

**John Choi**  
**Narrator**

**Insung Oh**  
**Interviewer**

**January 17, 2011**  
**Brooklyn Center, MN**

John Choi               - **JC**  
Insung Oh               - **IO**

**IO:** This is Insung Oh interviewing John Choi at the Korean Association of Minnesota. Today is January 17, 2011.

Could you, please, state your name?

**JC:** Sure. My name is John Choi, last name C-h-o-i, Ramsey Count attorney.

**IO:** Could you spell, please, your name?

**JC:** J-o-h-n, Choi, C-h-o-i.

**IO:** Your age?

**JC:** Forty years of age, born on June 2, 1970.

**IO:** Where were you born?

**JC:** In Seoul, South Korea.

**IO:** Can you tell in detail about your family members, name and relationship?

**JC:** I'm married and I have a wife. Her name is Youn, Y-o-u-n Choi. Then, I have a young son who is two and a half years of age. His name is Will, W-i-l-l. Then, my father and mother. Peter Choi or [sounds like Chay-Chung-Guan] is my father and my mom is [sounds like Ming Yung Good]. Then, Barbara Choi is her Christian name. Then I have a sister Ann Choi and a brother-in-law Eric, last name Roloff, R-o-l-o-f-f.

**IO:** When did you come to Minnesota and what did drive your parents away from Korea to here in Minnesota?

**JC:** We immigrated to this country when I was three years of age. That was 1973. My father came here to study, get a graduate degree, a Ph.D. He did not end up finishing the degree, but we ended up staying, because, at that time, Korea was not the most stable country in many things. So we ended up staying. My parents were seeking kind of the American dream.

**IO:** Betterment of your family...

[break in the interview]

**JC:** Where did your family live at the very beginning of immigration?

**IO:** Yes.

**JC:** Okay. Our first home in America was at Skyline Towers, 1247 Saint Anthony [Avenue. Saint Paul, Minnesota]. Back then, it used to be called the Saint Anthony Apartments. Now, it's known as the Skyline Towers. It's very well known. It's kind of a low income place. That was our first home. Then, we lived in the student housing at the University of Minnesota, also at Sibley Manor, which is an apartment building along West Seventh Street in Saint Paul. Then, we moved out to Eagan and we lived there for a long time. Then, we moved to Inver Grove Heights. I went to college in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Then, I came back to Saint Paul for law school.

**IO:** In 2009, you kicked off for campaigning for, then, county attorney, at the same place it is now.

**JC:** Yes, Sky, it's a very symbolic place I think for our family history coming here. For me, I think Skyline Towers represents, today, exactly what it we were experiencing and wanting as an immigrant family back in 1973. Today, Skyline Towers consists of many immigrant families from Africa who are living there. So there are many young boys and girls who are just like me, whose parents came here seeking something different and better in this new country and, then, struggling with all of the challenges of being new to the country. That's one of the reasons why I chose to announce my candidacy at Skyline Towers, to tell my kind of immigration story, but, also, to speak to many of the families who are immigrants, to show that really anything in this country is possible.

**IO:** You talked a little bit about your parents here settlement after they came over here. How was their living? How was their life?

**JC:** I think we were a very typical Korean American family. When my father was studying at graduate school, my mom was working during that time. She got a job, probably in 1974 or 1975, at Sperry Univac, which was right by West Seventh Street and Shepherd Road in Saint Paul. So she was working there while my dad was going to school. It's a story really about hard work. Then, my dad ended up not finishing his graduate degree, but then ended up working here at Coca-Cola and then, also, being the reporter for the *Korea Central Daily* newspaper. So, just growing up very typical like

many immigrant families. One thing that I know that's very difficult for all families that come from another country that don't speak English, the language barrier is very difficult. Then, there's a lot of different cultural things that are different. It's never an easy thing to be an immigrant family.

**IO:** Like many Korean American immigrants, they are really anxious to teach their children at the best place, like America.

