

COLUMBUS AVENUE AND THE UPPER WEST SIDE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Eunsook and Liana Pai

Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District

2019

PREFACE

The following is a transcript of the second of two sessions of an oral history interview with Eunsook and Liana Pai (mother and daughter) conducted by Leyla Vural on October 30, 2019. This interview is part of the Columbus Avenue and the Upper West Side Oral History Project, sponsored by the Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District.

Eunsook Pai (born in 1942) and her sister opened Liana, a women's clothing store on Columbus Avenue, in 1982. Today, Liana Pai (Eunsook's daughter, born in 1966) runs the store.

In this interview, Liana and Eunsook continue to reflect on the way they run the store and the importance they put on the loyalty between them and their customers. They talk about going through life's journey with the customers (from christenings to funerals) and the bond that creates not only with customers but with the larger community. They talk about having fewer relationships with fellow store owners on the avenue because there are fewer mom-and-pop shops on Columbus. Liana notes that the Upper West Side has had an important influence on shaping her, given all the time she has spent in the store since she was fifteen. Mother and daughter describe the role of Korean culture in how they relate to one another and how that plays out in the store. They reflect on the significance of winning a WESTY [West Side Spirit Thanks you] Award in 2019 and what it means to them to be part of the community and part of making the community better. Liana describes the steady small-town feeling community of the Upper West Side that has lasted despite neighborhood changes, and Eunsook talks about the importance of making everyone feel welcome and special.

The interviewees have reviewed, edited, and approved this transcript. Readers should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of an interview and, therefore, does not read like a polished piece of written work. Time codes have been included to make it easier for readers to match the transcript with the audio recording of the interview. Time codes may, however, no longer be completely accurate because of edits to the transcript. Where there are differences between the transcript and the audio recording, the transcript is the final document of record.

The views expressed in this oral history interview are the interviewees' alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District.

Interviewees: Eunsook and Liana Pai

Interviewer: Leyla Vural

Interview date: October 30, 2019

Session: 2 of 2

Location: New York, N.Y.

Vural: [00:00:00] It's Wednesday, October 30th, 2019, and this is Leyla Vural interviewing Liana Pai, and her mom, Eunsook Pai, is going to join us shortly, for the second interview for the Columbus Avenue and the Upper West Side Oral History Project. Thank you.

L. Pai: [00:00:14] Thank you.

Vural: [00:00:15] Last time we talked a fair amount about how much the community means to you, and I thought it would be great to talk about that a little bit more and maybe how that's changed over time. So, one of the questions I wanted to ask you was, how has the customer base changed?

L. Pai: [00:00:38] So, I would say that the customer base has for the large part remained the same. They've just gotten older [laughs], like myself. You know, the mothers became grandmothers. Then the daughters came, the grandchildren—the grandmothers brought the grandchildren. And I think the nice thing about the Upper West Side is that there's so many that have stayed. Very few people that I know—or I would say that there's maybe some that moved away, that have moved out of New York completely or decided to sell their homes and downsize. But it's such a neighborhood of people and families that just keep growing, generation by generation.

[00:01:48] I think that the value of the real estate has changed dramatically. So, it used to be where you could get a building for \$10,000, and that would be a pretty large building, and now it's millions of dollars for a brownstone.

[00:02:09] So, I do have customers that I think have been here for the same amount of time—if not longer, than the store—that bought their first home and saw that as it got better, meaning as the neighborhood got safer, that there were more amenities, there were more restaurants, boutiques, that they kind of—their families grew in the neighborhood. And the ones that have left, I know, often come back and come back with kind of like a nostalgic sadness, like, “I miss being on the Upper West Side.”

[00:02:55] Because, you know, you have the park [Central Park West]. You have—the landscape is not so different, meaning that—it's not like over in the sixties [referring to the numbered streets] where you see, on the West Side Highway, the Trump Towers or any of the high-rises. You know, you don't—in the seventies [numbered streets], you don't really see that. Maybe there's one or two buildings that are like that, but you'll see a lot of brownstones and tree-lined streets.

[00:03:30] And I have a customer who's been coming for a really long time and she lives in a brownstone up the block, in the eighties, from a school, and it has—there's a playground on Amsterdam Avenue—and she said her and her husband couldn't believe how many kids were there one weekend recently. She said it was just indicative of how many families are also moving into the area because of the better schools. Now, could this have been said thirty-eight years ago? Probably not [chuckles]. But it's the same—like if you had the foresight to invest and—what a difference you would have thirty years later or forty years later.

[00:04:28] And we have a lot of the children that have come. I think the hard part of all of that is the fact that there are people who you lose, whether it's from sickness or natural causes or—recently—there's a father and his wife who used to come all the time, and then he brought his daughters and he would always buy his daughters things, and his grandchildren. And he's a lawyer and he was really just—he still is—the loveliest, loveliest man when he comes in the store. He just brightens up everybody's day.

[00:05:14] And his wife had been battling cancer and illness for quite a long time. And so sometimes they would call us and they would say, “Can you bring something by? She needs some tops and she can't really make it in because she can't walk.” So, we would drop it off or we would have—or he'd come and pick it up for her, because he loved clothes.

