

Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization Asian Family Center Oral History Project

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Interviewee: Sivai Bennett

Interviewer: Natalia Fernández

Transcriber: Avery Sorensen

[00:00:00]

NF: Natalia Fernández

SB: Sivai Bennett

NF: My name is Natalia Fernández, and I am the Oregon Multicultural librarian for the Oregon Multicultural Archives at Oregon State University's Special Collections and Archives Research Center. Today's date is January 14th, 2015, and we are conducting an oral history interview as part of the IRCO Asian Family Center oral history project. So let's get started. If you could please state your name and spell it out loud.

SB: My name is Sivai: S-I-V-A-I. Middle name is Folausaua: F-O-L-A-U-S-A-U-A. Last name is Bennett: B-E-N-N-E-T-T.

NF: And what is your birthdate and birthplace?

SB: I was born in American Samoa in 1960.

NF: And, with which ethnic or cultural backgrounds do you identify?

SB: I am Samoan.

NF: And when and where were your parents born?

SB: My mother was born on the island of Upolu in Independent Samoa. And my father was born on the island of Aunu'u, which is part of American Samoa. My mother was born in June 10th, 1927, and my father was born on March 19th, 1920.

NF: And where was it that you grew up?

SB: I grew up in American Samoa, which is a U.S. territory. However, my mother was born and raised in the western islands of Upolu.

NF: And so, how long were you there?

SB: I was born and raised in Samoa. I left when I was 18 years old to come to college here in Oregon. I spent two years at Eastern Oregon University and then later transferred to the University of Oregon.

NF: And did you come here by yourself? Did you have relatives here? Why did you choose Oregon?

SB: I came to Oregon by myself because when I was in the seventh grade, I had a pen pal, her name was Vicky Pierce. She was a student in Beaverton, and she and I, we corresponded with each other. We were pen pals from when I was seventh grade until I was in, uh, I was a senior in high school. And, she and I—I became interested in coming to school in Oregon because of my friend, Vicky.

NF: And so, did you always know that you wanted to come to the continental United States, and specifically Oregon, based on that relationship?

SB: Yes. In 1971, my eldest brother and, uh, left our country to come to the United States down in Los Angeles as a college student. And so, we were told by our parents that all of us would have the opportunity to come to the United States for college after we completed high school. So I knew at age 11 that I would be coming to the United States to go to college after high school. And then, in 1978 after I graduated from high school, I left my island, and my eldest sister traveled to Los Angeles with me. And I spent about two weeks in Los Angeles, and then I flew to Portland by myself. And from Portland I took another airplane to Pendleton, and then a professor and his wife from the University of Eastern Oregon University came to Pendleton to pick me up from the airport. I was a student at the University of Oregon [Eastern Oregon University] from 1978 to 1980, and then, from there, I transferred to the University of Oregon and completed my undergraduate studies there.

NF: And what was it that you studied?

SB: I studied political science.

NF: And did you know that going in when you first started college or did you switch majors a few times?

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SB: Uh, hm. That's a very good question because when I was in high school I wanted to become a teacher. But my parents – my father was, when my father first started working, he was a teacher and the principle for, in American Samoa. But he told his children, and me included, that teachers do not earn enough. There's a lot of work that goes into being a teacher, and so, because I was a student leader in high school, my parents told me that I should come to college and study to be a lawyer. My father was a legal practitioner. He was like a lawyer. He was, he was licensed to represent clients in court for land and title cases. And so, my parents wanted me to come to college and study to become a lawyer, but my heart was in teaching. So, I became a school teacher at age 25, and my first job was teaching high school back in American Samoa where I was born and raised. And, currently, I'm teaching fifth and sixth graders at Harold Oliver Elementary School in the Centennial School District here in Portland.

NF: So let's talk a little bit more about your time in Oregon. Was it what you imagined when you came here and studied here? Was it what you expected or was it very different? What was it like?

SB: It was very – I was very homesick when I arrived in La Grande. I was the only student from – I was the only Samoan student. There were many students from the Micronesian Islands, so I felt very lonely. I was not fluent in English, and it was very difficult because of the language. And also, I remember, I can remember going to my classes, and there were some professors who were, they were, they knew that it was difficult for foreign students to keep up with the English. So, I had one professor, her name is Sister Alberta Dieker --she's still living, I think she's in her 90s,--and she would have a study groups to go over the materials before exams. But I – there were classes that I took that there were things that I didn't understand, English words that I didn't understand. So, it was very difficult. The first two years was very difficult because of the language barrier.

NF: And then, why did you decide to transfer to the University of Oregon? Was it for the program, or?

SB: Uh. Yes, the program. Because when I left home, I was, even though I interested in becoming a teacher, but I was following my parents' wishes for me to go to law school. And so, I shared that with my academic advisor at Eastern Oregon State College, and I told him that I was, that I needed to take classes that would help me get into law school. And so, my advisor, Dr. Harvey Bennett, told me that it would be good for me to at least spend two years taking prerequisite classes at Eastern Oregon State College and then transfer to the University of Oregon.

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And, Dr. Bennett also told me that there are three law schools in the state of Oregon – University of Oregon, Lewis and Clark Law School, and Willamette Law School. And, he said that Lewis and Clark Law Schools, their tuition was higher than the University of Oregon. And so, his recommendation for me was to transfer to the University of Oregon, and that was what I did. I transferred to U of O. I took political science courses, history, and I also took a class to prepare me for the L-S-A-T. But, I met my husband there; he was a law student at the University of Oregon. And so, we got married, and then we moved back to La Grande, where he was from. And he was working there, and I went back to college and start taking classes for, to become an elementary school teacher.