**JC:** Oh, sure. My parents were very, I think, similar to many Korean immigrants that I see. They stressed that education was really important. Doing well in school was probably the most important priority that my parents had for myself and for my sister. I see that as very typical amongst many Korean immigrants and, sometimes, maybe even too much the way they're stressing the school, putting the pressure on to do well in school. [chuckles] That's very typical. I think Korean immigrants have defined success that you do well in school. You go to college and go to a very good college and, then, do well in college, and, then, good things will happen if you can get a college degree. I think that's very true. That's a very good recipe for any immigrant group coming here to focus on making sure that your children receive not only a high school education but a college education. That was kind of the recipe that many Korean immigrants have fulfilled over the many, many decades.

**IO:** Is that unlike the other immigrants parents? I think, as an undercurrent for their children probably greatly education affected your parents' priority?

**JC:** I think many immigrant cultures stress the education, but the Korean immigrants, I think, really, really stress that. They make it a top, top priority.

**IO:** How does that compared to other immigrant groups?

**JC:** I don't know if I can make that comparison. All I know is the Korean experience, and I know it's very much stressing on the educational achievement.

**IO:** Where did you go for elementary school? How was your early life?

**JC:** My first schooling was at Homecroft Elementary School, which is in Saint Paul, kind of in the Highland Park Area, when we lived at the Sibley Manor Apartments. Interestingly, Sibley Manor Apartments, too, just like the Skyline Towers, is comprised, today, of many, many African immigrant families that live there, as well. When we lived there, Homecroft was the first school. Interestingly, my son, William, he goes to Homecroft right now for preschool.

**IO:** [chuckles]

**JC:** In Saint Paul, they call it Early Childhood Family Education, ECFE. So, today, he goes to Homecroft, which is kind of really interesting. My first school was in Saint Paul

at Homecroft, and, now, my son, William, goes there for ECFE classes with my wife, Youn. So that was my first school.

Then, we moved to Eagan. My parents saved enough money to buy their first house. We grew up in a part of Eagan, which is what I would call the working class part of Eagan. It's down by Cedarvale, which is along Highway 13 and Yankee Doodle Road. It's kind of considered to be like old Eagan where the first kind of development occurred in Eagan. Most of my childhood, I'd say from first grade all the way until about tenth grade, was growing up in Eagan. That neighborhood [was] very predominantly white. In fact, in terms of minority kids growing up in that area, we were kind of the lone Asian family. Maybe there was two Asian families in the immediate neighborhood, and, then, one African American. Otherwise, everybody was white, kind of a middle class type neighborhood. So my first school was Rahn Elementary, R-a-h-n. It still exists today. I went there from first grade up until sixth grade. Then, I graduated and went to Saint Thomas Academy Middle School from seventh to eighth grade. Then, I went to Saint Thomas Academy High School from ninth until twelfth grade. Saint Thomas Academy is located in Mendota Heights, kind of close to where I grew up. When I went to Saint Thomas I think my parents wanted me to get a Catholic school education and, also, probably thought I needed a little bit more discipline. [chuckles] So it was a good school for that.

**IO:** Do you have any interesting story?

**JC:** Of growing up?

**IO:** Yes.

**JC:** Well, I think growing up as a Korean immigrant family, even for kids growing up, your parents come from a different culture, but, then, growing up, you go to school in American culture. So all the time as you grow up, this is very typical for, I think, all immigrant families. I see a lot of that playing out with the Hmong community and all of that stuff. Because you grow up kind of Korean but more American, growing up in society, but your parents are more Korean, it's always a challenge to deal with all of those various issues. Then, just growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, at that time, I think our society has come a really long ways in terms of accepting other cultures. Today, I think, it's much more welcoming in the schools, much more welcoming. In fact, there are some people who seek out diversity. They want their kids to go to a school that has other types of cultures and races. Back then, in the 1970s, early 1980s, no one really talked about that or it wasn't something that was encouraged. I think our society has come a long way. Just growing up, it was never an easy thing. I think awareness that you're also Korean probably didn't happen for me so much until much later in life. I would say not even until after the age of eighteen. Growing up, when you look around and you see everybody who is not Korean, right, and not Asian, I think it's very difficult to have the Korean identity even as a Korean immigrant. I just viewed myself as just like everybody else, but everybody else was not Korean. Those are things growing up in Eagan, Minnesota, where that's kind of what the neighborhood looked like and all of that.