[00:05:40] And then I recently found out from the daughter, who came in with her daughter, that her mother had passed. And it was so heartbreaking because you just—I mean, it's part of life—but you've built such strong relationships with people and then sometimes they don't come in anymore and that's how you find out, or I found out from her daughter. I said, “Oh, I wish I had known. I would have gone to the shiva.” And she said her mother didn't want anything elaborate. She didn't want—she just wanted the family. She wanted it very simple. And there have been other people who I've gone to their funerals or—I mean, and this is a little bit morbid, but, you know—I've definitely had to help people dress for all occasions.

[00:06:52] And, see, the makeup of the Upper West Side definitely still remains kind of progressive, more liberal. I don't know how diverse I would say it is. I think that that's something that in—while there are a lot of families here and while I think that there's a lot of

diversity in faith, I don't know how much diversity there is in nationalities and race and colors. I think when you get further up the Upper West Side maybe.

Vural: [00:07:45] So, have you noticed that that changed? Because it kind of is a function of gentrification and the cost of real estate and rentals or buying.

L. Pai: [00:07:58] I don't think that I ever noticed that it was very diverse. There were certain areas that as a child, when I was growing up here, when I would come to work at the store when I was in my teens, you know, I wouldn't go past Eighty-fifth, Eighty-sixth Street, right. And you just kind of knew there was a lot of drug-dealers and addicts and homeless people. But between 80—like between the Museum of Natural History and Seventy-second Street was kind of a really interesting area that was probably *the* area of little mom-and-pop stores, the antique stores, little restaurants and bakeries, which I think in terms of the makeup of the Upper West Side, the sad part is is that a lot of those places are gone.

[00:09:17] And it's not just about rents. I mean, that's some of it. Luckily, we happen to have a good landlord or one that's always been aware of our longevity and has been loyal to us and we've been loyal to them. But, for instance, even the big chains that have kind of overtaken the Upper West Side are going. Like across the street from us Duane Reade is closing. And people were protesting Duane Reade coming in because it was, you know, going to change the makeup of the neighborhood, and now it's closing. And it's a huge space. And then next to it is Chase Bank that just closed their branch.

[00:10:11] So, I think that it's not—I also don't necessarily think it's an internet thing. I think that what's really important, which has kept our business alive, is this idea of loyalty, customer service, friendship, relationships, where you're really reaching out to somebody. And it's not

something that—I think it'd be harder to find on the East Side. I know that sounds strange, but, you know, the East Side, or Madison Avenue, has a certain aura around the name. It's less to do with—I have a lot of customers that live on the East Side, but it seems like everything seems a little more expensive. It seems a little distant. It seems a little bit less about getting to know one another, or to go through that journey of celebrating life and going through all the different: the birthdays and the weddings and the bar mitzvahs and the christenings and then funerals. And I think that the Upper West Side, luckily for us, has still remained the same in that way, but there are fewer and fewer of us.

Vural: [00:11:55] Let me ask you, how has the fact that there are fewer family-owned, smaller businesses, how does that affect how you relate to the other merchants on Columbus?

L. Pai: [00:12:09] Oh, well, so, I would say that I don't really have a relationship. We used to, like when we first started out, we knew everybody on the block. I mean, part of it was also to protect each other. We'd protect each other from, you know, anything untoward. Or we would have coffee with one another. We'd get rugelach from Miss Grimble's and bring it next door.

[00:12:44] And even as stores became more—like the Charivari started to expand, or there was Variazioni, and there was a Joseph—when higher end stores kind of moved in hoping that it would be a little bit like the new Soho, I think that we—still we knew the managers. We'd go in. We would look. Now I don't—we don't have that kind of relationship. And I think part of it is that it isn't family-owned. It isn't—it doesn't feel neighborhood-y. It feels like a chain that's come in that decided to open up a store.

[00:13:36] Our Chase Bank was great because we bank with Chase. But our reps they were always super nice. The hair salon right next to us we're friendly with. And there's a new little

Italian café, my husband is friendly with them. There's one—so, Pappardella, which has been there not as long as us but quite a long time, on Columbus and Seventy-second [Street]—no, Seventy-fifth, Columbus and Seventy-fifth Street—their manager and owner we're friendly with. So, sometimes if I'm working late nights with the staff, they happen to stay open late and we'll go in there for a quick bite to eat.

[00:14:35] There are other families, like the Zabars, they shop at the store—the mother and two daughters—so, we see them a lot. And of course we go to Zabar's a lot. I think, yes, it would be nice to have a little bit more where you kind of had a stronger relationship, but—

[00:15:08] You know, and then the clothing stores—I just—it's interesting because some of the stores carry the same stuff that we do. And that doesn't ever really bother me because what we offer is very different as a store and as a family, and that's why people keep coming.

Vural: [00:15:39] So, it's ended up that you have a community in the neighborhood, but not so much of fellow merchants.

L. Pai: [00:15:46] Yes. And I know that the merchants—I think it would be different in terms of—I think with the restaurants, it might be different. With clothing merchants, yes, it's just—it's weird. There is a—and I think it's Columbus Avenue BID [Business Improvement District] that does it—they have a merchants' association. I just—unfortunately, I don't have the time to go to those meetings. One of my staff members went and was very kind of excited because they were just talking about neighborhood types of things that were going on. It would be nice to put a face to people's businesses, but I don't know how many people are so hands-on anymore.

Vural: [00:16:49] How much are you actually at the store?