NF: And, where was this, what college did you go to for that?

SB: Eastern Oregon University College. Wait, Eastern Oregon State College is now Eastern Oregon University in La Grande.

NF: So you received your Masters there?

SB: Uh no. I received my Master's degree from the University of Portland in 2003. And, I also received my – I am a certified teacher, so I received my degree and became a certified teacher. So I can teach K through 8 self-contained classrooms. And, right now, I'm teaching fifth grade at Harold Oliver Elementary School in the Centennial School District.

NF: Well, let's talk a little bit about the journey that you took from college up until this point. So, you mentioned that around age 25 you moved back home?

SB: Yes.

NF: And you were married, so you moved back home with your husband, and he met your family? And, how long did you live there, and what was it like going back?

SB: Yes. Yes. Um, we went back – I went back to Samoa, and my husband, and, of course, my husband came with me and our four month year, four month old daughter. Her name is Sineva, she's 30 years old now, she's a lawyer. And so, it was a wonderful experience for me--I was very happy to go back home, and my mom helped raise my daughter while I was working full time. And, we were there from 1984 to 1988. My husband was the chief prosecutor in the Attorney General's Office, and I was a high school teacher. I taught English, Samoan history, U.S. history, world history, and U.S. government. And then, from there, our family moved to Southern California, and I became an elementary school teacher in the Catholic schools in El Centro, California, about 120 miles East of San Diego.

NF: And how long did you and your family live there?

SB: We were in El Centro for ten years. And then, from there, we moved back to Oregon and we've been living here in Oregon since 1998.

NF: And here in Portland?

SB: In Portland. So, about 16 years, 1998. My son started – well, my son was in third grade when we first moved to Portland, and our daughter was in, started high school at Central Catholic High School. And Christopher, our son, attended Holy Family Catholic elementary school. And Christopher Michael Fa'afetai is 25 years old, and our daughter, Sineva Marie, is 30 years old.

NF: Great. Can you talk a little bit about your mentors that you've had along the way, whether personal or professional or both? You mentioned a few advisors that assisted you and anyone that comes to mind in terms of mentorship and guiding you along your path?

SB: Yes. My parents are my foremost mentors. Can we take a...

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NF: So, in terms of your mentors, let's talk a little bit about your personal and professional mentors that you've had over the course of your life.

SB: My very first mentors are my parents. My late father was Folausaua Teofilo and my mother, who's still living in Samoa, is Sineva. And, to me, they are my first mentors – they raised me, they taught me all that I needed to know, and still continue to learn from my mother--especially the history, the oral history. My culture is based on oral history, and so, stories, history is always passed down from generation to generation. My other mentors growing up in Samoa are my aunts and uncles and my teachers and the minister. I was raised in a Protestant family household. My mother, although – although my mother was raised in a Catholic family, when she married my father, who was a son of a minister, she became a Protestant and raised her children in the Protestant church. My high school teachers played a major role in my education. And, I wanted to become a teacher because of my high school teachers, they were wonderful teachers. Some of my teachers – a couple of teachers that I really appreciated their help were a couple from Connecticut, Richard and Sandy Behan. They were my science teachers in high school. My Samoan teachers also became my mentors, and they were

the ones that encouraged me to come to America and to get my education in America. They too also came to America. They were educated in the United States, and then they returned home to teach in high school. And, I had a few – I also had some American teachers that taught me in English. And so, when I came to Eastern Oregon University, my very first mentor was Dr. Harvey Bennett, who later became my father-in-law. And he was one of several mentors I had in college. My other mentors included Sister Alberta Dieker, that I mentioned earlier, she was my history professor, and also had another professor who was, who taught anthropology, and he became my mentor as well. When I went to the University of Oregon, I had a couple professors there that were my mentors. I was admitted to the University of Portland in 2001, and, I would say, I had three very close mentors there – Dr. Ellen Arwood, Dr. Lee Golden, and Dr. Juan Flores, who is from Guam. Those three people were the main professors that helped me decide what's going – attending, while I was attending the University of Portland, and working towards my M-A-T, Master of Arts in Teaching. I graduated – I finished the program in 2003.

NF: And can you share a little bit about what happened, your parents' reaction, support when you decided that you wanted to pursue becoming a teacher rather than what they had originally hoped, which was you becoming a lawyer? Can you talk a little bit about that?

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SB: Yes. Well, they were, my parents were very pleased that I married a lawyer, and they also were pleased with my choice. When I moved to – when my husband, our daughter, and I moved back to Samoa, they were very proud of us – proud of me as a teacher and of Michael, my husband, as a lawyer. And they were just thankful and proud that we were willing to come home and work and help with the family obligations. So.

NF: So then, in terms of your process of becoming a citizen of the United States, can you share a little bit about that story?

SB: Yes. So, I'm from American Samoa, which a U.S. citizen [territory] – I was born and raised there. And, people who were born in American Samoa, like myself, we are U.S. nationals. In other words, we're not U.S. citizens. And U.S. nationals can travel to the United States, and U.S. nationals can also join the military. And so, the big difference between a U.S. national and a U.S. citizen is that U.S. citizens can vote in the United States, but not U.S. nationals. And so, I became a, um, naturalized citizen. I applied for naturalization while I was living in El Centro, California, in the early '90s. And, when I applied to become a U.S. citizen, to be naturalized citizen, I didn't have to take the test.

The test that is normally given to immigrants when they're applying for citizenship was waived. And so, that test was never, I mean, I was not required to take a test.

