and perfumed wash cloths." (5) Kan's was a favorite of celebrities like Kim Novak, Danny Kaye and Jimmy Stewart and also appeared frequently in Herb Caen's legendary column in the *San Francisco Chronicle.*

In the 1960s, soy sauce was more widely available as a kitchen staple–no longer used exclusively as a Chinese ingredient–and the company expanded further. After Hall's death in 1966, John Young became president of the Corporation and head of Wing Nien Soy Sauce Company, joined by George Hall's son, David, in 1970. John oversaw the move to a larger plant in Potrero Hill before retiring in 1977. David took over, helping to automate the new plant and opening a second in Canada. Of the new location in Potrero Hill, which he calls "a really fancy area, Al said, "they've built that location into a pretty nice apartment, restaurant, all that stuff. We do co-packing of Chinese condiments now and some various brands of soy sauce, although I'm no longer involved with it. It's my cousin's business now." In 2013, Connie and Effie Hall Dilworth published "Wing Nien Brand: A Story of Longevity," which tells the story of the company's early years and how its history connects with Chinatown's growth.

Moving to the Richmond

Doing well for themselves and wanting more space for their family, the Youngs migrated west. They were living on Jackson Street between Grant and Stockton Streets in "one of those really crowded apartments," Al remembers. "And we didn't live there for more than a few months while we were waiting to buy a house—it was so crowded. I think we were living with other relatives. More than five of us, I'm pretty sure. If you've ever lived in an apartment in Chinatown with a family, then you'd know that you'd really want a house and a garden and everything else. At the time my father was promoted to lieutenant colonel and he was eligible for the GI Bill, so one could get a house with no down payment. You could choose a lot of properties. And my mother was very successful in her business so she said, 'We can afford to live in many neighborhoods.' We could move out of Chinatown; Chinatown is a really crowded place.' If given the opportunity to live in a suburban area or to live in Chinatown, where you have to spend half an hour trying to find parking, it is kind of a no- brainer."

He continued, “When we were trying to look around for a house, the realtors were always showing us homes in different areas outside of the Richmond District, and my parents wanted to live in the Richmond District. The realtors said, ‘We cannot and will not sell to an Asiatic.’ My father was really frustrated with this and told one of his Army buddies and best friend, Lieutenant Colonel Keith Bering of the situation, and I think they hatched a plot.” Keith Everton Bering was just a few years older than John, and also a graduate of Stanford University’s School of Engineering (Class of 1931). He beat John into the Army by one year—enlisting on February 26, 1941—and served in the U.S. Army Ordnance Corps. Married to Dorothy Eaglebarger, the couple moved around, from Los Angeles to Texas during Keith’s service, but raised a family in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Al continued, “They were both U.S. Army lieutenant colonels and shared a pride in serving our country. Keith fought in one of the bloodiest wars in the Pacific in Okinawa. I don't know how they figured this one out, but I don't think any of my dad’s Army buddies would not have done the same thing for him. Keith goes ahead and buys the house for us and a month later turns it around to sell to us—and at a great risk because, according to the real estate covenants, if you sell to an Asiatic or someone who is not Caucasian, you forfeit all of your profits from the house—so Keith took a risk!”

Photo. Listing for what became the Young family’s Richmond District home, June 6, 1948. (Courtesy of the *San Francisco Examiner* / Newspapers.com)

Connie remembers that the family “moved to a modest house at 674 37th Avenue in 1948, the first Chinese family that far down ‘The Avenues.’” An advertisement lists the home “offered by owner for quick sale” in the *San Francisco Examiner* in June 1948.

For $13,750, this “beautifully decorated” Richmond 5-room Bungalow had new appliances, renewed floors and a yard, and was also close to schools, shopping, and streetcars. (6) According to San Francisco City Directories from 1945 to 1948, John Linz was the owner of record for the home.