L. Pai: [00:16:53] A lot [laughs]. I'm probably at the store four days a week and then I go into the market and I work from home. So, it's, you know—having your own business, it's a lot of work, and especially if you don't divvy up the work. It's not like I hire—and I think this is where a lot of businesses tend to fail is when they hire outside people to try and understand their demographic.

[00:17:37] So, it's really hard for some of my customers even to work with other people. They want to work with me, which is completely fine, but it can be problematic if I have to do other parts to keep the store running and I'm not at the store.

[00:17:56] Luckily, like the way that I train the people that work for me is, you know, we don't do things commission-based. We don't do things in a way that feels—I don't ever want anybody to leave feeling like they got something because they were pressured or—yes, I think the old motto of 'the customer is always right,' even if they aren't really right, they kind of are [laughs]. Only because I think it's not worth it for me for somebody to leave unhappy.

[INTERRUPTION]

Vural: [00:18:41] I wanted to ask you a little bit about—you were saying that you have a good landlord. I know it's Robert Quinlan.

L. Pai: [00:18:49] Ah-hum.

Vural: [00:18:49] And I interviewed Robert and he talked about how important it is as a landlord to value long-term tenants.

L. Pai: [00:19:02] Right.

Vural: [00:19:03] So, I was interested that you've experienced it that way [laughs]. And one of the things he told me, and your mother mentioned that the store started much smaller, was that at some point you expanded the store. Can you tell me about that? Like what happened and what was that like for you to just be bigger and how have you managed that?

L. Pai: [00:19:25] So, my mom will remember the exact dates. But we initially were so small that like—I mean, I'd probably say we were only a couple of hundred square feet. You know, we had two small dressing rooms, a mirror, clothes that kind of lined a little register, and a little island in the middle of the store that also had clothing around it. So, very, very small. And it would often be where people were waiting to get in the dressing room. You couldn't, you literally could not kind of pass somebody without actually really having to say excuse me [laughs] or something like that anywhere in the store.

[00:20:24] And when it got to a point when we could expand, of course it was really exciting, because we'd have a backspace, we'd have more dressing rooms. And my mom and my aunt worked with a—because as my father taught at Pratt Institute and he had a lot of friends who were architects or designers and a friend's husband of my parents, no, a friend's wife, a fellow teacher at Pratt, his wife did the design. And, you know, with every kind of contracting and design, it can be problematic. One of the things is, of course, money. You have to be careful about how much money you're spending. And there was also—the way that we were able to expand was there was an apartment behind the store and that's how we expanded.

[00:21:40] I remember there was a lot of disagreement over design, and I think that ultimately that's what everybody always feels when they're going through that. And other than that, I'm not really—I think my mom would be better at answering that.

[00:22:05] Having the amount of space that we have now, like it'd be great to have even more space, and we have, I think, seven hundred square selling space and maybe two hundred square feet of backspace, where we have a bathroom and a little kitchen. And so it's not very big. But, you know, when I walk into some of those stores where they have three thousand square feet, I get very jealous [chuckles]. It wouldn't have the same feeling, but it would be nice to have, you know, the luxury of having all that room.

Vural: [00:22:49] Have you ever lived on the Upper West Side?

L. Pai: [00:22:54] So, an interesting story. So, when I got pregnant, my mom—so, my mom and father own a brownstone in Brooklyn and my brother was living on one floor and I was living on the other floor. And at a certain point, my mom was like, “You know what, you really need to be living in a separate house.” So, I bought a—we bought an apartment on the Upper West Side on, gosh, was it Seventy-first Street? Seventieth or Seventy-first Street, right off of Columbus Avenue. And it was the parlor floor of a brownstone and it was a co-op. But below me lived this French couple with two kids and the apartment needed a gut renovation.

[INTERRUPTION]

Vural: [00:23:54] So, we stopped to welcome Eunsook. So, welcome back.

E. Pai: [00:24:00] Thank you.

Vural: [00:24:02] And before you got here, Liana was talking about the apartment that they bought on the Upper West Side, because I was asking if she'd ever lived in the neighborhood. Do you want to finish telling me that story?

L. Pai: [00:24:12] Yes, so, we—

E. Pai: [00:24:12] Oh, my God [chuckles].

L. Pai: [00:24:13] —bought this apartment. We had to do a gut renovation. And there was a board, a co-op board, which of course we had to get approved by, and the president of the board was a Frenchman who lived with his wife and two children in the garden apartment. So, we lived above them. And he was seemingly very nice and charming, but as the renovation progressed and there were two incidences, which of course we were very—

[00:24:50] The contractor's foot went through the ceiling one time, because we had to literally put—there was no insulation and I wanted to soundproof between the floors so that he wouldn't hear my children once they—I mean, I only had one at the time. And he told numerous lies to the board and we—it was so—it got so bad that I decided to sell it before I even moved in, because I thought after having survived a near-death experience during the birth of my—you know, before the birth of my child, I decided I never wanted to live a life with living above somebody like that.

[00:25:42] And so we sold the apartment, and because it was very well done—we had a really good architect, we had—we sold it, I think, you know, for enough that made back our money that we had put into it. And then all of a sudden, the president of the board, when it was found out by the rest of the board members how much he lied and how corrupt he was and then they wanted him out, but then he wanted to sell. So, then he started to try and call me, which was really interesting, I thought to myself, I can't even—thank God I got out of there before, you know, I had even tried.