NF: So the whole process was relatively simple, didn't take too much time by the time, between the time you applied and when you actually became naturalized, that process was...?

SB: Yes, correct. I only had to fill out the application, pay the fee, and it was very quick. It didn't take a long time because we were in El Centro, and so, I was able to submit my application and the fee to the immigration office there in El Centro.

NF: So, in terms of your experiences as an immigrant coming to the United States, being here--you had mentioned earlier about the language barrier when you first started college, but were there any other experiences within your, the context of being an immigrant that you'd like to share? Any difficulties or challenges?

SB: I think, I think one of my very first unfortunate challenge was when I was at the University of Portland. I began the program, the Masters of Arts in Teaching in the summer of 2001. I was in--I took five classes, and I got all A's. And it was so much easier for me because I had, my English was better, and I also knew and understood all the contents in the courses that I took because of my experience as a teacher. I taught high school in American Samoa for about four years while we were living there with my husband and our daughter. And then I taught in elementary school at Catholic, at two Catholic elementary schools in El Centro, and I also taught Mexican adults, Mexican and Mexican-American adults at Imperial Valley College--I taught them English. And so, all of that experience helped me to become a successful graduate student.

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And so, my very first unfortunate experience was, took place at the University of Portland where, even though I was doing very well in terms of getting good grades in my classes, I was forced out of the program after two semesters because I was not able to pass the multiple subject assessment exam. I was able to pass the multiple choice section, but I was not able to pass the short answer section. And, later I found I understood what was happening to me during that time. And, when I'm under a lot of stress--and I understand this for my students also--when a student, like myself, is under stress and pressure to pass, it makes it very difficult. And, I later understood my challenge was that I, and I think it's called "test anxiety." And then, some of the other challenges that I had with that test was that the material that was on the test, for instance in science, math, and social studies were things that fifth and sixth graders were taught here in America. And so, there was a gap in my learning; I didn't learn the subject area when I was in elementary school in American Samoa. And so, because I

didn't have the passing score for the M-A-T program, the University of Portland told me that I needed to leave the program until I was able to pass the second part of the multiple subject assessment. I still find it difficult at times to, in my work currently as a teacher--I think sometimes, as an immigrant here in Oregon, I have found, I've had experiences where people, to me, they judge me for the way I speak, for the way I act, for the way that I process information because sometimes it takes time for me to process information in English. I mean, I can understand it when something--when I hear something, I can understand it in my native tongue, but sometimes it takes me like a second or two to process that information in my brain and then respond. And, I've found that, sometimes, when I'm quiet and listening and not responding to, like, conversation or, or a presentation, um, I sometimes, it's taken, some people take it as me not having an opinion to share. And so, it hasn't been easy for me all the time. I feel misunderstood sometimes. I feel, even with the current job, I feel that sometimes I'm at the disadvantage. In my school right now, there are only three people of color who are teachers -- a young woman from Oakland who is Latina, the counsellor in my school is part Native-American, part white, part African-American, and so, and then myself, Samoa. In some of our schools, there are no teachers of color, and we have seven elementary schools at the Centennial School District. And, in some of those schools, there are no people of color, and so, it has been a struggle. And I wish that people that I work with, like the administrators and other teachers, I wish that they are more understanding, and, I think, some of them have some empathy towards me, but I think others don't. They don't have empathy because -- and, in fact, the Latina teacher, and she's my friend from Oakland, she's fluent in Spanish. And so, she and--she's the only other teacher that is fluent in Spanish in my school. But I'm the only -- I am one of two teachers who are immigrants. My other, the other teacher is my friend Koty García, who is an immigrant from Guadalajara, Mexico, and she teaches at another school in our school district.

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NF: In your school district, it sounds, there are very few teachers of color. Are there are a lot of students of color?

SB: Yes. Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. In fact, in my own school, we have the highest number of students of color and children of immigrants. We have a large population of immigrants from the Slavic countries--from Russia, Ukraine, um, you know, those countries. And then, we have a large population of African Americans in my school. In all of our elementary school, we have African Americans, we have immigrants from the Latin American countries, we have immigrants from Africa, from -- I have a student from Vietnam, and then I have, we have Samoan students, Tongan students, and Micronesian students. And so, in my school, the population of students of immigrants or of families of immigrants from around the world and also African American students, that population is, like, 60 or 70%. And yet, in my building, only three

teachers of color. And, this last summer, our school district hired very first person of color to be the assistant superintendent, Dr. Paul Coakley is African American. And, he's the very first assistant superintendent and HR director. And so, our current superintendent, who is Sam Breyer, in his three years of tenure as a superintendent, I have seen an increase of people of color being hired as principals and as teachers in my school district. But again, in some of the elementary schools, there are no teachers of color. So, the demographic of my school district has changed tremendously in the last 20 years or so; the demographic went from predominantly white to, now, predominantly people of color and immigrants from around the world.

NF: Well that leads well into talking about your work with IRCO and with the Asian Family Center. So, can you share what your current connection is to the Asian Family Center?

SB: Yes. I serve as a volunteer on the advisory board for the Asian Family Center. And, I became a board member about—I think this is the fifth year that I've been a board member. And how I became a board member was that I have been a member of the board of directors for Samoa Pacific Development Corporation. This non-profit was started by a group of Samoans, both from American Samoan, from Independent Samoa. And so, I went to IRCO because I needed to get their help and to help me and my Samoan Pacific Development Corporation. And so, through that conversation with Mr. Sokhom Tauch, I believe he's the CEO of the IRCO organization, he advised me to go to the Family Center, the Asian Family Center to meet Mr. Lee. And Mr. Sokhom Tauch said that Mr. Lee and the Asian Family Center also serve Pacific Islanders. So, I went to the Asian Family Center, and I met Mr. Lee, and then Mr. Lee invited me to come and join the advisory board for the Family Center. And so, I've been on the board for about five years now.