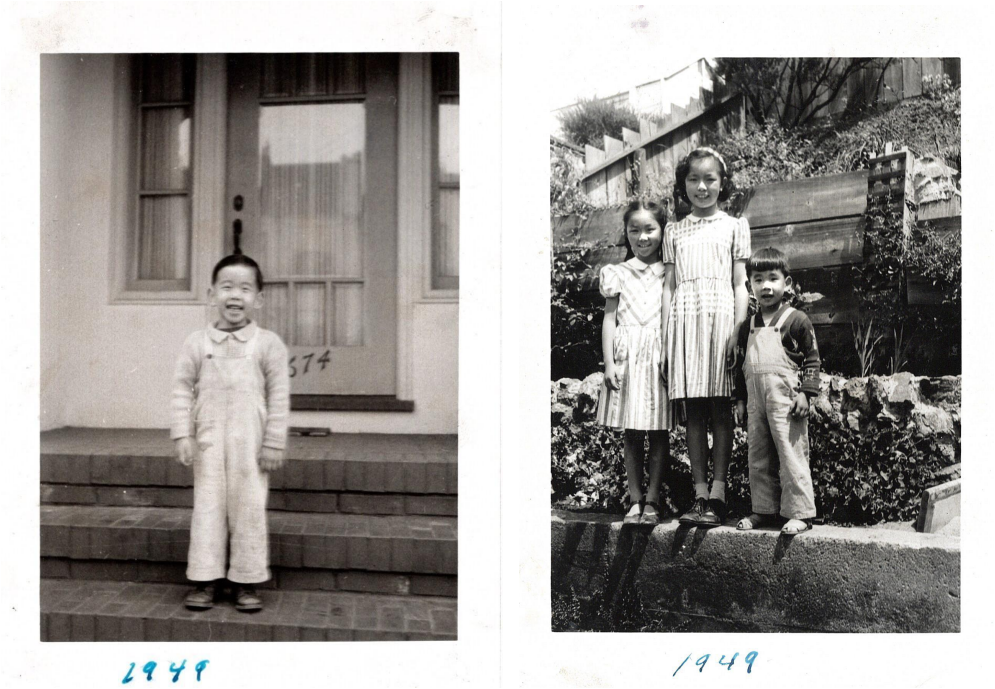

Photo. [Left] Al Young on the front steps and [right] all three siblings in the backyard of the Young Family home at 674 37th Avenue shortly after moving in, 1949. (Courtesy of Al Young)

Al continued, “When we moved in, our next door neighbor circulated a petition to get us out of the neighborhood to enforce the racial covenant against Asians and people of color. Two doors down, the Stevensons, who eventually became my best friends, told my mother about it. My father goes back to his Army buddies and says, ‘There are two societies here–the civilians and the Army people–and they think totally differently.’ His Army buddies are incensed. When you fight side- by-side, you think totally differently about whom you’re with. You form a bond and brotherhood. And so they all decided to hold all of their monthly U.S. Army Reserve Unit meetings at our house in the Richmond once a month, until the Korean War broke out. They parked up the neighborhood, came up in uniform and brass, with their children. It was wonderful for all us kids and the families. As the neighborhood began to observe, the petition to remove us just faded and nobody ever gave us a problem after that. Army Strong!!!” Their father would be a reserve officer until he retired with the rank of full colonel on May 25, 1972.

Photo. Left to right: Janey, Connie, Mary Lee, Lt. Col. John C. Young, Alfred John at the Young family home at 674 37th Avenue, circa 1952. (Courtesy of Al Young)

“And we didn’t just move there,” Al continued. “We had the feeling that we needed to assert ourselves and we’re going into this neighborhood to live as Americans. I’m not sure how other people of color felt about moving into (at the time) an all white neighborhood, but we certainly felt that we had every right to be there as third- and fourth-generation Americans, and an Army family. We were accepted into the neighborhood eventually. To the realtors we weren’t, but all of their fears came true and we got into the neighborhood and acted like people. We started buying and inviting our friends, and we took over the neighborhood.”

‘Horrible, horrible! Ruined your white neighborhood,’ they said. But if you hadn’t sold your house, you’d be a millionaire now. Same fear, if you let Blacks into the neighborhood your property values will diminish. The Richmond is a great example of suburbia when you let non-Whites in! It becomes really interesting! I look at the kids I

grew up with, those who were White, and I look at them on Facebook. And almost to a "T" they've got Asians, Hispanics, and Blacks in their immediate families. See what public school did: it ruined us!"

Photo. Connie Young (left) and Janey Young in front of the Young family home at 674 37th Avenue, circa 1961. (Courtesy of Al Young)

"There were no Chinese in the Richmond District to speak of at the time," he said. "Those that lived in the Richmond were mostly wealthy enough to buy a home. Although, down the block from my home, which was so weird, was a Chinese orphanage. And I never saw the orphans! I lived there for 16 years and I never saw an orphan there. I saw the structure and we would always walk by there and everybody knew it was the orphanage, but nobody ever saw them. I walked by it and my friends used to say that that was the orphanage."

Nobody ever saw orphans at 740 37th Avenue because the white neighborhood feared an influx of "Oriental children." A proper garden and fences were proposed to shield the sight of Chinese babies from white residents. Founded in 1933 by Donaldina Cameron, Dr. Bessie Yeen Jeong, Helen Wu, and a group of Chinese Presbyterian women, it was called Mei Lun Yuen. In 1939, it transformed into a foster home managed by Helen Wu. Despite fund-raising activities in the 1950's, by 1962 Mei Lun Yuen was defunct, the abandoned property was sold by the City, and a new building was constructed on the site. (7)

“But, in general, it was a middle-class neighborhood. Almost everyone was employed, working-class or professional, and had similar backgrounds. Most of the parents were in the war—a lot of shared experiences. The neighborhood was great. I lived half a block away from the Balboa Theater. Growing up there, the biggest thing was birthday parties. Everybody had to have birthday parties, and they were almost identical. We’d have hot dogs and ice cream and go to the Balboa Theater for a matinee. It was like every birthday party was like that!”