**IO:** What was your dream at an early age in Minnesota?

**JC:** When I was a young boy, I liked to play sports a lot. I loved to play hockey and baseball. As a young child, probably my dreams were to be a professional athlete. [laughter] Then, you realize you're not as good, so that's not going to work out. Those were just kind of the early dreams. I don't think I ever had a dream of being a lawyer or anything along those lines.

**IO:** How was your father's, parents' dream?

**JC:** I think just typically like many, many other Korean immigrant families, they probably would have loved it if I would have become a doctor or some professional, like a lawyer, all of that. That's kind of very typical where they're pushing you most importantly to get good grades, to go to college, and, then, do something professional after that.

**IO:** Was there any conflict?

**JC:** Like many families, growing up, it's never easy, especially when you have differences of culture like that, but nothing very typical of Korean immigrant families. That's the thing when you grow up in this country, in America, there's ways to think and the American culture is very different from Korean culture. Korean culture is so different. [laughter]

**IO:** Very demanding.

**JC:** Very demanding things, yes.

**IO:** We can do everything.

**JC:** That's very true. Yes.

**IO:** So tough for the mentality and the physically. They can actually accomplish all of their dreams.

**JC:** Yes. [chuckles]

**IO:** Is there any special, even if you talk about a little bit cultural duality, cultural barrier, or language barrier? You don't have any special language barrier, probably. My son also came over here at the age of three.

**JC:** Oh, same situation.

**IO:** At the age of four, he started to learn English while he increasingly forgot the Korean language.

**JC:** [laughter] Yes. I can't read Korean. I can understand Korean a little bit, and I can speak a little bit, but not that well, only because we came here when I was three years of age. I think just like many other Korean kids growing up here, they speak a combination of Korean and English when they're communicating with their parents. That was really the only type of Korean that I would speak, so that I could speak with my mom and dad. Otherwise, just growing up in American society, you don't use Korean, so you lose that and you forget that. Then, maybe, you have a wanting or a need to wish you could speak it later in life better. I can't read Korean but I can understand a little bit but not a complicated conversation.

**IO:** At an early age, generally, Korean immigrant parents are teaching their children Korean. Sometimes many years after because of their job and their life's so busy probably in your memory parents have tried to teach you...

**JC:** Oh, yes, my parents made me go to Korean school on Saturday mornings, but I didn't really enjoy it. [laughter] We ended up I think I was able to not go because I didn't want to go to Korean school.

**IO:** Can you tell me about something bad happens, like you're an Asian, you're a Korean? How were your school years? Did you have any special experience?

**JC:** I always remember that as a part of growing up. I think when you are a different culture growing up in any culture, there's always going to be that. I remember that going back all the way since schooling started in kindergarten or first grade or second grade, so all of that. There's always somebody that will call you names because you're Asian. A lot of times, they don't even know the difference between Korean or Filipino or Japanese or Chinese. Especially, I think, in the neighborhood where we grew up in Eagan, many of the families that lived there and the kids that lived there, they didn't really have exposure to other cultures. I think a lot of that was just based upon ignorance. I got through that just like everybody else does. When you grow up, there's always somebody on the playground or somebody who calls you names or whatever it might be based upon how you look or what your culture is. I'm sure that, even today, that exists for some people, but I think times have changed, too. I see that's there's probably less and less of that. Yes, all of that existed all the way through, you know, until, probably, college. Part of that is just kids being kids. Their family experience and all of that wasn't broad-based. That's just what I had to deal with growing up, but I came out okay.