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NF: So you contacted IRCO around 2009, 2010?

SB: Yes, I think it was around 2009 when I made the connection with the folks at IRCO.

NF: And did you know about IRCO's work before then?

SB: Yes, yes I did. I heard about them, I heard about the work that they were doing to serve the needs of immigrants and refugees from around the world. And I also knew that they were also serving the needs of people from the Pacific Islands. So I became interested in learning more about the work that they were doing, and also I wanted to be able to, like, connect my own organization for Pacific Islanders with IRCO because IRCO has been helping in this area, I believe, for the last 30-some years. And so, so I tapped IRCO as a way to network with my organization for Pacific Islanders.

NF: So I'm curious, when you first moved here to Oregon, did you know about IRCO at that time? Did you look for any organizations that provided services to immigrants, or that you didn't need those services, or you didn't know about them, in terms of your role as...?

SB: Oh when I moved in here from California?

NF: Actually, when you first moved here. When you were really young, did you reach out to any organizations at that time, or did you just have support from the universities that you attended, and that was enough?

SB: Uh yes. So when I came from, when I came from, when I came in 1978, I was a student in La Grande at Eastern Oregon State College. Um, I, the—I didn't go out of the university because I had all of what I needed--you know, the professors, and the Eastern Oregon University had a program for foreign students. So, we had an advisor that also helped us with, you know, whatever needs that we might have at the time. And then again when I went down to the University of Oregon I was a student and so my, so there was no need for me to be looking for assistance outside of campus. And also, what I didn't share with you was that I came on a scholarship, a full-ride scholarship from the government of American Samoa. And, that scholarship paid for my room and board, and my parents didn't have to pay for anything. And so, my tuition, room and board was covered with my scholarship. And so, but--currently, I know that IRCO Family Center is serving the needs of people from the Pacific—Samoan people, Tongan people, folks from the Micronesian Islands. I know that IRCO is providing services not only to students, but also to adults.

NF: So, what do you see as your role, excuse me, as the board's role within the Asian Family Center and within IRCO? So, as a whole, what do you foresee for the board in terms of what you've been doing for the past five years and what you hope for them to continue to do?

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SB: Well, one of the--I think one of the two things that I see about myself as a member of the board. First, we're an advisory board; we advise and we give our ideas to Mr. Lee, who is the CEO of the Family Center. We meet quarterly, and so there are matters that Mr. Lee asks the board for input. And also, when we have fundraisers, the board members help by soliciting funds. And also, we had a bake fundraiser about two years ago, and we were able to raise a large amount of money because the board members not only solicited donations from businesses in the community, but we also helped sell tickets. And the tickets were \$100 per person, and I was able to sell tickets for the

fundraiser. And so, those are the two things that I know of that the board, the advisory board in which I serve, help with the, you know, Mr. Lee and the folks at the Family Center, the Asian Family Center.

NF: So do you see yourself as a liaison between the organization and community members?

SB: Uh, yes. Yes. I, you know, I'm very busy as a school teacher, but I see myself as a liaison, yes correct, between IRCO and the community, and especially the Pacific Islander community. I let my community know that there are resources through IRCO for students because IRCO runs the SUN Program in some of the schools in Portland. And so, students are getting the benefit of after school program through SUN. And I also know that IRCO has – IRCO and the Asian Family Center – have hired Pacific Islanders. And I also know that they have also helped provide assistance to adults, and I know that they, that some of the IRCO employees visit people at home and provide services for those folks. And I've heard that they've gone to homes of Pacific Islanders, and um, to provide services for, you know, little, small children, adults, and students alike.

NF: Wonderful. So you've mentioned a variety of services that the Asian Family Center provides. What do you see as some of the most important services that the Asian Family Center provides within the immigrant and refugee community? You've mentioned working with small children, you've mentioned some of the adult programs and employment opportunities, so can you share a little bit about that in terms of what you've done with the board, and, you know, ideas that you've come up with, programs that you've developed, or ideas that you have to, for them to work with the community?

SB: Yes. Well, IRCO has full time staff that work with adults and families and also with students. And so, my role as a board member is to advise the Mr. Lee and his staff. So, we're, I have not had to be the organizer of, you know, what goes on with the programs because they have staff members that take care of those things. And so, my role is to advise Mr. Lee in areas that they need our expert advice. And also, I have helped with fundraisers. But I do know from going to the meetings and hearing Mr. Lee presentation and also the staff presentations of all of the work that goes behind the scene. And so, and so, I envision that they will continue to do these, I mean, provide these services for our immigrants and refugees from around the world.

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NF: So are there any examples that you'd like to share that you can think of where members within your community have said that they needed certain services or would like certain services, and you've taken that to the board and then Mr. Lee has applied them? Can you talk a little bit about that process? And you can think of anything from, you know, community need to the board to then actually applying that in the AFC.