Photo. Muni B-line streetcar #139 on Balboa Street and 37th Avenue, 1956. (Courtesy of Jack Tillmany / OpenSFHistory, wnp5.51187)

Al remembers, “We entertained a lot—my dad’s Army buddies, and our own immediate family. The Lee family is pretty large, so I would have cousins to mess around with and we would gather in our house quite often. It was big by inner city standards and most of the family on my mother’s side, the Lee family, all lived in Chinatown. I think they relished in the fact–‘Let’s go see our parents, Uncle John and Aunt Mary.’ We had room to play in the backyard but in Chinatown you would run around in the apartment.”

Photo. Circa 1957 (Courtesy of Al Young)

In remembering what daily life was like at home, Al said “I tried to avoid tasks, chores, and errands as much as possible. Of course, I was asked to do certain things, but chores were not piled upon me. I had a workbench downstairs where I worked on my projects, my model airplanes. My mother knew that I was different, that my learning style was different. So she really encouraged my hobbies. Growing up in the Richmond District, there were about three hobby shops in the Richmond District. I knew them all. I built model airplanes, model boats, model cars, gas engines. I was really into working with my hands and with anything that exploded, whether it was internally or externally. When I was in junior high and elementary school, I joined two different model airplane clubs—one started out strong, but we broke up and started another club. We would be flying model airplanes at the Polo Field, so that’s what brought us together. We would have meetings located at different people’s homes in the Richmond. I visited the Polo Field and Spreckels Lake very often, flying model airplanes, or running model boats with engines.”

“Then that turned into cars.” Al continued. “As soon as I hit 15 years-old I bought a car before I could even have a license to drive. It was a 1950 Mercury, four door, $25, with no first gear. I hid it around the corner so my parents couldn’t find it. Finally, I had to tell them and they allowed me to bring it back into the house and use the garage. I think

they realized that, ‘We couldn’t fight this, at least he was interested in something.’ Boy was I interested!”

Once he had his license, Al “raced around all the time! It was a lot safer then because you really weren’t going that fast. Eighteen seconds in the quarter mile is not that fast. But speed is relative, it was great. To me one of my best memories in high school was going on a date or hanging out with friends. We would go to the Great Highway and there would be parking lots at either end. The Great Highway was not blocked off the way it is now, it was a straight stretch, a good three miles. One side, there was no place for a policeman to park so, if you raced on that side, they could never see you because there was a big berm. The other side we called the hot side—a cop could actually see. We picked out a person who we thought we might stand a chance at beating. I came out in my ‘47 Chevy, and we would race. When the car was fast enough to pull ahead of an opponent—oh, it was terribly exciting. And going back on the other side of the Great Highway, you might find another person you might match up with. Sometimes you might make a mistake and go against someone who was really fast and think ‘Oh gee, that was embarrassing.’”

The job he landed as a teenager encouraged this hobby. “I worked at Balboa Richfield from the time I was 16 until the time I was 18. And that was at 25th Avenue and Balboa, at a gas station. I also apprenticed at an auto repair shop. Part of the whole deal with me dropping out of the college prep track and entering the voc-ed track at George Washington High School was that I would spend some days after school and Saturdays being an apprentice at a foreign car repair shop. My dad knew an auto repair shop owner, Steven Sui, who had a foreign car repair shop–one of the few Chinese-owned auto repair garages in San Francisco. He had me come in on Saturdays and work there and after school. That was on Pacific Avenue and Broadway. It was a pretty large garage and it was upstairs. I think there was an auto parts store there also.”

Al went on to become an accomplished racer. From 1976 to 1996, he was twice winner of every major Championship E.T. Drag Race National event in the Pacific Northwest, and he was also the American Hot Rod Association World Champion in 1981, among other championship titles. He is still a sponsored race car driver and ambassador for the Bardahl Corporation, which also inducted him into its Hall of Fame at a ceremony held at America’s Car Museum in 2015.

“When I first started racing at national venues, my car would be on the trailer and there would be a Chinese lion on the side of it because I’m not going to hide who I am. Traveling throughout the country, I would stop in small towns and people would stop and talk with me and some would even invite me to lunch, and I would think, ‘Wow, America’s really changed. So cool’. But when my sponsors bought me an enclosed

trailer, all enclosed on the sides so you couldn't see my car, people in those same places treated me like a terrorist, you could just tell. When I had the racecar to look at, people could connect with me, but just as a face they treat you like 'the other'. You realize that some of these people are not wedded to prejudice. They know it's there but they'd rather put it away to start talking about cars."