**IO:** When did you first realize (you were a Korean or an Asian)? You talked a little bit about it at the age of eighteen or something when you went to college, you met many Koreans. When did you first feel that you were a Korean or an Asian as a minority?

**JC:** I think when you get older. I can't really pin point it, but I just know it was sometime after eighteen. I think when you become an adult, you start to reflect more on a whole bunch of life issues, one of which is your identity. You reflect on your parents. You reflect on who you are. Then, you start realizing that who you are is not just

American, but there's also a heritage there about being Korean American and all those things. I can't think of any specific moment or point, but you just have more of an understanding and awareness. I remember all of that probably occurred in college or after college.

**IO:** I want to hear about your college life. College is very important.

**JC:** Yes, it is.

**IO:** For someone's future dream or future job.

**JC:** College was a good experience for me. I went to Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Marquette is a Catholic school. It's a large school; it's about, maybe, 10,000, 12,000 students. It's a large, private type of school. It's located in a very challenging neighborhood. It's in the downtown area of Milwaukee. Surrounding Marquette is a lot of poverty.

I got really involved in college. I decided to start an organization focused on helping kids through a tutoring program, kids that were at risk at school who weren't doing well with their reading. So I organized about two hundred students to do tutoring and mentoring for kids who were at this middle school. A lot of these kids were not doing well in school, and it was kind of a tough neighborhood. So I organized that, and it was my first experience, I think, of kind of focusing on doing something like public service and doing something for other people, and doing community leadership. That was a really good experience. I learned a lot and I also recognized in myself that I really like to do that, help other people and to think about the bigger perspective of how do we make our community and society better.

**IO:** I became aware of that. One of Saint Paul's former mayors, I remember, in 2009: I helped a Korean broadcasting videotape as its documentary program about Medtronic's business story. At that time, the mayor, I talked a lot with him. He [the former mayor] has got an artificial heart. He was talking about the national poverty in the 1980s, probably Minnesota also in 1980, across America probably, the policy issues of poverty. But, still, that issue keeps coming up. Probably your college life in addition to your scholarly work....

**JC:** The organization was called Students Enhancing Education. The acronyms were SEE. Because of that, I received a number of leadership awards for the college. There was a number of them, but I can't even remember what they were. Yes,

**IO:** After college at Marquette University, you transferred to Hamline [University, Saint Paul]. Why did you choose that area, change into law?

**JC:** I graduated from Marquette University, undergraduate, with a psychology degree. Then, I went to my first year of law school at Marquette University. I was there for a year, but I knew that after I had spent a year at Marquette—that was five years total—I

wanted to come back home. I got very interested in politics and things like that. I wanted to get involved in the mayor's campaign. I finished my first year of law school at Marquette and, then, I transferred to Hamline. In between, in the summertime, I got a job on a campaign, a mayor's campaign in Saint Paul.

**IO:** What was the name?

**JC:** Bob Long, L-o-n-g. That was 1993. The candidates for mayor at that time were Norm Coleman, and Andy Dawkins, and Bob Long, and there was a Marcia Abner, and John Mannillo. Many people ran that year. Norm Coleman ended up winning.

**IO:** Oh.

**JC:** Yes, in 1993. But I worked on Bob Long's campaign in 1993. That was my first campaign that I got involved with.

One year later, Bob Long, ran for Ramsey County attorney and so did Chris Coleman, the mayor of Saint Paul today. So Bob Long, Chris Coleman, a guy named Tom Fable, and then Susan Gaertner, those were the four people that ran for county attorney. Susan Gaertner won. Then, she's been there for sixteen years. But back in 1994, I worked on the county attorney campaign for Bob Long.

**IO:** That's interesting.

**JC:** Yes.

**IO:** Related to what you do today.

**JC:** If someone told me back in 1994, "One day, you will be the county attorney," I wouldn't have believed them.

**IO:** Still you have many years left to become a lawyer, finish Hamline Law School.

**JC:** I graduated in 1995.

**IO:** After that, what was your professional job?

**JC:** After that, I started at a law firm called Hessian, McKasy, & Soderberg. It was in the IDS Center [in Minneapolis] on the forty-seventh floor. I worked there, too, while I was in law school. I worked there from like November 1994 when I started. I worked as a law clerk all the way through law school. Then, I started there as an attorney after I graduated from law school in 1995. I stayed there till about 1998. There, I was doing a lot of kind of commercial litigation work. I also started developing a practice around government relations and government affairs.

