

Oregon State University's Asian & Pacific Cultural Center Staff Oral History Project Spring Term 2014

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Interviewee: Mandi Suzuki

Interviewer: Natalia Fernández

Transcriber: Desireé Gorham and Buddy Martin

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NF: My name is Natalia Fernández. I am the Oregon Multicultural Librarian, a staff member with OSU Special Collections & Archives Research Center. Today's date is May 20, 2014, and I am interviewing Mandi Suzuki, a staff member of the Asian & Pacific Cultural Center at Oregon State University. So if you could state your name and spell it out loud to get us started?

MS: My name Mandilyn Suzuki.

NF: And what is your hometown or where is "home" for you?

MS: My hometown is Waipahu, Hawai'i. I actually grew up in Pearl City though, but I would call Hawai'i my home.

NF: What is your age, year in school and major?

MS: I am 22, I am a fifth year, so this is my victory lap. My major is general science with an option in pre-physical therapy.

NF: What are your self-identities in terms of race and ethnicity?

MS: I identify as Asian American. Ethnicity wise I would consider myself Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino.

NF: What is your position at the APCC, what do you do and how many years have you worked here?

MS: My position is the external coordinator. As an external, I outreach to the community, I provide guidance and support to the support staff on site. There is five support staff, we have various positions, we have activities, we have the community outreach, we have publications, and now we have an academic success position. So I

overlook the support staff, I provide guidance, I provide any type of resources they may need to be successful in their events, and this actually my third year working at the APCC.

NF: What were some of your other positions when you first started?

MS: My first year, my third year in school, was actually office assistant and I moved up to be community outreach to fill the position. Then last year I was community outreach one more time, I felt like I didn't fully get to do all the events I wanted to, so I came back filled that position again.

NF: Is it typical to start off as an office assistant with a new center?

MS: I think so; it helps up to kind of gain experience in the center, along with what we are hoping to advocate for, to kind of gain that sense of awareness and education. Personally jumping into an activities position was a little difficult, I had weave around the whole just how to plan the event in a timely schedule. Initially that was really difficult, I would say being an office assistant definitely helps because you get to see the other activities coordinate and plan their events and you can kind of learn and move up as you go through school.

NF: Have you worked for any of the other cultural centers or did you choose the APCC and you've just worked here for the past few years?

MS: I just chose the APCC; I've been here for the past three years.

NF: Why did you decide to work here?

MS: I wanted to be in student leadership, development kind of position, I wanted to outreach to students, I wanted to be a type of support network. I actually applied to career services that same year. I think, now that I think that back, that I didn't get the position at career services, that was actually my first choices, but because I didn't, I ended up here. I think a lot of the opportunities that I didn't realize came from this position. That's why I chose to come here, I wanted to work with students, I wanted to interact with students, I just wanted to kind of further develop my interpersonal skills, along with my leadership skills.

NF: What were your expectations, your hopes, and were those matched, surpassed, not matched?

MS: I think it was definitely surpassed. I didn't really know what I was getting into. When I came to the center, I knew what the centers were for, as like a support system, but not quite the extent of what each activities coordinator did, and so when I came in, I didn't have very many expectations, but working with a team, developing those relationships definitely surpassed anything that I ever imagined.

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NF: When you decided to work here, the first few years you were here, did you attend events at the APCC and other cultural centers? Is that how you found out about them?

MS: Yes. My sophomore year I actually worked with Aunty Sandy, and she kind of got me connected to the APCC. I was an officer for a Hawai'i Club, so we had events at the APCC, so that's where I started to get my familiarity with the center, and I knew when they were looking for positions, I figured it would be a good opportunity.

NF: Can you describe the projects, events, activities that you've worked on over this past year during fall term, winter term, and spring term, and ones that were especially meaningful to you?

MS: Definitely, I actually haven't had any events this year as an external, I was more of a guidance support network for my support staff. As a community outreach we did, or we had a goal to have an all center collaboration every term. My first year I worked here we actually had a lantern making, all center collab. for World AIDS Day and we actually got to hang those lanterns in the Trysting Tree Lounge. That was a lot of fun. My first event was actually during Queer History Month and we had a panel of faculty, staff, students that were of color and they were also, they identified as homosexual. To me that was a very interesting first event coming from a Catholic background, I was very conservative coming into college so I wasn't very exposed to those types of discussions and conversations. I think that was kind of the starting point to where I wanted my events to go. In winter term we had an event, Expressions of Love, it was another all center collab. We did a lot of outreaching to students. It was very passive, it was to let students know we were there to support, but it was really nice being able to work with the other centers and to see us come together and provide this type of support system for other students.