[00:26:31] But in the time that I was there, it was really interesting because we had never moved in, but walking up and down the block, you know, there was so many customers that would be

like, “Oh, hello, Liana, what are you doing here?” you know. And I thought to myself in some ways it’s better that I work in the neighborhood and then I live someplace else, because so many people know me that I literally couldn’t get a block without somebody saying hello. And of course it’s always nice to say hello to somebody, but, you know, when you’re kind of living you’re life like that, it’s also nice to, I think, have some separation. Maybe if I even lived, I don’t know, ten blocks up or ten blocks down [chuckles]. But—

Vural: [00:27:29] That’s interesting. So, it’s been this neighborhood that you’ve known so intimately since the early eighties and in a certain way been a home, but really your business home and not your—

L. Pai: [00:27:39] Yes.

Vural: [00:27:40] —life home.

L. Pai: [00:27:41] Yes. Although I’d probably say I spend as much time at my business home as I do in my life home and probably more waking hours in my business home [chuckles]. So, it’s, you know I think it’s probably been much more—had much more of an impression or much more to do with who I am than even where I live.

Vural: [00:28:15] Can you say more about that?

L. Pai: [00:28:18] Well, I think that when you—you know, I started working at the store when she [refers to her mother] opened it, when I was fifteen, and, you know, when you have your own business, you spend a lot of time there during—our hours, we open seven days a week, 11 to 7, 1 to 6 on Sunday, and then after hours, because sometimes you have to take care of the things you didn’t take care of during hours. And just the community of people that you see and

the stories that you hear, it definitely shapes the way that you think. It affects your opinions on whether it's anything from politics to tastes in food, to life, to, you know, maybe shared experiences. There's been a lot of that. And it's partially them sharing with us, but it's also with us sharing with them our life events.

[00:29:36] Like my daughter used to sit in the window of the store with my mother and then my mother and the babysitter would take them to Central Park. And my daughter would crawl—you know, we've seen not only my daughter, but we've seen a lot of kids—children—who we've had to like help their mothers and carry the baby or watch them run around the store. Even the guy who became our super in the building, to see him get married and have children. You know, it's been a very—it's been a huge part of our lives.

Vural: [00:30:32] So, Eunsook, I was asking before you got here about the expansion of the store. You were saying how small it was when you opened it and now it's obviously much bigger. Do you remember when it expanded and how you got to make that happen?

E. Pai: [00:30:49] We only had three hundred fifty square feet. That's including the bathroom. So, you can imagine how small. No stockroom. So, above the toilet was a stockroom. So, how small. And every day when merchandise arrived, we had to constantly hide a bit behind the hanging—you know, clothing hanging—in the bags, the stockroom. So, I mean, it was just three hundred and fifty square feet. That's a tiny—

[00:31:31] And anyway, I don't remember but I think maybe 1980, maybe '88 or '87—we opened in 1982—and in the back, two apartments were vacant, so we decided to open that up. So, that's why the store is a very funny shape, because just long and then side and—

[00:32:09] But anyway, so there's no way we can survive at three hundred and fifty square feet. What we should have done, we should have moved to a bigger location. That would be actually better. But, you know, for some reason, we started there, we never thought we could move or something. You know, in your head, you don't even think about anything else except that location.

[00:32:37] So, we could literally move to everywhere and because we have experience now and we no longer have to worry about \$3,000 rent. But I think what we really should have done—move toward the Lincoln Center, that would be a little busier than Seventy-fifth [Street]. But we started there. We just never thought about moving to a new location. So that was it.

[00:33:15] Yes, and if we moved to much bigger window space, means much bigger frontage, that would be more advantageous. But we have a small window. So there's nothing we can do now because I'm old to do anything and, I don't know, I just feel it's too much work, so.

Vural: [00:33:49] Well, and people are loyal to you. They—like I'm sure the connection is partly place based.

E. Pai: [00:33:58] Yes, even if we move five blocks down, I'm sure people will just follow us, but for some reason we just don't. And also our landlord, Walker & Malloy, they have so many spaces on Columbus Avenue, we could easily have done that. So, we are probably one of the longest tenants they have. And they used to say—

L. Pai: [00:34:29] She [referring to interviewer] had interviewed Bob Quinlan.

E. Pai: [00:34:31] Oh, you did? Oh.

Vural: [00:34:32] Yes.

E. Pai: [00:34:32] Oh. Did he ever mention about us?

Vural: [00:34:36] He did, he did.

E. Pai: [00:34:38] Oh [chuckles]. He used to say we are the best tenant. We never complain. Even water damage from upstairs, we, you know, took whatever damage to dry cleaner and we never ever complain. And that's the best tenant. We always pay rent on time, never delay or anything. But anyway. I can't believe you did interview.

Vural: [00:35:15] Yes, well, so, the interviews I've done have been a mix of local merchants—

E. Pai: [00:35:20] I see.

Vural: [00:35:21] —and owners and long-time tenants.

E. Pai: [00:35:22] Yes, I see, I see. When did you do that?

Vural: [00:35:25] I interviewed him last February.

E. Pai: [00:35:29] Oh, oh. I wonder where he is now. I haven't seen him for so long. About ten-some years.

Vural: [00:35:37] Oh, I think he's—I mean, I interviewed him in his office—

E. Pai: [00:35:40] Oh, okay.

Vural: [00:35:40] —on Columbus.