SB: Yes. Um, so as a board member for Pacific, for Samoa Pacific Development Corporation, I have advised the ministers because they're the ones that, that, I mean—the Pacific Island community, especially those that go to the Pacific Island churches, um, my role between the IRCO and my Pacific Island is for me to provide the information to the ministers, and that information is then shared with parishioners—that there are services at IRCO that will benefit the population, especially the population from the Pacific Islands. And so, I get the word out to our Pacific Island community to take advantage of the services through IRCO. But I also know from talking to the staff at IRCO that they do go out to the families of Pacific Islanders, and they also go to the schools --to elementary school, middle school, and high school—and provide assistance to students of Pacific Island, you know, from Pacific Island families. And so, that has been--those are some of the examples of how I have connected IRCO with my Pacific Island community.

NF: Wonderful. So what do you see as your personal and professional role within the immigrant and refugee communities? So you've mentioned that you act as a liaison, you make connections, your experiences as an immigrant yourself, and how that has shaped you. So is there both the personal and professional connection to why you are an advisory board member?

SB: Yes, absolutely. You know, so as a teacher, especially as teacher in a school or a school district where there is a large population of immigrants and refugees. Um, so professionally, I have learned that there's so much that I can provide to not only my students in term of academic preparation for high school, for middle school, high school, and college, I also provide information to the parents regarding services that are available in the community. And I have also advised the parents about services that IRCO provides. And then, when I have, you know--during conferences when parents come, especially parents of, immigrants' parents, I not only talk about their children's academic progress, I also share with them during that time, services that IRCO provides. And IRCO also provides interpreters for us, and I have met several interpreters that are from IRCO during conferences.

NF: So, what are some of the biggest needs within the Pacific Islander community? Is it, you know, needs for the children, for adults, language barrier, employment opportunities? What do you see as some of the needs within the community?

SB: Yes. What I have learned in my 16 years here and my eighth, this is my eighth year working for Centennial School District--prior to working, becoming a teacher in public school, I was a Catholic school teacher for the Archdiocese of Portland. And so, I have learned that students of Pacific Islanders who came to America as adults and also children of Pacific Islanders who are not fluent in English, those children have the hardest time in school because, although they're learning English in school, the language spoken at home is still Samoan. And so, I know that some of our Pacific Island students struggle. They struggle in school because of language barrier. They also struggle in school when the teachers don't understand what it's like to come to school. And, some teachers, not all teachers, but some teachers do not realize how difficult it is for some of these students to come to school where the language is English and then go home where the language is their mother language of people from Samoa, Tonga, and other islands in the Pacific. And one of the biggest problems that I see for some of these students is that sometimes they have homework, and they have homework where there's no adults at home that can understand the homework. So these students have nobody at home that can help them because the parents don't have the background knowledge and the parents are not fluent in English. And so, those students will always be at the disadvantage. And, I have seen that. I have seen students drop out from middle school and high school because they get so frustrated with, again, with the lack of knowledge or lack of understanding of the subject matters, and they get frustrated because of the lack of support from people and from the faculty or from folks in middle and high school. And some of my own students or students that I know of, Samoan students and Tongan students, drop out middle school and high school. And, so that's sad. It's very sad for me when I know, you know, when I come across a family and they tell me their story. And then I hear the child's story, you know, something happens at school, there was a misunderstanding, and then they were expelled or the student just gave up.

NF: So for those students, that's part of the reason why the SUN program exists. Is that -- are there SUN schools within your school district?

SB: Yes. Yes. In fact, there's a SUN, there's SUN school in my school at Harold Oliver Elementary. I believe there are -- so we have seven elementary schools in Centennial, and, I believe, there are probably three or four SUN programs, three or four or five schools have the SUN program.

NF: So then, you definitely, I would assume, you encourage your students who need that extra support to attend the SUN school.

SB: Oh absolutely, yes. And so, my – three years ago was my first year at Oliver Elementary. I volunteered to be the chess coach because they wanted a certified staff, a teacher to be the chess coach – Chess for Success. And so, I did that for a couple of months, but it was difficult because I was brand new at Oliver Elementary, and I was trying to, you know, take care of not only my responsibility as the fifth grade teacher, but I was trying to juggle the afterschool program. So, I helped out for about a month, and then I just told the SUN coordinator that it was, it was too difficult, too much, the obligation to my teaching job was, just, overwhelming, becoming very overwhelming.

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But yes, I always encourage my students, especially the ones that could benefit from, you know, the SUN teachers helping them with homework, and also the students learning, I mean, doing activities that they normally don't do when they go home. Like, you know, they have sports, they have sports, they have chess, they have cooking classes, they have, I mean all the programs that students don't get from the teachers or from the school, those programs they get from the SUN program. And plus, the SUN staff also help our students with their homework because some of our students have parents that don't speak English or parents that, yeah, that don't speak English and can't help them with their homework. So the SUN program, through IRCO and through the other SUN, help our immigrant students to become successful in their subjects.

NF: And that's at your elementary school, so when they go to middle school and high school do they continue getting assistance or, at that point, they don't have the SUN program anymore?

SB: SUN program only exist, I believe, in elementary. And so, I don't know what extra support, like, after school support that the students get when they're in middle school and high school. I'm not, I don't know.

NF: But you find that the SUN program, especially at that early age, is very helpful to help build all their skills and the basics, and then it prepares them for middle school?

SB: Well, the SUN program after school, I mean, the teachers take care of all the basics in the academics, but the SUN program also provides the support that the students need for example, for instance, in their homework. You know, if a child has homework, they are able to complete the homework with the assistance from the SUN teachers. And so, they get that help, they are provided that help that they may not get when they get home. And, but, in addition to the help for homework, they also are able to take other courses, such as cooking and arts and crafts, music. I believe, in some of the SUN programs they have music, they have dance teachers that come after school, and then they have sports – they have basketball and I believe soccer. And so, some of the – so

like, for instance, the basketball and soccer, there are after school programs in the community where children, parents pay for their children to play football, soccer, or basketball, but the children get that from SUN, you know, from, so they learn the skills, you know, to become a soccer player or a basketball player. So they learn those skills from the coaches. But in terms of skills, I don't think they learn--the SUN teachers are not certified teachers, so they don't teach skills, you know, like in math, writing, and, but they get help in providing help for the homework to the students.