NF: That sounds wonderful. So as the external coordinator this year, do you mostly, you mentioned that you support, so do you mostly assist if a communities person with that position, or another activities coordinator's assistants, do you help them out with their projects?

MS: Yes, and I also used to go to tabling events to outreach to different resources on campus, whether that would be other organizations or just different departments on campus. It could be ASOSU, it could be academic departments, and then having those networks to provide to my activities coordinators if they should have an event where they need a certain professor, or a certain academic department they are looking for as to collaborate with, I could provide those networks.

NF: So you act as a networking mechanism, as a liaison in a way?

MS: Yes, definitely.

NF: Wonderful. What have been your challenges working at the APCC and how have you overcome them? Since you've been here many years, you can talk about a specific year or your experiences as a whole or how you had challenges and maybe they've changed over the years?

MS: I think one of the biggest challenges, and I think this goes for all the cultural centers, is advertisement and getting students to come to events, as well as their interest. I know what we advocate for can be really touchy subjects, and I think it's important that we do what we can to educate students about what we're doing, but at the same time it's very difficult to have students engage if it's not a conversation they're either used to talking about or they are just uncomfortable with those types of discussions. One very big problem that we've always wanted to is having students coming to events, so we've had very little turnout for events unless there's food offered or if it's a fun event. Many of our like past, fun events like Henna Night or Dead Week Feast where there's food, we have a lot of students, but when it comes to more meaningful events such as we just had an event for Native Sands, Native Lands where we kind of connected the histories between native Hawaiians and Native Americans, the turnout of students was a lot lower. So I think those are the type of events that are a lot more important to getting out, social justice, social advocacy, but yet those are the events that are not as well attended. So I think that's a very big problem. Last year our external had this really great idea to outreach to professors, so I've been trying to kind of push for that this year, where we let professors know of our events, and these are

mostly professors in Ethnic Studies. So we created a listserv of professors that were interested and they were willing, and a lot of these professors offered these events that we hold as extra credit. So we've seen a much higher turnout of community members and students when we have these connections to academic departments because it actually provides an incentive for students to come out. So that's helped a lot.

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NF: Have you also connected with other departments, like Women and Gender Studies or any other departments? Or are you looking forward to doing that in the future?

MS: Yeah, we've actually have a very diverse array of professor on our listserv, so we do have Ethnic Studies, we do have some from Women and Gender...and I'm pretty sure we've had professors that teach about transgender type of classes. A lot of the professors that are advocating for these different types of underrepresented people of color, and a lot of their courses kind of structure around these types of discussions, are the professors we kind of look towards and that's what their courses are, they are offering and teaching, so it's very relevant.

NF: Have you worked on events where you've attempted to incorporate the fun and a more serious discussion, or do you typically do those separately, have you tried that or does that work?

MS: Yeah, this year our activities coordinators are very, very creative. They've thought of the most creative ways to engage their participants, as well as provide educational background. The actual first one that came to mind is the Native Sands, Native Lands. She came up with this great activity where they had food as kind of their resources and to kind of illustrate why there were disparities. I remember her explaining to me, they had Goldfish, some people would get more than others and to explain that this is kind of how resources are allocated and why that's not fair and so that actually gives into perspective students that have either less Goldfish or less Goldfish, like the privilege and oppression that kind of came with colonization. They kind of a made a story line out of it using different kinds of candy and all these different, you know, resources, and I thought it was so clever to be engaging, yet fun. We had snacks that you could eat afterwards, and so it was very, very clever. I think another event that they held this year was talking about Asian authors because it's not a very big population. The activity for that, they actually made bookmarks, and so they're just very clever with all their events. So they try to make it very engaging, as well as interactive and very educational.

NF: Those sound great. This next question, I think you've mentioned a few of these, but what do you consider your successes working at the APCC?