E. Pai: [00:35:41] Okay. 68 or something, right?

Vural: [00:35:45] Yes.

L. Pai: [00:35:45] Yes, we were there.

E. Pai: [00:35:45] Yes, yes. Okay.

Vural: [00:35:48] Yes.

L. Pai: [00:35:48] But did you decide to expand because you—business was going well?

E. Pai: [00:35:55] Yes, yes, for sure we can no longer have a tiny store and we have so many people coming and, you know, obviously that's what you do. You know, you cannot stay in the tiny space. And the rent was \$800. That's how we started.

Vural: [00:36:17] Do you remember a time when you realized that you were building something that would last?

E. Pai: [00:36:25] No, no, I don't think so. You know, we just keep going and hard work. I really think it's—your whole life is just—you cannot even skip one day. You know, we only close four days a year and 361 days is open. That's lot of responsibilities and work, and also you cannot work alone. You cannot get sick sometimes. Even when you are sick, you still have to come, because there's no one can work for you. And that's the hard part.

L. Pai: [00:37:17] Even now I would say that, you know, with the changes that are happening—like I said, on our—across the street from us there's going to be total empty storefronts. And on Columbus Avenue, you can see that a lot of those chains that took over now are going away. And, you know, mom-and-pop stores aren't necessarily feeling or feel confident in opening up a store on Columbus Avenue. That's why on Columbus and—especially during—in a certain range of stores. I think when you get further up and further down it might feel a little bit—you'll

see a little bit more of restaurants and other little types of stores. But, you know, with the possibility of Barney's closing on Madison—and we'll find out on the 31st—

E. Pai: [00:38:19] Tomorrow.

L. Pai: [00:38:20] Yes—whether or not they're going to close completely.

E. Pai: [00:38:22] Oh, my God.

L. Pai: [00:38:26] And a bunch of other big retailers are struggling, you know, it's hard to see whether or not you can—

E. Pai: [00:38:36] Survive.

L. Pai: [00:38:36] —survive.

E. Pai: [00:38:38] Yes.

L. Pai: [00:38:38] And there's—you know, because for us it's one month can make a huge difference in whether or not we can make it. I mean, it may not be as dire as that. I know a lot of—there were a lot of stores that weren't paying their rent, they weren't paying their vendors, they weren't—but we've never had that. We've never done that and, knock on wood, we never will [chuckles].

[00:39:07] But there was recently something that was open for almost a hundred years. Oh, I mean—

E. Pai: [00:39:17] Barney's.

L. Pai: [00:39:17] —the mattress store.

E. Pai: [00:39:19] Oh.

L. Pai: [00:39:19] The mattress store on Seventy-second Street, I think they had been open—

E. Pai: [00:39:22] Oh, Sleepy's?

L. Pai: [00:39:23] Sleep—

E. Pai: [00:39:23] Yes, Sleepy's

L. Pai: [00:39:24] He had been open for like almost a hundred years.

E. Pai: [00:39:28] Yes, and—

L. Pai: [00:39:28] And they closed a few months ago, on Seventy-Second Street off of Columbus, and Tani [a shoe store] off of Columbus. So, there's a different—it's a different culture than being in a small town upstate or across the country, you know, where you have like a small store. I think there are still those things that exist. I think that as the fall of the malls and the fall of the chains happen there is still—people still need to go shop and some people, a lot of my customers, don't like to shop online.

[00:40:18] I had one customer who came in, she bought a jacket. And she's been coming to the store for a long time. She hadn't been in in a while. And she said, "You know, I needed a black jacket and I ordered four different ones from Saks, all Max Mara,"—who we carry—"and," she said, "they were all wrong. I had to return them all." And she came into the store and she tried on a Max Mara jacket and it fit her perfectly. And she said, "Do you have an online presence? Because I would have just ordered it from you." And I thought to myself, ah, this is one of those times where I wish I had an online presence. And I said to her, "Well, we do something else

where you can call me or you can email me and I'll drop things off for you on consignment so you can try it on." And she was like, "Great." She was like, "You know, because you know my body, you know what's going to fit me."

[00:41:23] So, I think that hopefully, you know—I know that the people who come to the store really love the store. And I think the important thing that I would say is—that people need to know—is that it is critical that you support your community. It's like, yes, there are the big department stores and there's Bloomingdale's off price or there's Century 21 or there's, you know, grocery stores that are huge—Targets—and they have their place. But I think that it's *really*—that when you're investing in a small business or your neighborhood business, you're investing in your neighborhood, you're investing to make sure that your neighborhood stays vital and that people want to come to your neighborhood. It also helps with—you know, if you live in your neighborhood, like if you live actually on the Upper West Side, it helps to boost up the real estate value.

[00:42:46] But I think that's something that in New York *that* needs to be heard more, and not necessarily from politicians or from—but really from people who do have mom-and-pop stores and the history and the stories. And I think that's really—I think it's critical to us being around.

Vural: [00:43:11] [Addressed to Liana] Yes. So, I wanted to ask you, given that you have worked together since you were fifteen, what role has the store played in the relationship between the two of you?

E. Pai: [00:43:23] Oh [chuckles], I don't think we ever have any problem. You know, as a Korean and as a—she was born here, but still I think they get some Korean culture, not that we want to teach them or anything. We want them to be American. But, you know, we have a

different value and probably it's good and bad, but I think it's more good than bad. And because that's all I know: Korean culture. And we always respect older and elder and, you know, of course parents. And the parents never can be equal as your children. And I always say no matter what, you know, you cannot be equal as me and your father because we are the parents and you are the children.