NF: And the SUN program, are there events that incorporate the parents and the families, and does that happen sometimes, incorporating the parents into that learning process or that support, or not so much?

SB: No, not so much.

NF: It's more just support for the students.

[00:59:42]

SB: Yes, yes, support for the students. But I also know that IRCO provides supports to parents. And I believe, IRCO also provides, like, English, English classes. IRCO also help adults who are, who are studying to become U.S. citizens, yes. They help them, you know, with the test materials. So there are classes for adults who are studying the history and who are preparing to take the test to become U.S. citizens. And, one of the things that I hope I can do is to visit the SUN school, you know, the SUN program that IRCO runs. I know that there's some SUN – IRCO has a SUN program in Portland Public and, I believe, David Douglass, but not at Centennial, IRCO doesn't run those SUN programs. So, it's Portland Public, Southeast Portland, Southeast area schools – I think three, four, or five in Portland public schools.

NF: Wonderful. And, can you talk a little bit about your role within the other organization that you mentioned and how you became involved with that organization? And you're an advisory board member for the Samoa Pacific Development Corporation, is that correct?

SB: Yes.

NF: So, you're role with that organization. I know you've mentioned it a little bit, but how that got started, a little bit about that history.

SB: Oh, okay. So, Samoa, Samoa Dev. – uh, excuse me – Samoa Pacific Development Corporation was started in 2002 by a group of Samoan people. And, one of the main organizer, in fact, he is the person who started it is a relative of mine, but, and his name is Dr. Toeutu Fa'aleava. He is the director of the McNair Scholars program at Portland

State University. And so, he was the one that started the organization when he and his family moved to Portland from, I believe, from San Francisco. And while he was studying to become a lawyer, while he was in law school and the PhD program at UC Berkeley, he also helped with the Samoan community nonprofit organization down there. And so, when he moved, when he got the job as the McNair Scholars director at PSU, he and some of our Samoan people decided to start the nonprofit. And so, it was started in 2002, and I joined the board in 2000... I think 2005. And so, I'm currently, I'm serving as the secretary for the board of directors. And, in the past I was president, I was president of the organization for, I think, two, three years. And, I was a vice-president, and I was also the treasurer. So, I've held president, vice-president, treasurer, and now I'm the current secretary. And so, I have – one of the things that I've, I've done with my, with IRCO is to try to merge, I mean not merge, but network with IRCO for services that would benefit our Pacific Island community. And so, our Pacific Island nonprofit is still developing. We have nine board members, and every year we select, you know, the president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer.

[01:04:50]

And so, it's still in very--how do you say--beginning stage. And so, I think we're in the, we're moving towards – one of the things that we, we are working on is to be able to write grants, get grants from private and also from the governments--the federal, state, and local government. And so, we're in that process writing grants. Right now, as we speak, we have a bank account, and I think we have less than 2,000 dollars in our bank account. And so, we're, we're very, I mean, at the very beginning stage of building our nonprofit. And so, our main goal is to be able to write some grants, and then be able to provide services similar to IRCO, that's our plan, is to be able to provide services to our students. So our organization is targeting--we want to target children from K through 12, that's our main goal. And so, if we can get grants to provide after school programs, that would be wonderful. And also, the other goal that we have is to be able to provide services to our young people and adults, similar to what IRCO is doing. So, IRCO, for me, is a very good. IRCO will provide the resources for our, for my Pacific Island community nonprofit. And so, that is the reason, one of the reasons, why I became involved with IRCO because I wanted to learn from what folks are doing for IRCO. And I was told that, you know, they started it--you know, just a small group of people was how IRCO started, and now they're very successful. It's going on – IRCO has been in existence for over 30 years now. And so, I envision taking my Samoa Pacific – I envision in 20 years from now, we will be close to where IRCO is now. So that's our goal, is to be able to find grants that will enable us to provide services similar to what IRCO is currently providing to families and to adults, students and adults.

NF: And that service is within the Portland area?

SB: Uh, within Multnomah County and we have a large population of Islanders in Washington County and also across the river in Clark County, yeah. And so, that's our big picture, is to eventually have a building with – and that we would be able to hire our Pacific Islanders, adults, and young adults, and adults to run these programs. And so, that's where I would be able to use my background as an educator to help students with their, you know, whatever need that they have, whether it's academics, computer, you know, literacy for adults, classes, you know, for adults, and help our adults from the Pacific Islands study to get their citizenship, their U.S. citizenship, and just to be able to provide employment to our adults in addition. But our main goal is to have programs and have resources to help our students from K through 12 and also have some resource, some funding to help our college students with their tuition.

[01:10:05]

NF: So do you foresee using the same model as IRCO but specific to the Samoan Pacific Islander community?

SB: Yes. Yes, yes, exactly.

NF: Wonderful. And do you foresee yourself remaining on the board as long as you can continuing...?

SB: Yes, for IRCO? Yes.

NF: For IRCO and for the Samoa, for both?

SB: Samoa, yes. Yes, I do. I do because, you know it's, we meet quarterly, so it's not, you know, demanding, and it's a great way for me to connect with my friends at IRCO and to stay in touch with my Pacific Island brothers and sisters.