"Two years ago, in 2019, I was inducted into the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) Hall of Fame, Northwest Division. We're talking about a crowd of about 450 people and they're all White. They all know me and I'm very comfortable, and I told a story about going down South to Bristol, Tennessee, at the World Championships in Bristol. I told them about a man named Sherman. He and a friend drove my car across country and I flew down. I tell the audience: 'We arrive at the race track and a crowd with 38,000 people in it.' At the moment, I'm talking to the audience and a lot of people don't know Sherman. So I then say, 'In case you didn't know, Sherman is Black and I'm Asian.' There wasn't anyone in the stands who looked like either one of us. 'What Can Possibly Go Wrong?,' I said. The audience totally broke out in laughter. It was a good opportunity to tell people about those difficult experiences. I think it's really necessary. I can't run away from the way I look and who I am, and I'm kind of glad about that. Who knows, I might have been a coward if my race wasn't so obvious. My presence at the races just makes people realize who is actually in our country."

Memories of the Neighborhood

Aside from working, Al has memories of local businesses in the neighborhood and his time attending school in the Richmond District. "It was a really clean neighborhood, a lot of fun. I'm not sure when they opened, but growing up–probably from elementary school on–I remember a place called Jack's Hand Laundry. Jack's was owned by Chinese and he knew our family also. He was on Balboa, maybe three storefronts up from 36th going towards 35th Avenue. I know that because I always had to pick up laundry. It was always at Jack's, right across the street from the Frosty Bossy." In 1959, Jack's Hand Laundry was located at 3438 Balboa Street, and they had a second location at 308 Mason Street.

Photo. Shell Station on the northeast corner of 37th Avenue and Balboa, 1951. (SF Assessors Office Negative Collection / OpenSFHistory, wnp58.201)

“And then the other Chinese business was a Super Market. Ours was a strange neighborhood; on 37th Avenue, where we lived, if you went three more doors down there was a gas station. It was a Shell station on the corner. Next to the Shell station was Cala Foods and right across the street from that was another supermarket, and then right on the corner of 37th and Balboa there was another—three supermarkets within 150 feet. Kitty-corner from the Shell station was where Chinese ownership of a supermarket appeared. I can’t remember his name but he ended up buying the store.

Photo. Lafayette School at 37th Avenue and Anza Street, August 1964. (Courtesy of the History Center, San Francisco Public Library / AAA-9901)

Photo. Mounted Policeman Charles Conran ties Patricia Scaglione's shoelaces at 37th Avenue and Balboa as a group of Lafayette Grammar School students wait to cross the street, November 12, 1957. (Courtesy of the History Center, San Francisco Public Library / AAH-0370)

"We lived four houses down from Lafayette School, so I was able to go to the playground there all the time. On my particular block, the school took up the other side so there weren't too many kids. They were either younger or older than I was. But, I would walk two blocks away and all of my best friends would be there. It was a very idyllic childhood and I felt very privileged. I did everything I wanted to do and I never felt any kind of prejudice. If someone said something off-color, most people would say, 'What are you, crazy?' Or I would have to punch them in the nose and then it was all settled. But, that was it. All of my friends, we just grew up together, we were all kids."

Lafayette School 1956

Photography by Mildred

L5

Photos. Lafayette School, 1956. (Courtesy of Al Young) [Ed. note: Janice Gow Pettey discusses her family's photography business for *Chinese in the Richmond*]

In January 1957, he did receive an honorary mention for submitting a story, poem, or drawing to the *San Francisco Examiner*'s "Juniorama Playland" section. "The things that I remember the most were the May Festivals at the Lafayette School. The May Festivals were so cool. We would dance around the flag poles and did all these fertility rites that we didn't know were fertility rites. We could not even pronounce the names of the dances that we did. It was all from Scandinavian or Baltic countries, but we loved them! We sang and danced, and it was very ethnic. The biggest thing that I felt and remembered about grammar school was that the teachers worked really hard at making sure that every one of us felt that they were their favorite student. I remember Miss Bett, who was our kindergarten teacher; she was also my sister's kindergarten teacher. My sisters went to Lafayette before I went to Lafayette. When I entered in, I felt very much at home."

Photo. St. Thomas Catholic Church on Balboa between 39th and 40th, 1964. (Courtesy of the History Center, San Francisco Public Library / AAB-1053)

“When we moved to the neighborhood I always went to St. Thomas Catholic Church on 39th Avenue and Balboa. I stopped going to church when I went to college, but I gave it a real run. I was confirmed, First Communion and everything else. My mother was baptized Catholic. But every time, I’d always have to pray for her because she never went to church with me. I always thought, ‘Oh my God, she’s going to go to Hell!’ We were public school kids and we were let out for two weeks during the time of our confirmation. We had to take confirmation classes at St. Thomas so I was a student there for two weeks even though we were enrolled at Lafayette Grammar School. It was organized between the public schools and the Catholic schools. It was a fun time!”