[00:44:44] So, I think, probably, it's hard but you get used to it. It's just like even I don't speak perfect English, but she know exactly what I mean. I don't have to have a clear, perfect English but she will understand. And, you know, we always—we get along probably really well and I think, I really think, it has something to do with the culture.

L. Pai: [00:45:24] Yes, there's definitely—

E. Pai: [00:45:25] She can never talk back to me because I'm the mother. And it's really culture, cultural things. And even as a little—and we teach them never use the bad word, never use anything not proper, and even joke—no. And so children grow up without saying those words. And because I grew up that way, so I know I never used that word in my life, I never will, and I want them to follow the same thing. And using the bad word is a bad habit. You know, it doesn't mean anything, but why should you use that word and make you feel bad and make other people feel bad? And you sound bad and why do you do that? And I lived my life without any of those words and I'm fine. You know, not that I want to be elegant or anything proper, anything like that, but still.

[00:46:51] And so I think it's really upbringing maybe connects us to work together. And, you know, we get along. And of course if I do something wrong, she will tell me, and if she does

something wrong, I will tell her—and very open about it. But you still have to be very careful because you don't want to hurt feelings, but I think basically we get along without any problem.

Vural: [00:47:35] So, what do you think, Liana, in terms of the role that the store has played in your relationship? Because that's a particular thing—

E. Pai: [00:47:43] Yes, yes.

Vural: [00:47:41] —to work together.

L. Pai: [00:47:44] So, you know, initially I was working for my mom and my aunt. And so my mom is the eldest sister, so that had its own dynamic, because I definitely think that culturally that played a huge role in, one, there's a certain sense of respect and work ethic that goes along with that. You know, you're not—as my mom said, you don't talk back. You don't—you know, you really—you work just as hard as they are working hard to provide you with the best that they can.

[00:48:35] And so, you know, there were times where I think that—my aunt played more of the business role and my mom was more in the store role and so sometimes I had to balance out my relationship with the two of them, even though—because their personalities are very different. They were just—they're two sisters that—they're very different.

[00:49:13] And when I was younger, I think also for me it was about working really hard just to make sure that the business was successful. I was also—at the time I was acting, I was doing other things, so I was doing that in between. But I never let go of the fact that my mother and my aunt started something pretty remarkable and that it was also part of my livelihood, right. It

wasn't just—it was also about making our lives better, but it meant everybody had to make sacrifices and work hard.

[00:50:03] And then I would say that when my aunt left, it was very difficult, because all of a sudden, we were left to take over *all* the roles. And it really should have been at a time where my mother, if she wanted to retire, she could retire, but all of a sudden, she had to kind of help in ways that she hadn't necessarily helped before, without very little, oddly, without very little training.

[00:50:44] There are some things that we both knew, like my mom has great style. She does have a business sense. But my aunt had a way of just knowing exactly how much—

E. Pai: [00:51:02] She has a commercial sense.

L. Pai: [00:51:02] Right.

E. Pai: [00:51:03] And I didn't have a commercial sense, even being in business for a long time. And I know what I like, I know what works for me. But she couldn't care less what she looked like, but she has amazing business, commercial sense—something—she's just born that way. You know, you learn through your mistake, but I think she was a genius in that regard.

L. Pai: [00:51:41] Also accounting—

E. Pai: [00:51:42] Oh, she's just—

L. Pai: [00:51:44] —like she'll know how many—

E. Pai: [00:51:47] And also, she wasn't married. So, entirely her life was for business.

L. Pai: [00:51:54] Well, she married late in life.

E. Pai: [00:51:56] She married much later, and so I think that probably was a bigger plus for the store, not so much for her personal gain, but she devoted her life for the store.

L. Pai: [00:52:15] And we were very—you know, my aunt and I we—like she would take me, when I was younger, she would take me on trips. We would—you know, we had a very strong relationship. But I think that in terms of my mother and I, I think there is that sense of always needing to respect and honor. So, there are things that—you know, I wouldn't talk back to my mother. That just wouldn't [laughs] happen, and even at fifty-two, I still won't talk back to my mother.

E. Pai: [00:53:00] Oh, that's the culture.

L. Pai: [00:53:01] That's the culture.

E. Pai: [00:53:03] Absolute culture. I can never do it to my mother, even if she's deadly wrong. Never. Never.

L. Pai: [00:53:10] Right. And there's certain things that I think from my mother culturally, because of—as we were talking about—just my staff and having to manage that and how the younger generation is very different in terms of their expectations, in terms of their feelings, and it's a very—you know, everybody is just emotionally raw and open and they want you to know how much they're feeling.

[00:53:44] When I was growing up, that was not—you didn't let people know your feelings.

Like you wouldn't really cry, and if you cried, it was probably really—like it would have to be really bad. Or you'd cry in secret.

[00:54:04] So, there have been times when I might have to explain to my mother, but I have to choose my moment where I say, “This person is very sensitive about this particular thing.” And, as a woman—my mother, who grew up during the war, who emigrated to the United States without speaking a word of English, who survived it all and made a success of herself—it’s a very different world now. It’s not only is it a world of this, you know, the twenty-year-olds just feeling like they deserve more or—it’s not all of them, but I will just say that there’s a certain sense of, I think entitlement is too strong a word, I mean maybe it has to do with the fact that there’s so many different things to contend with in the world, that is like whether it’s politically, environmentally, the workplace, and all of these things that have always been kind of simmering under the surface kind of coming to light more.