MS: I think one of the biggest successes is, as a staff, watching the staff kind of develop and grow, not only to leaders, but to become a lot more culturally competent and aware of the types of injustices that are happening and what we can do to further advocate or further change that. I think it's really hard to measure success, but I think, for me personally, it's more on a personal level how they've grown, and I guess being in a position that I am, it's more watching my staff, rather than success I feel that I've done or I feel like I have in regards to my position. A big goal for me at the beginning of the year was to kind of help my staff to figure out their place in the world, and how they want to move forward knowing the injustices, and if they're of underrepresented groups of people, how you can approach those kind of situations. I think from the year they've come a really long way, and I think that's a really big success. In terms of events, I think success is defined in the people that you reach out to, not necessarily how much, but how much they take away. We've definitely had students come up to us and tell us, "Thank you for having these events, you know I've learned a lot, I didn't know that" and I think that's an aspect of success I would define, just to know someone's life has been changed a little and they have a little more knowledge to take with them and share with others.

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NF: Great. In terms of the new center, you've been working in this center for a while and the APCC just had its groundbreaking recently. So can you talk a little bit about your role in the design process, if you were a part of that, your role in the groundbreaking?

MS: For the groundbreaking we were definitely involved in the whole mechanics behind it. So, planning process, I was really, really sad that I couldn't speak, I was actually supposed to MC with Maiyee; I had class. We did the planning for the invitations of who we were going to invite, the whole like determining what type of activities we were going to have, what kind of food we were going to have – the whole layout of the timeline of just what we were going to do for the groundbreaking event. That was a big part of what we were doing for groundbreaking.

NF: What does the new center mean to you?

MS: I think it's a new beginning. I'm really excited because we are moving, we are the only culture center that is moving, and we're moving to smack, dab middle of campus. It will be great. Many students have asked and we're so excited because we're so much closer to campus. I think that just shows our movement towards social justice, social equality on this campus, social advocacy, and how important all those aspects are to student life. I think the new center is a representation of our fight for that change and I think overall it's just a very nice, new beginning.

NF: The new center, as you mentioned, moves you closer to campus it will move you right across from the NAL. Can you talk a little bit about your interactions with staff from the other cultural centers, and if this move will help be more a part of that? You mentioned that you like doing collaborations with the other centers, at least once a term; can you talk a little bit about that?

MS: So I think being close to the NAL is definitely going to be a plus. It will benefit the staff knowing that we are closer to other staff. I think that's one, that kind of goes back to the challenges, there's been a disconnect with the cultural center staff because we're so far apart from each other that if we ever go through a cycle where we're rehiring new staff, our staff wouldn't necessarily know new staff on the BCC. Although we go through training in the beginning of the year, if there's new staff hired, we don't necessarily get to meet them, interact with them, and just build relationships with them. I think that was a plus of the community outreach position, but I think it's really unfortunate, because a lot of our staff don't really know the other external and internals of the other centers. I think that's definitely important because if we are fighting for this for all underrepresented people of color we need to stay connected, you know, together as one, but if that's difficult to do on just this campus, then how can we kind of show and demonstrate to the campus as a whole that we're together as one and we're fighting together. But I think that was one thing that we tried to do, that we tried to do this year, is that we tried to have interactions where our centers got to interact with each other, just our staff. It was really difficult, it's really busy here, but we do have our new liaisons next year and I will - we have been trying to teach them. Unfortunately, they haven't been able to take a class. Me and Maiyee have been emphasizing the importance of interacting with other cultural centers and keeping those connections together.

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NF: I'm curious with your position as external coordinator if you make connection with another department on behalf of the APCC, do you share that connection with other cultural centers? Is that part of what you do if you have a great event with one particular professor, do you let them know about the other centers, how does that process work in terms of communication?

MS: Not essentially. What we do as internal/externals, we meet once a month with all the other CRCs, Culture Resource Coordinators, but even then our meetings are only an hour, not everyone is always there, there's so much to catch up on, but we only have that one hour. Even then all our lives are so scattered in different directions that it's really hard to find the common ground to be...We want to meet with the Pride Center and just have a meet and greet with our staff, and so...I think when we find these different connections, they can come up during these meetings, but essentially, if I should find an Asian American professor that I felt was beneficial to us, may not be relevant so to say to the Native American Longhouse, so a lot of these connections are usually kept within the center, which I feel could be a benefit but could also be a downfall that we could work on those types of communications. Especially if those professors are very supportive, they could be supportive to other cultural centers as well.