“In elementary school, you’re in a self-contained classroom and the teachers really tailored most of their lessons for you. You really couldn’t fail. I never knew I had a learning disability going through elementary school. In fact, they sent me to a school for gifted kids in 1958. Sputnik was launched and it just sent chills up and down everyone in America. ‘Oh, the Russians are going to get into outer space before we will, and they’ll own outer space, and we got to do something!’ School officials went around to all of the elementary schools, high schools, and junior high schools and asked for all of the kids that may show an aptitude towards science. I built a lot of things and I love to work with my hands—radios and with directions, not that I invented them. My teachers felt that I was a gifted kid so they sent me to Lux Lab, myself and another student. Two students from every school in San Francisco went to Lux Lab. And we were treated like gifted kids. And there were kids that were truly gifted; I was not one of them, I just liked to build things. They set us in front of a table and gave us whatever we wanted; we could build whatever we wanted and do anything we wanted.”

“Here I was with a background of being a gifted kid, going to a gifted school, going to Presidio Junior High School where everything that you read was in a textbook and you had seven periods a day. And I couldn’t read. I have ADHD, which is another story. I didn’t know I did until I was 50 years old. I can read, but by the time I got to the end of the sentence, I forgot how the sentence started. So reading was futile to me in my early years. Everything in junior high was out of a textbook and I was helpless. I started in the

top group and I matriculated slowly downward. By the time I hit ninth grade, I matriculated to the bottom group of students."

Photo. Presidio Junior High School, n.d. (Courtesy of the History Center, San Francisco Public Library / AAD-4630)

"When I went to George Washington High School, I started at the bottom group and went down even lower, which means I'm cutting school and I'm just not doing schoolwork. That was my learning experience. And I'm a regular guy! But I'm fumbling through school. My father goes to Stanford, my sister goes to Stanford, and I can't even read. I barely made it through; junior high and high school to me was very difficult. People would say 'Oh, I bet you hated school.' No, I loved the social part of it and I had lots of friends but it was depressing. By the time I got to high school I was pretty depressed. I was hanging around people who also couldn't make it in school, and there was no special education, so they just have rooms they put you in with students who can't learn. And there were kids there that really couldn't learn, they had some real

serious problems. And there were some kids in there who were just antisocial or had a lot of oppositional behaviors. So I picked up some real bad habits. This is when I told my parents that I was going to drop out of school."

He did participate in sports, though. He played an "intramural football activity, it wasn't tackle football, after school at George Washington. The gym teacher said, 'There's too many people hanging out after school, we might as well form teams.' I always liked touch football, so they said, "Al, you will be one of the team captains.' I chose one of my best friends, Jim Higgins, who was Black, to be on my team and he helps me recruit other students. He gets his friend ,Danny Glover, and they bring on more of their friends. I had this entire touch football team made up entirely of Danny Glover's friends! So, that's how that goes. We weren't friends until then, that's how we met. We never really became friends, but we had a lot of fun playing football after school together."

"I also did cross country and track," he continued. "And I wasn't good at either one. I just felt that I had to stay in shape. My friends were always involved, some of my best friends were involved in sports. They would say 'Oh, we have to go to cross country to stay in shape and football.' Oh yeah, okay. I wasn't very fast. I did it just to say I did it. My sport was basically working on cars on the weekends. Unsanctioned racing."

"Fortunately, at George Washington they give you two tracks: college prep and vocational education. I told my dad that I wanted to go voc-ed instead of college prep and, being Chinese, he was vehemently against it. But I told him that it's either that, or, I was dropping out of school to become a mechanic. He finally consented to allow me to go change to voc-ed and I managed to graduate from George Washington High School with a 1.38 grade point average, getting a 'D' in almost all of my subjects that weren't voc-ed related." His favorite classes? "Auto shop! Auto shop, machine shop, wood shop—all of the shop classes were great. My old habits died hard. I didn't end up going to English class, I couldn't do that, but at least I stayed in school. We'll put it that way."

Connie also graduated from George Washington. In looking back at her time at school, she said "I did not experience overt racism in the public school classroom, though all of us were taught American History was only about white people and western civilization was the only real civilization in the world. Most labor unions still excluded Chinese and Blacks. There was a glass ceiling for Chinese professionals. I attended a great high school…but the whole society was sexist. Girls were second-class citizens, verbally insulted, whistled at and it was accepted. We did not have any varsity sports, girls were never class or elected student body president, but fine for vice president or secretary. Asian girls stereotyped as exotic, etc." (8)

The Young children also attended Chinese school. Al remembers, “Both my parents spoke Chinese, both of them fluently. My mother went back to China as a child to be educated, because her parents thought she should be educated in China. And my grandfather, her father, had a home in San Francisco as well as in China. My father’s parents only spoke Chinese. And here’s a guy (me) who can’t even read English! Let alone put me in a Chinese school. After I spend all day at school, you’re going to send me to Chinese school?! Give me a break! With ADHD, you can do things but you lose your attention quickly, and if it’s boring, boy you lose it fast. Chinese school taught by Chinese teachers was probably the most excruciatingly boring thing you could possibly get your head around. Ron Fong, who also lived in the Richmond District, his wife always remembers me from Chinese school. Her name is Bev Fong, she goes ‘We were so worried about you because we turned around one day and you were gone! You had run out the door.’ She gritted it out. I literally cut schools. Three different Chinese schools had asked me to leave before my parents finally gave up on the idea of continuing.” However, his sister, Connie, didn’t cut Chinese school and “speaks pretty well.”