[break in the interview]

**JC:** 1995, I also graduated as a fellow from the University of Minnesota Humphrey School. I was a Humphrey Fellow for 1995. That was a really good experience, too.

**IO:** Why did you choose that?

**JC:** I was very interested in public policy and that fellowship is for people who are interested in public policy or interested in doing something like that maybe later in life. While I was in law school, I applied and I got in as a fellow. A lot of that was because of some of the work that I did back in Milwaukee for Students Enhancing Education. I think that was one of the reasons I was chosen.

**IO:** [unclear]

**JC:** Yes. So I did that.

Then, in 1995, I started at the Hessian, McKasy, & Soderberg law firm. Then, I moved in 1998 to the Kennedy & Graven law firm [in Minneapolis]. I made partner at the law firm at a pretty young age. I was only thirty years of age, which is very young to be a partner. That would have been January 2001, I believe, is when I made partner there. I did a lot of work around representing cities and local units of government up at the Legislature and all of that kind of stuff. I was just kind of in private practice representing many, many different clients doing different types of legal work, the government relations also, some litigation and municipal type of law, until 2005. I had a very successful private practice doing many different things. I was honored by being “Super Lawyer” by [Minnesota] Law and Politics and all of those things. But, you know, those are just things where I had a very successful private practice.

Then, I got a call out of the blue from Mayor [Chris] Coleman in 2005, after he became mayor.

**IO:** Before you became the city director of lawyers, probably before that you as a professional lived a general life. I think that [the city director of lawyers]’s a turning point for your life. Can you tell me about your starting and finishing of that period?

**JC:** During the 1990s after law school, I was always active in politics, doing community type volunteering work, and all of that. Then, I talk a lot about how I got a call in 2005 from the mayor of Saint Paul, Chris Coleman. I had met Chris through all of that active engagement with political stuff. Nineteen ninety-four is probably when I first met him when he was running for county attorney. Then, I got to know him more when he ran for city council in 1997. Then, he won in 1997, and, then, of course, he decided to run for mayor in 2005. It was interesting that I never really expected that he would call me to be city attorney, because I had actually supported his opponent, Rafael Ortega, for the DFL [Democratic Farmer Labor Party] endorsing convention. But, you know, Chris Coleman and I have known each other for a long time, and we maintained a friendship. I think Chris understood why I didn’t support him, because, at that time, when I was in private

practice, my largest client was something called the Ramsey County Regional Rail Authority. They're the ones that do the light rail construction and all those things, and Commissioner Ortega was the chairman of the Rail Authority. So when he told me he was running for mayor and asked me to support him, I said, "Of course, I would." So Chris, I think understood why I would not support him. It wasn't any reflection on him. In fact, it says a lot about him that he would appoint me as his city attorney. So he called and I accepted.

I accepted because I knew that, really, if I didn't take this opportunity that I was being offered by Mayor Coleman, I would never, ever have some opportunity like this again. At that time in my career, I was thirty-five years of age. I was a young partner. I was making a good salary, and I know if I stayed doing what I was doing, my salary would continue to increase, and, then, it would become even a larger pay differential between what I would be making and what you get paid to be the city attorney. I knew whether it was city attorney or to run for the Legislature or to do anything in politics or public service, if I didn't take that opportunity to do that type of public service, I would never have that opportunity again or it would not make sense. Do you see what I'm saying? At that time in 2005, I was just very newly married and we didn't have any children, so really no financial obligations to think about. [chuckles] So I just jumped at that chance, and I knew that this was a great opportunity to do something that I was passionate about, which is to serve the public. Remember the story I told you about Milwaukee when I organized the students for the tutoring program? I really enjoyed always the opportunity to do public type leadership, to try to organize people, and try to do something good. So I took this opportunity. Being a city attorney and doing a good job in that role, very much, I think changed my life to get me focused on trying to continue on in doing public service. That's why I ran for this position, because of that experience.