NF: In terms of your ideas for the future, sort of the bigger picture, what projects, events, activities would you have liked to have seen, or would you recommend for the future?

MS: I think activities and programs I would like to see weekly events, just to provide continuity to students, you know, students on campus to know that we're here. I feel like if there's a continuity in the programs that we have, let's say maybe having like a weekly discussion of anything at all, then that could be associated with the center, and that could definitely increase your retention in the amount of students that come by to the center just knowing that there's a space, even if the weekly activity is a study space, it provides, I feel, this continuity where students know that the center is providing this activity once a week and you know where to go. I think that's something to look for in the future, especially with the new centers, we have such large and beautiful spaces that it would definitely be something that could even more so attract students to the centers.

NF: What advice would you give future APCC staff, or other OSU cultural center staff? And it sounds like as your role, that's part of what you do, is prepare the future leaders of the centers?

MS: Yeah, I think my biggest advice would be to stay connected, stay positive, and definitely remember what we're working towards. Having events that have low turnouts can be discouraging sometimes, I think it's easy to lose sight of what the bigger picture of what we're fighting for because of the smaller tasks that need to be done. We need timelines, we need, you know, things to meet deadlines. Caught up in all that, sometimes we forget we're celebrating who we are and our identities and how far we've come and how much more we have yet to go and what we need to do to get there. I can say that in terms of our heritage month, you know, we're always like, "Are you on your program plans? Are you getting it done?" But the bigger picture is these events are to show our advocacy for our history and what we're trying to do to change the inequalities and oppression that we face. I think just keeping an open mind, and definitely staying true to your values and enjoying what you do, I think that's a very big thing, staying passionate and always think positive.

NF: Based on working at the APCC, what is the takeaway that you've gained that you would like to share with others?

MS: I think the biggest takeaway I've had working here is my level of cultural competency and awareness. I think that's definitely something to be shared. I think the only way we can break these oppressions and inequalities is to face it and to kind of address the systems that are holding it into place. I think the only way we can break those systems is to be educated and to advocate and to just give others that information to know what we can do with what we have. We actually just attended a conference this past Saturday in regards to Asian Americans and Health Care, and just from that I feel that we can see how this race discussion kind of overlaps into every aspect of our life - not only health care, but education, the type of housing we live in, the type of environments we live in, and I think that cultural competency is key to what we need to move forward and to changing these different systems.

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NF: What is the biggest issue for you in terms of the purpose of the APCC? Why is it important that it exists and continues to flourish?

MS: I think that it's essential that the APCC, as well as the other cultural resource centers on campus, to provide students a source of comfort to know that they're supported, a safe space to know that they can come here and not feel they're judged. I was telling my staff earlier, every year we always have one student that continually

comes daily, and to know that we're here to kind of support that, it makes a difference if it's one person because, I guess, in terms of other ways of looking at it, if the center wasn't available, where would they go? Would they be in the position that they are? Would they still feel supported? I think that's what's important for these cultural resource centers is that it provides students networks with other students that, you know, may look like themselves, or may identify very similarly. It's not to say we're exclusive, but to know that we have a center specifically dedicated to Asian Pacific Islanders, we provide that comfort to know that they can come here and know what we have resources to direct them to people that identify with Asian and Pacific Islander.

NF: So in a way you already answered this question, but how would you describe the impact of the APCC on students, on API students?

MS: I think it's a big impact. It's a gathering ground. Asian and Pacific Islanders are very keen on community, so I think it provides that community space. I think what's difficult with students, though, that identify as Asian, is that a lot of these students are very wary of coming for help sometimes. I think that's what we're here to provide is help and support, even if they come to talk or just to chill or spend time with us, that's great if it helps them, but the students that don't feel they can come because they're either shy or they're hesitant, I think those are the students we need to outreach to. The students that do come in and utilize the center, I think it has a huge impact because it provides a space that they feel like they can come, and it is a home away from home.

NF: Do you have any suggestions of how you can potentially do that type of outreach to the students that may need to come, that should come in perhaps to get the extra help, but for whatever reason may not want to, do you have ideas or strategies for that?