In addition to staying connected to the Chinese language, the Young family maintained their connections to Chinatown. Their father was an integral member of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and worked for decades to improve Chinatown–helping to found the annual Chinese New Year’s Parade and the Miss Chinatown Pageant. Al remembers his parents, “decided they were going to participate where they could do the most good civically; my parents were very civic-minded.” Among other infrastructure improvements in Chinatown he worked on with the city of San Francisco, Al remembers “My father was involved in getting low-cost federal housing into Chinatown. That was one of the things that he worked on with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and with his connections. He got the Ping Yuen, and this is still there in Chinatown. He was one of the original people who lobbied and got federal money for that.”

“Of course my dad was in the military so the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and they were both Cathy Posts. Those were both in Chinatown,” Al remembers. As Commander of Cathay American Legion Post No. 384, Colonel Young spearheaded the War Memorial in St. Mary’s Square in 1951. In 1950, their father was called to active duty during the Korean War and promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel. He was assigned as chief of the Inspection Division of the San Francisco Ordnance District from April 1951 to April 1953. Connie remembered he worked out of Oakland Army Base, which was where the District was centered. “Because of the ‘Red Scare,’ he felt the need to show the patriotism and loyalty of Chinese by launching the war memorial to fallen Chinese Americans in World Wars One and Two.” He presided over the dedication ceremony alongside his former commanding officer, General Albert

Wedemeyer. This memorial still stands and was rededicated with a symposium hosted by CHSA in November 2020, according to Connie.

Al continued, “My mother had her women’s group. You know, she was an artist. She collected certain things and had art shows with her collection of art and some of her own, and she had her group of friends who were also great artists. Some of them are world famous. She had the art shows in Chinatown. It was just to get people interested in Chinese culture. A lot of Chinese wanted to learn about their own culture, so she was able to use her fan, jade, art collection to show them.” As John and Mary Young traveled abroad, they amassed an extensive collection of Chinese Imperial robes and Chinese jade which they eventually donated to Stanford University, where it’s now part of the Cantor Center for Visual Arts, and to the Tacoma Art Museum (TAM) in the 1970s.

In an interview with *Northwest Asian Weekly*, Connie said her parents “were well aware of the harsh treatment of Chinese in the Northwest during the 19th century and the forced expulsion of Chinese from Tacoma. By donating their art collections to TAM, they hoped to promote and bring people together to appreciate Chinese heritage.” (9) In February 1979, TAM director Jon Kowalek said Mary Young sought “the finest examples of Chinese embroidery and costumes. The robes were purchased at different locations around the world, none in China. Her discerning eye was very sophisticated…the finest quality in a 99 percent state of perfection.” (10)

However, “an undetermined part of the Young collection was lost as part of a private, unannounced sale” in the 1990s, and another large portion of the collection was deaccessioned and went to auction in 2013. (11) In advertising the latter, the TAM website described the collection as “mainly tourists’ keepsakes and mementos.” (12) In response to criticism from Al and Connie, TAM said the collection was not of high value, although auction house appraisals said otherwise. The Young’s children wished the remainder of the collection to be transferred to another museum. Al said, “My parents intended these precious works to showcase Chinese art and culture. Some of the jade pieces were precious heirlooms I contributed to my parents’ donation. They were a part of the permanent collection of TAM and put on view for all to enjoy. Now, the jade is being used as currency for the museum to buy new works.” (13)

In addition to their collecting, John and Mary Young saved a significant California estate in danger of redevelopment. In 1961, the Youngs, George and Mary Hall, Johnny and Helen Kan, Dan and June Lee joined Joseph and Clara Gresham as well as their son, Eldon, and his wife Deon, to purchase Hakone Gardens in Saratoga, California. Hakone Gardens began in 1915 with the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, which, along with a trip to Japan in 1916, inspired Oliver and Isabel Stine to incorporate gardens

modeled after Fuki-Hakone-Izue National Park into their 18-acre summer retreat. The Stines were noted San Francisco arts patrons and Isabel was a cofounder of the San Francisco Opera. Construction of the gardens, attributed to Noaharu Aihara and Tsunematsu Shintani, in 1917 and would continue through 1929. The estate was purchased by Major Charles Lee Tilden (of Tilden Park in Oakland, California) in 1932. Hakone passed to his sister, Mrs. Walter Gregory, after his death and was then put up for sale after she died in 1959. Saved by the Youngs and their partners, Hakone was restored and then offered to the City of Saratoga for purchase, saving it from redevelopment. Connie would later chair the Board of Trustees for the Hakone Gardens Foundation and she co-authored the book *Hakone Estate and Gardens* in 2021.