**IO:** What were your great accomplishments for four years as a city attorney?

**JC:** When I look back, I think the biggest accomplishment that I had was to get people in the office, not only in the city attorney's office but, also, even around in the criminal justice system, to maybe think about things differently. I think my tenure as city attorney people will look back on and say that I was able to change a lot of things and focus of the office, one of which is to really champion on some of these kind of lower level crimes, to think about justice and public safety in a different perspective, one of which was to utilize like diversion programs. Instead of sending someone to jail for two or three days for a minor offense, why not try to do something where we get them to stop the behavior, and, then, not do it again? That's the most important thing. But, sometimes, the traditional approach of we have a consequence for somebody and, then, we send them to jail for two or three days, that doesn't always work. It might work in the sense that we're punishing that person, but the criminal justice system is not just about punishment. It's also about rehabilitation, and I think the most important thing is so that people stop their behavior and, then, don't do it again. A lot of times, what I see are people that come in the system there might be chemical dependency or mental health issues or they're very poor. A lot of times, what's happening is because of the fact that they're poor; it's driving some bad life decisions. Then, also, just the background of a lot of people that come into the criminal

justice system, they're cognitive skills in determining what is right and what is wrong and thinking through consequences that if I do this, I'm going to hurt someone else. If I steal something from somebody, there's a victim, that I'm stealing from that person. They're not necessarily thinking like that. They're thinking I want this today. I want it and I'm going to get it. There's things that we can do, I think, to try to intervene and get people to get better cognitive skills so that they understand what they're doing is wrong.

**IO:** Recidivism...

**JC:** Yes, that's a big thing for me is to try to stop recidivism. I think a lot of days, we don't spend enough time on that. We spend too much time thinking about what's easiest and, sometimes, what the easiest thing to do is just to put people in jail.

**IO:** How has your college area, psychology major, affected?

**JC:** I think the psychology major was interesting in the sense that it gives you an experience to look at things from a perspective that there's things that could be attributing things to behavior in their certain pathology or things that people suffer from. So you understand, I think, that aspect of it all. Sometimes, I think, we are always wanting things to be so logical, but that psychology background gives you an understanding that people suffer from various different things and things of that nature. Yes.

**IO:** Can you tell me about issues like during your professional job, including a city attorney...? I think you are in that diversity in American culture. You probably met a lot of immigration issues. What was your thought? What was the most important immigration issue, if any?

**JC:** Like immigration issues, not so much every day. I think if anything, it's mostly about my election and the campaign that I ran. Because I ran for office and because I was successful, I run into people all over our community, and many of the people that are just so excited about my election tend to be people who are immigrants themselves or really embrace the concept that America is a country of immigrants. I think people who have that strong belief that America our strength is our immigrant population and they accept that we're changing as a country, people like that, or people who themselves are immigrants, whether they came from Russia or they came from China, Africa, a lot of people, once they learn about my background, they're very excited about my being in public office and, then, my running for county attorney. In fact, I think that was one of the neatest things that I experienced as a candidate. I recognized that my candidacy meant so much not only to people who, like me, were immigrants but, also, people who have this very strong belief that this country is a country of immigrants. I think it was very satisfying for many to see somebody who was not born in this country succeed in kind of an electoral way, because that's, in a lot of ways, a validation of who we are as a community.

**IO:** I think you had a good speech at the last October Korean Service Center, that it's the most important for Korean American immigrants, that the Korean Service Center has

now became one of the top five across Korean Americans in the United States; that's the service program for immigrants. I think you got a good speech at that time. What was your speech content?