NF: And, over your many years serving the community, have you seen the needs change over time, or do you find that as people move to the United States, that it's the same needs, it's just more people are coming? Anything to share about that, your thoughts on the needs, what the needs are and how've they've changed?

SB: Yes. I think the needs of the people, it's the same, you know. Immigrants--from immigrants, especially young adults and adults who are not fluent in English, they struggle to get employment. And, students who come to the United States from other countries struggle with language. And if you can just imagine, let's say a 15 year old, okay, from Burma or from Africa. Fifteen year olds here in America are in high school, and a fifteen year old that comes from foreign countries, they're put in high school, and they're expected to be able to learn the same materials that Americans fifteen, I mean fifteen year olds that grew up in America. And so, those students, I have learned from

my friends at IRCO, many of those students drop out because, you know, you can't take the students from a foreign country, put them in high school, and expect them to learn English, you know, overnight. And so, so I know of students and I've heard stories of high, you know high, especially middle school and high school students who drop out. And, what was the other question?

NF: Well, I think you answered it in terms of the needs are similar as immigrants come. It's one of the main needs, especially for young adults, is the language barrier, which you yourself faced personally when you moved here. You knew a little bit of English, but it was in college that then you really learned more English, is that correct?

SB: Yes, I learned more English, and I became fluent while as a college student. And, one of the advantages that I had was that because there were no other Samoan students, either at Eastern Oregon State College in Le Grande or at the University of Oregon, I was able to speak English all the time. And that was an advantage for me. One of the struggles that I know of, that I'm aware of is the struggle for families, especially families either Pacific Island families or immigrants and refugees from other parts of the world, so when they come to America, their children start going to school. And their children start learning from their friends or from being in American school, the culture--the culture outside of these families' culture. And one of the things that I have learned is that the culture of the parents and the culture here in the United States, those two cultures clash. And so, new things or things that immigrant students learn sometimes clash with the culture of their home environment, and that causes a lot of hardship, I believe, for not only, especially teenagers, young adults, and their immigrant parents. And so, I have learned that through my own work as a teacher and also through my work as a community leader because it happens with our Pacific Island community, and I also know through my own work as a teacher, it happens in our immigrant and refugee community. So the clash of two cultures creates a lot of conflict and hardship in our immigrants and refugee family household.

[01:15:38]

NF: So, in your experience, do you find that the, the adults that move here want to retain that culture and keep the connection back home, whereas the young adults, perhaps, want to, want to assimilate a little more to the culture of the United States?

SB: Yes, yes. Yes, yes, yes. I have seen that. And I have heard of the -- and it happens when the children are, are in middle school and especially in high school and beyond high school when children of immigrants want to be, like, "Americans" --have all the, you know, the things that young adults or young high school and middle school students want to be just like their American friends or just like... You know, 'cuz we have students who parents are immigrants but they themselves were born here in the United States. So I have, I know of conflicts between the parents, parents who are

immigrants and their children because parents who are immigrants, they want to keep their culture, and, but then their children are learning the so-called “American culture.” And I know that sometimes it causes conflict. Not all the families, but I know of families where the two were, I mean, like you said, the children want to assimilate whereas the parents are trying to keep them, you know, away from the American culture. And, we’re all Americans.

NF: And, with you, personally, was it as important to you to retain your first language, your native tongue?

SB: Yes.

NF: And, do you still speak it?

SB: Yes.

NF: Did your children learn it?

SB: Um. My daughter, uh, spoke the language. She was fluent in both Samoan and English when she was growing up in Samoa, but when we moved to southern California, I became a teacher, and I had to work on my English because when I was back in Samoa, I used both English and Samoan. I explain, like, when I would be teaching history or government or even English, I would explain things in Samoan to my Samoan students ‘cuz they were all Samoans. And, when I was teaching history or U.S. government, I found myself explaining some of the concepts in Samoan to my students who were not fluent in English. But when we moved to southern California, I spoke English both at home and at school, and I had to work on my English because I had a heavy accent when I moved back to the United States. And so, if my children were growing up in Samoa, they would be fluent in both. They would be bilingual. Unfortunately, they – my son doesn’t speak. He understands a little bit, but my daughter – even though Niva doesn’t speak Samoan, but she understands, she has retained the knowledge. And, I’m sure, once she moves to Samoa--because she’s planning to get a job and go work there as a lawyer and spend time with grandma--I’m sure once she is emerged into the culture, I’m sure it will come back. But I speak Samoan, Samoan is my native tongue. So, when I call my mom on the phone, of course I speak Samoan to her. She’s not, she doesn’t speak English. She understands more than she can speak.

[01:20:08]

NF: Do you feel that, um, it’s a problem in the United States that the culture of this country isn’t as supportive of bilingualism and it tends to be more English-centric? Do you find that that’s a problem or not so much?

SB: Um, I think people are more accepting of students to speak their mother tongue now than, maybe like, 40 years ago, okay. 40 years ago, the idea was to assimilate students, but I think now, the culture that we have now in the schools is to, for students to learn English but also for students to retain their native language. Because, you know, studies shows, but also my own experience as a profession, if a child, let's say the child is from Samoa, if the child is fluent, can read and write and speak in Samoan, that child will have a more successful experience learning English. So, if a child is fluent in writing, speaking, and reading in their mother tongue, they are more successful in learning English. And so, we don't discourage children from speaking their mother tongue, and we don't, and we – myself and I know many of the teachers – we encourage the parents to speak their native tongue at home. So I think, I think now we're, we're more accepting, I think, of your immigrant children or children of immigrants using their native tongue. And, of course, I encourage my students in my class to teach each other. So if, like, a child doesn't, only speaks English, I encourage those children to learn either Spanish or Russian or Vietnamese from their friends but, especially español, because I tell my students, 20, 30 years from now, people who speak Spanish will outnumber people who speak only English. That I've heard from studies, right. That's the prediction, like, 30 years from now. And so, I have encouraged my non-Spanish speaking students to learn Spanish from their friends and to take Spanish when they go to middle school and high school.