[00:55:35] You know, when you hear about like some other person who’s taken advantage of people all his life, now, we all were there, we all knew that those things were going on, but now it’s all coming out into the open. And I think—

E. Pai: [00:55:50] Just like the #MeToo movement.

L. Pai: [00:55:52] Yes.

E. Pai: [00:55:52] It’s changing the world. And it open, open, and I’m pretty sure—this is a different subject—but people take advantage of that. You know, before, never, you know. And so it’s a different time. And it’s—

L. Pai: [00:56:13] I don’t think you mean that they take advantage of that, because—

E. Pai: [00:56:17] I think so. I really think. Before, you know, if anybody touches your hip or something and—it’s not a good example—but now it become like a *big* bad things.

L. Pai: [00:56:40] Mommy, I think what you're trying to say is that while there are people who have reason to call out because, like, whether it's Harvey Weinstein, the cases against him of those actresses, or [Jeffrey] Epstein—is that what his—

E. Pai: [00:56:58] Epstein, Jeffrey Epstein. Oh, my God.

L. Pai: [00:57:01] You know, things—when you hear about things like that and there are people who have actually been, whether it's assaulted or whether they've been wronged or treated differently because of their race, sexuality, there's also this heightened sensitivity of people not wanting to take advantage of, but maybe—and I think—

E. Pai: [00:57:32] It's opportunities. They want something, so, it's like—

L. Pai: [00:57:38] Well, it's not that they want something.

E. Pai: [00:57:38] They're gaining—

L. Pai: [00:57:39] It's more like if somebody—it's true that if it's like, if they feel wronged or slighted in any way, and it could be because somebody used the wrong pronoun or it could be because they felt like somebody was looking at you in the wrong way, that they could call offense to that and make a larger complaint than—you know, now it becomes really hard. It's like a lot of comedians talk about how “I can't make a joke, because if I make a joke and it's politically incorrect, or socially incorrect, all of a sudden I'm not going to be able to—like I can't perform any more.”

Vural: [00:58:27] Well, so, one of the interesting things that I'm sort of hearing is that as a mother and daughter you're navigating how difficult it is to manage a small business and also

navigating this interesting relationship between Korean culture and American culture and what that means for you, between the two of you personally and what it mean for your business.

L. Pai: [00:58:50] Yes, and I think that it's also—my daughter was doing a social studies assignment, a global assignment, and a lot of it has to do with immigrants and the racial and social diversities and things that occurred at the turn of the century or beforehand. And I think of it as that's so important to the makeup of not only the Upper West Side but the United States. Just of the fact that all of these different cultures coming together and being able to have the freedom of speech and the freedoms that, the liberties that we get. I think that's so—it's so critical.

[00:59:55] And luckily the Upper West Side, in particular I would say, is a very—is very much about that. It's a very—and I don't think it has—I don't think it's lost sight of that at all in terms of its community. I think the makeup still has that, and even more so now, like people are really joining together.

[01:00:21] And culturally, what I would say is, even though earlier I said that there was maybe a lack of diversity, I think a lot of my customers, you know, originally their families came from whether it was Eastern Europe or whether it was from—and just not necessarily from the United States—it's not like they were—their families have been here for centuries.

Vural: [01:00:58] So, I'm aware of the time. So, I wanted to ask you to reflect a little bit before we say goodbye. I read that you won the 2019 WESTY [West Side Spirit Thanks You] Award.

E. Pai: [01:01:08] Oh, yes [chuckles].

Vural: [01:01:08] From the *West Side Spirit*.

E. Pai: [01:01:10] We had no idea how we got there [chuckles].

Vural: [01:01:14] I thought that might be a way to think about where you are now and how you think about your role in the neighborhood, given that you've just been honored. And congratulations.

E. Pai: [01:01:24] We'll probably continue to do the same thing. You know, we are very much for people and we care about everybody. And, you know, we are known for the store. And if anybody is sick or have something, big things happen, we always try to do something to help them. And beside business—it has nothing to do with the business—we send something to them to make them feel special. And another thing is even—you know, I'm a good cook. I'm probably—everybody thought I should open a restaurant, but anyway. So, I will make a delicious soup that I can send.

[01:02:23] And we are that kind of store. And when customer had to wear some pants or something dressy to go out that evening, we quickly, temporarily, hem up, sewing and move the button and all that right on the spot, because we are all capable doing this, especially my generation, we learned how to do that in school, in junior high school.

[01:02:58] So, we do all kinds of stuff for people and eventually that really is a special service. And I don't know what other stores do, but even if they want to do, they don't have that skill. So, they cannot do it even if they wanted to do it. But we, you know, especially me and my daughter, we both can do it very quickly. And so I think it makes them feel very special and they will come back and back, and also we give them *really* personal attention. I think that's why we are still surviving.

[01:03:54] And at a department store, you go, if you are not a Mrs. Diamond or Mrs. Gold and somebody's buying over the phone a \$100,000 or more—and people rather sell to them over the phone than somebody who comes in and wants to buy one dress or not—and so, you know, when you go to a very specialty store, like Bergdorf Goodman, they are always busy. They don't have time for you because you never bought \$100,000 worth of clothes.