The Next Chapter

Al left San Francisco to study English literature at the University of Washington. “I moved at the age of 19 and it was a dramatic cultural shift—there were no people of color up there, everyone was White! When I went to the University of Washington, I could count the number of Asians on one hand. Now, it’s 24% Asian. I was really shocked! People often say to me, ‘You seem really comfortable being with White people.’ And of course, I grew up in the Richmond District!” He graduated in 1968 and received his MA in 1972.

The next year, he co-founded the Summit K-12 School, one of Seattle’s first Alternative schools. For 37 years, the man who almost dropped out of George Washington High School taught a variety of subjects to high school students in the city: from AP history and Comparative Government and Politics to Auto Shop, Physical Education, Film Study and Chinese Cooking. He also coached volleyball, softball, and basketball and led groups to the South Pacific and Washington D.C. In 2004, he was recognized as one of Seattle Public School’s “Heroes in the Classroom” and presented with an award at the Seattle Seahawks Stadium. He retired in 2008. His wife, Vicki Johnson, was also a Seattle Public School elementary teacher for 28 years.

Al Young’s accomplishments are too many to list in total. He is a member of the Board of Trustees for the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) in Seattle, Washington, and is active with CHSA, narrating a 2011 documentary titled ‘D*r. San Yat-sen at Liberty’s Door.* That same year, he and his wife, Vicki, began traveling the world in his classic 1973 Plymouth Roadrunner–a journey that would go through 2018. They toured the US and Canada and, in 2014, they drove the muscle car on a 45-day road trip that covered 8,000 miles and 14 countries. The next year, they did it again, this time traveling for 50 days through 24 countries that included Amsterdam, Greece, Istanbul, Bulgaria, and Sweden. And, in an unprecedented third trip in 2016, the pair made guest appearances at classic car events, Brands Hatch and the Power King Meet, as they

traveled over 7,000 miles through the United Kingdom and Norway. The car that took them across the world was donated to MOHAI.

Shortly before his induction into the NHRA Hall of Fame, Al was the subject of a 2018 Rick Quan documentary *Race: The Al Young Story*. And in May 2019, he was also inducted to the George Washington High School Hall of Merit for Motorsports and Education.

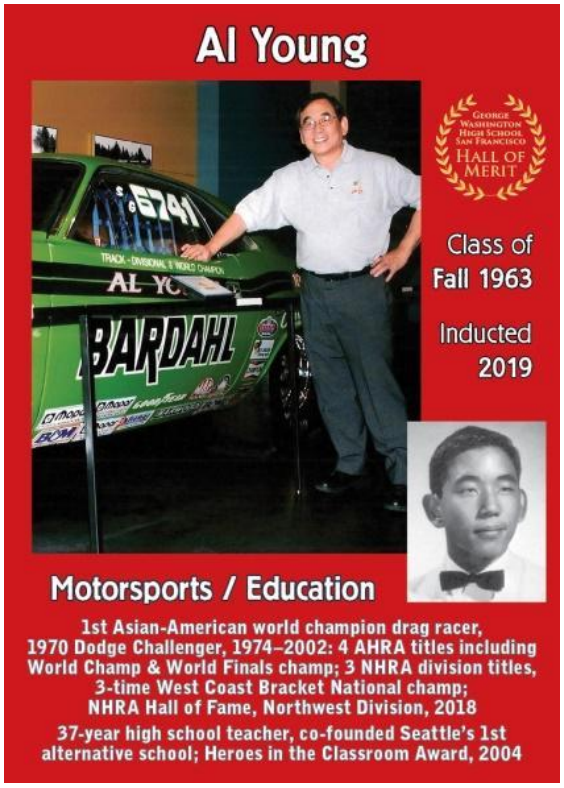

Photo. George Washington High School Hall of Merit poster, 2019. (Courtesy of Al Young)

After graduating from George Washington in 1959, Connie studied literature and journalism at Mills College where she was Valedictorian of her 1963 graduating class. She said, “things changed in a positive way for me going to Mills College, a liberal arts women’s college….Women were leaders at Mills College. I was head of Model United Nations, on the literary magazine, worked on the college newspaper. My English professor suggested I write a paper on Mark Twain and the Chinese. That started me on the course of Chinese American History.” (14) She would later serve on the College’s Board of Trustees from 1970 to 1972. In 1970, she played a central role in getting the Angel Island Immigration Station designated a National Historic Landmark after a California State Park Ranger named Alexander Weiss rediscovered Chinese poems carved on the Station walls. At the time, California State Parks planned to demolish

everything on the site. She became a founding member of the Angel Island Immigration Station Historical Advisory Committee in 1974.