**JC:** My message was, I think a lot of times, especially Korean American immigrants, we have that model of doing well in school, but, ultimately, a lot of times that leads to seeking a professional career that's more private focused, whether it's, maybe, being a lawyer or a doctor or a business person, something along those lines. But, a lot of times, I see a lot of very successful Korean families and their children grow up to be mostly in the private sector. My message there was to encourage more participation amongst Korean immigrants and Asian immigrants, not only in professions that would be more public in nature but, also, just getting involved and participating in civic life. I think as immigrants when you're a new immigrant, typically, families will be very focused on the survival mode.

**IO:** Yes.

**JC:** They'll be very focused on just educating their children. But participating civically in the future of our country and to actually take ownership of our country, I really believe that America belongs to all people, all citizens, and the citizens in this country are very diverse. A lot of times, the people that are participating, a lot of times the new immigrants don't feel that connected. A lot of times, it's because where they come from maybe politics was corrupt or maybe because someone like them had no say in government. Here, in America, it's very, very different. You can be anyone. You can be the president of the United States. You can be the governor. Anything is possible politically in this country. In fact, we are a democracy, so it's about the people. When I think about who, as county attorney, my boss [is], well, that's the people. [chuckles] I work for the people. People don't work for me, but I work for the people. That's a concept of American democracy. What I'd like to see is more and more Asian immigrants become more involved civically in the future and think of themselves that they have a stake in the future of this country. So they should be more involved politically. Whether they're a Democrat or a Republican, it doesn't matter that they're more engaged in participating, that they're more engaged in volunteering. I don't see as many Asian Americans as there should be volunteering for just anything, like the American to volunteer for the Red Cross, to give blood, to volunteer as a tutor after school to help kids who are struggling with school. I would like to see more and more Asians become more involved in the future and have a stake in our community.

**IO:** For their own representation.

**JC:** Not only for their own representation, but just for the future of our country. Our country is only as good as people are willing to participate and care for it.

**IO:** Yes.

**JC:** So my message is that in an American type of democracy, all people really have a responsibility for the greater good to participate. Obviously, people should participate so that the Asian American community is represented, but, also, what I'm suggesting is for the benefit of our country. I'd like to see more Asian Americans, all people, participating actively and caring about American democracy and where we're going from here, because the future is really up to us as citizens. That's the beauty of this country.

**IO:** That speech was right before your election.

**JC:** Yes.

**IO:** After the election, you came up into Korean Association's general conference, general meeting, and also, on January 5th, there was a swearing in. At that time, you were with us speaking about your parents. You said that they didn't even think about that you could be a county lawyer, that's a big history, I think, for a Korean American in the U.S. Can you tell me about that?

**JC:** Yes, I think when most immigrant families come to the United States, the concept that I just articulated about the American democracy, that it really belongs to all citizens, those are things that we're not really thinking about. [laughter] We're thinking mostly about just surviving, number one. Right? In fact, many immigrants who come here come here as refugees. If you look at the African immigrants, you look at many immigrants like the Hmong, they're coming here because they're trying to escape something very horrible, a horrible situation. The Korean immigrant experience is a little bit different here in Minnesota. It's not so much a refugee type of situation. It's more seeking a better life. But, still, you're very focused on the many challenges of living in a new homeland. You don't speak the language as your primary language. There are many customs and cultural differences that the majority culture has that you don't know about or that you're soon learning. Then, the challenges of even trying to educate your own children in a different culture, in a different system, is very, very overwhelming. I think a lot of times, people are so focused on that, the thought that your son or your child would become something in a very important role in government, is I think difficult for all immigrant families to grasp. But, in a lot of ways, the fact that it's possible in this country that someone like me could become elected as Ramsey County attorney, that's what makes people feel so good about this country. In fact, I think this is really not possible like, as an example, in Korea. If someone from another Asian country moved to Korea, right, and wanted to become the chief prosecutor, elected prosecutor, could that be possible? Probably not.

**IO:** No, no.

**JC:** But that's the case for most countries. For some reason, in America and some other countries, like maybe Canada and other places, it is possible. I think that's the beauty of this country and why my particular election was very captivating for people who have been here for many, many years. It says so much about our country.