[01:04:38] So, but we give them special attention—all different type of body, type of woman, comes in, and some are beautiful, but some are not, but we're always trying to make them the best as we can. And so I think probably we will continue to do that and that's the only thing, you know, we will survive, because there's so much internet business and so many people get used to that, especially young people. But only thing I can say: our customer's age got a little bit older. And I don't know what that means. We used to have very young people and we still have, but our average customer got a little bit older, and probably they don't buy as much on the internet than young people. So, you know, but we still—we'll do the same thing and—yes.

Vural: [01:06:00] So, Liana, do you have reflections you want to share?

L. Pai: [01:06:04] Yes. So, when Alexis Gilbert—or when they told me we were being honored with a WESTY, it was really a wonderful moment because it felt like to have been a part of the community for so long, to have worked so hard and, you know, continue to work hard to stay vital and present was a huge honor. And I also thought it was really wonderful to honor my mother and my aunt for their contributions as two women who really had no idea what they were doing and—

E. Pai: [01:06:52] No fashion training and no business training also, and didn't know what we were doing and—

L. Pai: [01:07:03] Right. So, when they said that they were honoring us—you know, my aunt's in California and I told her about it, and then my brother came and my kids came and my father came. And my father, you know, he doesn't always come to all the events, but he was really—he said he was really proud to see my mother getting honored for such a huge achievement. And when we—

E. Pai: [01:07:37] I almost didn't come [chuckles]. I didn't have any idea what it's all about.

L. Pai: [01:07:42] And then when we got there and we're surrounded by [Congressman] Jerry Nadler—Jerrold Nadler, right—Eduardo Vilaro [artistic director and CEO], who's from Ballet Hispánico, Barbara Adler [executive director of the Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District from its founding in 1999 to the spring of 2019], who I knew from the store, but also just around, and—oh, my gosh, who was the other person that was—oh, Symphony Space, Kathy Landau [executive director]. But it was such an interesting group of people to be honored. It was people from all different cultural points and landmarks. And that's what my father said, was he said that what he thought was so wonderful about it was that it really was about the community. It was about the people who made the community stronger and the people who really devoted their lives—it's not just about personal gain, it's about helping to make the place where you are better, a better place to be, as a community together.

[01:08:53] And that's what was so exciting about the WESTY Award, because not a lot of—there are a lot of award ceremonies that happen, but how often do you see somebody honoring that? Honoring the community. And in such literal—the ways were so diverse and they were so—some people—there was a reverend who was there with his family. And everybody had just like two minutes to speak.

E. Pai: [01:09:27] Policeman.

L. Pai: [01:09:28] Oh, there was a policeman.

E. Pai: [01:09:28] Policeman.

L. Pai: [01:09:29] He had his two kids and he—

E. Pai: [01:09:32] Running around like a crazy, and [chuckles]—

L. Pai: [01:09:35] And he thanked his wife.

E. Pai: [01:09:38] Wife.

L. Pai: [01:09:38] And it was so sweet. He thanked his wife, who was a nurse, and his wife, who literally you could see, she was just struggling to keep the kids around. But, you know, to have that, to have a policeman, to have somebody who not only is with Ballet Hispánico, who's culturally trying to keep dance alive in New York City, one of the hardest places to keep any kind of creative endeavor alive, to Jerrold Nadler, who is trying to keep our Constitution alive [laughs]. But, you know, and then there was us.

[01:10:27] And it was really great for me to see—to be a part of that. And, you know, I do feel like I've made a difference in people's lives, but for me it was nice to have my mom—

E. Pai: [01:10:42] It is true, yes, it is true and—

L. Pai: [01:10:45] —and aunt honored.

E. Pai: [01:10:46] You know, we have all kinds of customers coming in. Some of them are so depressed. Some of them have a serious problem, personal. They come and they cry and we give

them a very warm feeling and we hug them and, you know, it's just, it's like real life. It's not only we are trying to sell the clothes, but people come in with their problems. But we give them a comforting feeling and you're not the only one—we all have the same problems—and give them lift. There's so many of them, so many. So, we always say we have a good business. We are earning money and we are at the same time making them feel good. And, you know, how many places?—

[01:11:59] You know, when you go to a doctor's office, they are all some kind of an illness. But whenever they come to us—and, you know, they might have something, but they're all going to look beautiful. And they leave the store with the clothing and they are thanking us. So, that's a very good business because you feel, you know, rewarded or something. And no matter who they come—I mean, what kind of people they come in—we always have to make them feel welcome. And when they leave and they feel super special because they got the perfect dress for the event.

[01:12:55] So, it's a good business but then at the same time, it's hard work for sure.

L. Pai: [01:13:01] But like when I told people about what we're doing with you and this oral history, everybody got very excited, like my customers have gotten really excited. And “When is that happening?” and “Where is that? “We want to go, we want to hear, we want to—”

[01:13:23] I think that's the beauty of the Upper West Side and it's the beauty of the people of the Upper West Side—and that hasn't changed. Where you do have that community? And you'd think that we were in a small town, but I guess the Upper West Side is like its own little, small town.

Vural: [01:13:46] So, with that I think I'm going to say thank you and goodbye.

E. Pai: [01:13:50] Oh, thank you.

L. Pai: [01:13:50] Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]