MS: Yeah, I think, well we work closely with CRFs and the UHGF's, so Community Relation Facilitators, and with this new First Year Experience where students are, its mandatory to be in the dorms and residence halls, to utilize that and to utilize our relationships with the CRFs to kind of outreach to first year students to let them know we are here. A lot of students don't know we are actually here until like their third or fourth year, and it's so sad because students have come and been like, "Where has this been? I didn't know, this is my fourth year," so you know kind of utilizing those relationships and using it as a bridge to have students come over and utilize the center and to see what resources we can provide.

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NF: Hopefully that strategy in addition to moving toward the center of campus, hopefully that combined will make you much more visible.

MS: Definitely, we'll be right next to West.

NF: So what suggestions do you have in terms of, let me go back to the other question. How would you describe the impact of the APCC on the OSU and local community?

MS: So on the community as a whole, I think, I think we have a very large impact that Asian Pacific Islanders rely heavily on family and community and this is to say that we are connected with a lot of Asian Pacific Islander student groups on campus. And when they have their cultural shows we always see family, elders, and community members and I think that goes to show that our outreach to the community and our impact on it. Even with other events that we have held we had an event recently on the Palestine history and we actually had community member that came. Luckily our staff that was hosting the event could speak Arabic so he could actually speak to them, but that shows that a lot of the community that associate with these identities feel that they can come which is great and they feel that they can associate and be engaged in these kind of conversations which I think is wonderful.

NF: That is great. What suggestions do you have or ideas for future collaboration with the OSU and local community, so extending that.

MS: Yeah, I think one big one would be community service. I definitely want to see more community service from collaborations with the staff to either the OSU campus or other networks out in the Corvallis community, even as a bigger whole. I know one year we did a Locks of Love type of event and I think that's what type of events I would like to see with the center. So hopefully it can show that we are outreaching to community and doing what we can to change and to further advocate for others that may not feel like they have a voice.

NF: And can you describe your thoughts on why sharing your stories is important to your identity, if it is?

MS: I think sharing stories is essential to kind of holding on to what is going on now, and being able to look back and see either the changes or just stories that have to do with identity if identity, the definition of identity changes in years. I think that telling stories also preserves cultural history, cultural stories, cultural memories, either

through family or personal experience I think these stories are kind of a snapshot into the present day or later on into the past.

NF: Great, so as one of our final questions, can you describe your experiences here at OSU pertaining to your racial or ethnic identities? How you have been shaped? If your perception has changed, if it stayed the same, just your overall experience here at OSU.

MS: Yeah, I think it definitely has changed. I'm a lot more liberal now. I am taking an Anthro. class on race in addition to my training here at the center, the way to look at race is very different. The way I evaluate my internal biases are very different, the way I approach situations and kind of question situations are very different. And I think, I think it's in a good way, and I think it helps to be a lot more critical when looking at other situations in general. I think looking back from where we have come from, we have come a long way, but in regards to the recent issues we've had on campus regarding the hate messages things that came up in the *Barometer* with the ASOSU elections, we have a long way to go.

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Seeing what has been done to kind of change those thoughts, seeing the advocacy on campus, very proactive like the march I think it gives me a lot of hope as to what we are reaching for and what we are trying to change. Although, I know there is a long way to go but, I guess the way I identify myself and the way I look at my own race is definitely changed and the way I question situations and discussions has definitely changed. And I would like to think that I am a lot more educated but, I know there is a lot more to learn and I am eager to move forward and learn those things.

NF: Great as a quick follow up, did you participate in the Solidarity march? Either just as an individual or as a representative of the APCC, can you talk a little bit about that?

MS: I actually had class that whole day. I did hear that when I was in class that I was very proud to know what they were fighting for and I was a part of that picture just being at the cultural centers. But I personally wasn't able to partake in that event but I was there in spirit. And I think that march gives so much hope because there wasn't just students in that March, there was faculty there was staff and there was a lot of things that was written down that gave me hope that we aren't going to tolerate this type of behavior and that it's going to take a lot to get to where we want to go, but no one has given up and we are still fighting. It has definitely given me hope to see that March and to see it unfold.

NF: And is there anything we have not discussed that you would like to add or follow up on?

MS: I think I'm ok, but thank you for holding this interview and doing this.

NF: Great, thank you so much

MS: Thank you.

[end 00:37:31]