Connie Young married Dr. John Kou Ping Yu, an oncologist and is a force to be reckoned with, equal to her parents and her younger brother, Al. She is a renowned historian, lecturer and writer having written numerous articles and four major books that daylight the history of Chinese and Asian America. She is also a Trustee Emeritus Board member of the CHSA and was recognized at the organization's "Voice and Vision Gala" in 2012 as "History Makers" inductees alongside U.S. Congresswoman Judy Chu and *China Daily* founding member Manli Ho, who was also interviewed for *Chinese in the Richmond*. She was also presented the State of California's 13th Senate "Woman of the Year" award by Senator Jerry Hill in April 2016.

Conclusion

The Young family home went on the market in September 1969, according to the *San Francisco Examiner*. And, in a development that speaks to the cultural diversity of the Richmond District, the home went onto house Russian-American Community Services–a senior citizens support agency–in 1982.

In his lifetime, Colonel John Young was an original board member of the Chinese Historical Society of America. After his death on October 27, 1987, Mary funded the building of a museum near his ancestral village in Doumen District, Shuhai, Guangdong, China, which now bears his name: The Zhaozhen Museum. He is also one of 20 people celebrated for his contributions to San Francisco in a Financial District monument designed by Thomas Marsh, "Called to Rise."

Al still holds reunions with members of this George Washington High School graduating class about every decade. "Of our high school graduating class, many of us have known each other since we were five years old. We went to Lafayette, then Presidio, then George Washington. We have had mini-reunion for those who went to Lafayette or Presidio. We get together more often, like once every five years. There are about 30 of us. I say 30 because it's also the participants and their wives, or their husbands, boyfriends, and girlfriends."

In reflecting on his time in the neighborhood, Al acknowledged the privilege his family's move to the Richmond District afforded him. While he admits White privilege doesn't apply to him, he says "I know of being economically privileged and being able to exercise some of the fruits of economic privilege by living here. I was able to do everything, I never feared the police, or feared that they were not on our side to help us. I could go anywhere I wanted, I could buy anything I wanted if I had the money. There

were jobs available. I felt privileged. The few Black people I knew in the Richmond District probably felt the same way, but with an undercurrent of constant anxiety. I know they felt it. The reason I know that is because one of my best friends, Louis Scott, who is Black, grew up there—we were tight and real good friends. When we went to high school he started hanging out with kids who were from the Fillmore District, Danny Glover and those guys. And he wouldn't talk to me. He had found a group of friends that had a shared experience of prejudice and felt more secure with them than he did from our neighborhood. You know, for him growing up in the Richmond, he came from a different society than those from the Fillmore District. He chose to identify with his Black friends who understood his blackness. As far as me being Chinese and growing up in the Richmond District, I felt very privileged and did not feel overt racism."

He next acknowledged, however, that "I was accepted into groups that were terribly prejudiced and always talked about Black people in the worst way possible, in the most racist way possible. Sometimes it would go, 'Oh Al, you're White, you're White.' By the time you get to high school you realize people are trying to separate you. I remember going on one ski trip with George Washington High School and everybody was White except myself. The group one evening cheered: 'This is great! We're White and we're seniors at GWHS!' I'm thinking I'm not White, and they go 'We'll make you White for the Night.' It wasn't that bad because these were the guys I grew up with but…I was privy to a lot of discussions and I know how people were thinking."

Listening to this rhetoric made him feel "horrible, really bad. First of all, it doesn't match anything I know! Even going to George Washington High School where you're meeting kids who are from the Fillmore District, who themselves don't particularly like people outside of their group, which I can tell is just a different neighborhood. When I went to City College, I felt racism. And at senior day at George Washington High School I sang with the barbershop quartet; it was with James Liggins, William Morris, and Lewis Scott. All three of these guys were Black and I grew up with them. And we're on stage singing the barbershop quartet and one of my friend's friend says, 'I can't believe you're singing on stage [slur].' That really shook me up, I thought, "woah!" It never occurred to me who I was singing with. But hearing him say that, and later when I was at City College, we were circulating petitions to rate teachers, and the people who started it were two Black guys. We stood at one of the entrances of City College and passed out evaluation forms. Same comments – 'I can't believe you are hanging out with the ni—ers.' So, I'm very privy to the way certain people act and the mechanics of racism."

He remembers, "I visited Ireland three years ago, the Republic of Ireland. They were the friendliest people I've ever met, but it was just like the Richmond district, where I grew up! You know, Irish Catholic and St. Thomas, so I can identify with that so well and I was

treated the same way I was treated in the Richmond District. That's a very ironic thing. That's my biggest takeaway here growing up here as an Asian. I can't say that for other people of different ethnicities." The diversity of experiences Al had in the Richmond neighborhood, good and bad, endowed him with relatable characteristics that transcended national boundaries.

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