NF: And, a couple, just, closing questions at this point. You retained your connection to American Samoa because your parents lived there and your mother still lives there and you return periodically. Do you find that immigrants that have been coming in the last 10 or so years and continue to come to the United States, do they retain the same connection as well? Is that common?

SB: Yes. Yes, and I know that from, from my own students. Like, last year, some of my students went to Mexico, and it was either their first time to Mexico or it's like their second trip to Mexico, my sixth grade. I had two sixth grade students who made a trip to Mexico with their parents. And then, I had one student who went to Ukraine with her mother, and she was away for about three weeks. And then, another student's parents went to Ukraine right before all the trouble, uh, you know, with the Russian and the Ukrainian, you know, the problem in Ukraine. And then, I had my Vietnamese students have back with their parents to Vietnam. And so – and then, of course, I go to visit my family. And, I think, because nowadays immigrants are able to work and they're able to save up their money to take--either the parents go back home to visit their parents, the parents of my students, and my own students have made the trip back to their native country to visit grandparents and family. And so, it's, I think it's probably more common now for our immigrants to return for visits than it was 30 or 40 years ago.

[01:25:40]

NF: So, in terms of recommendations that you have for the Asian Family Center, do you have any in particular or is it mostly to continue doing what they're doing, anything that you can add to that?

SB: No, I don't think there's – I think what IRCO is doing right now, especially the Asian Family Center, I think they're doing everything that – the services that we're providing through Family Center is meeting the needs of our immigrants and refugees from around the world. And, I haven't seen my friends for about a year now, I've been very busy with my work as a teacher. And we have a board meeting, I think at the last week of the month, and this, actually tomorrow, we're meeting with a group of immigrants and one of our board members, Polo-- and I think you're gonna interview Polo or I'm gonna send Polo an email. So, Polo works for the city of Portland, and he and his colleagues are going to meet with the, me and some of the immigrants tomorrow. And they're going to train us to fill out the grant application for our community to apply for grants from the city, and that will help us with, you know, you've heard of the community gardens? And so, I'm going to write to, fill out an application for my Pacific Island community to be able to get funding from the city of Portland to start a community garden where we can grow food in the spring and summer. Um, so that meeting is tomorrow, and I know my immigrant friends will be attending the meeting. And, Polo who is one of the members of the advisory board is, and his friends from the city of Portland, are going to train us as to how to fill out the grant application.

NF: Wonderful. So, is there anything that we have not discussed that you would like to share--anything personal or professional or anything that you'd like to return and expand upon?

SB: You know, I think one thing that I want to share is what I have learned to do. Some of my friends, especially my Samoan and Tongan friends, these are people that I know, they have not learned to--like me, they have not learned to become involved in organizations other than church community. And so, some of my friends who are my age, I am 55 now, their connection is, it's very, in a very – like my Samoan friends, you know, they go to church and that's really their, like, their life, okay. And, what I wish that more people would do, like people from the Pacific Islands, is to be able to connect, network with other folks--like, network with IRCO or network with the Latin American organizations and to get, and to learn about assistance and programs that are available out there.

[01:30:00]

And so, I have learned through IRCO that there are a lot of resources, I mean, there are—if you know how to write the grant--in which I don't know, I wish I know--but if you know how to write a grant for, for your community, you can get the money, right. And so, that's what I have learned from IRCO, that they have people that is their job, their only job is to write grants. And my hope is, my organization, the Pacific Island peoples' organization will be able to hire somebody to write grants for our nonprofit. And I also, one of the things that I want to be able to do is to encourage people from my Pacific Island community to make friends with people outside of our, their own small church community. And I think that through my own work as a teacher and through my connection with IRCO, I have learned that there are, that there a lot of resources available for everyone and anyone if they know where to go.

NF: Well, any closing thoughts that you'd like to share at this point?

SB: Thank you. Thank you, Natalia for doing this because, you know, this is very important. It's important for other people and for people in the community to know the work that IRCO is doing through Asian Family Center, and it's also important for people in the community to know that it's not easy for immigrants and refugees to come to America. And, without programs like IRCO, I can just imagine how lost. I can remember stories of my own, of, you know, my own family--people that left Samoa for Hawaii and also for the mainland--how difficult it was for them, and they found help through their churches. And, I think one of the things that I would like to be able to do is to be able to visit the churches--the Samoan, the Tongans, and Micronesian churches--and bring to them the resources, you know, list the resources that are available, including IRCO and the Asian Family Center and also resources that, and resources and people that they can contact for any assistance that they might need. So, I, again, I'd like to thank you for your work and for driving all the way from Corvallis to interview me. So, it's a privilege and an honor to be interviewed, thank you.

NF: Well, thank you so much for sharing your story, it was wonderful to hear.

SB: Thank you. And, in Samoan, like Marcus Mariota said when he received his Heisman trophy, at the end of his acceptance speech, he said, "Fa'afetai tele lava," which means "thank you very much."

[end of interview 01:33:42]