**IO:** Many Korean immigrants, Korean generations, have a shadow of Korean War. In Minnesota, there are many, many Korean War veterans. With them, how did you experience with them?

**JC:** One of the most interesting experiences that I had as a candidate and campaigning for Ramsey County attorney was, actually, an accidental meeting that I had with Korean War veterans. It was the day of the election, and I happened to be just kind of driving around looking for things to do during the Election Day to do some campaigning. I came across a meeting of the Korean War veterans that was happening in Roseville, just by accident. There was a whole room full of people, but it was a very special moment, where during their meeting, I was able to actually speak. One of the wives of the commanders went up and talked to her husband and said, “You should let him speak.” So I was able to do that. It was really nice, because I was able to thank them for their service in Korea and, also, suggest and tell them that I probably wouldn’t be standing right there at that moment in time but for their service in Korea. I think that was a very meaningful statement and observation that meant a lot to a lot of people. Then, I got a chance to talk to them after their meeting. A lot of them actually had voted for me. It was about two o’clock in the afternoon on Election Day. After having some of those conversations where people had said that they had already voted for me, I think I had that pretty solid or very sure feeling that I was going to win around two o’clock in Election Day. Yes.

**IO:** You had a chance of coincidence.

**JC:** Yes.

**IO:** In 2009, you got award from the International Municipal Lawyers Association. What was the award about?

**JC:** This probably goes to your question number twenty or whatever, about the same director of city attorney’s office. I talked a little bit about it in my previous answer, about just kind of changing and reforming the system and making some changes. I was really proud of being recognized actually by all of my city attorney colleagues in the United States and Canada as being the top city attorney in North America in 2009. I got that award [Joseph Mulligan Award] primarily because of the work that I talked about, about trying to find innovative solutions to get people who are coming into the criminal justice system on low level offenses not to come back again, you know that whole issue or recidivism in addressing that. So one of the things that I’m really proud of—you asked me what I’m most proud of—is that type of approach and having success at it.

One was that driver diversion program where we’re helping lots of people who are driving without a valid driver’s license. Instead of trying to throw all those individuals in jail, which does us no good, we try to help them get their license back and pay back their fines that they owe to government and, then, get them a license as quickly as possible so that they can drive to work and do those things instead of taking a different perspective. That was a very different way of looking at things.

**IO:** I think you may talk about more campaigning. During the campaigns, a lot of happenings, staff members hard time campaigning. You appreciate the celebration of election night and your victory. Can you talk a little bit more about campaigning?

**JC:** It's a long, long campaign. In fact, it probably started back in April of 2009 for an election that was occurring in November 2010. So it was a long, long process. Actually, the campaign started from two of my friends who kind of tried to recruit me to run on Facebook when I was city attorney. So they started up a Facebook site. But it really took off. Within one weekend, it had over hundreds of supporters, and, then, over time, it just continued to grow. That was an interesting experience of just trying to put together a campaign. I was always very overwhelmed by the fact that there were so many people who wanted to help. A lot of those individuals that really wanted to help were people that were very captivated by the fact of what my background was, not just because I was qualified for the position, not because I was a city attorney and the things that I had accomplished, but some of my support was, clearly, because their spirits were kind of uplifted and kind of motivated by the fact that I was an immigrant to this country seeking higher office and that I was someone who was different.

There was a lot of people who just because of that got very involved in my campaign and I think that speaks a lot to kind of where we're at as a society, where that is something that is valued by people. In addition to that, there was a lot of people that got very involved in the campaign, like my parents. My mom and dad spent a lot of time working on the campaign, putting up lawn signs and things like that. I think that was really wonderful to see. Remember, we talked a lot about how immigrants come here and there focused mostly on just surviving and doing what you need to do to raise your family, but you don't think too much about connecting to the political process or the civic or the community stuff? It was great to see my mom and dad become very involved in the campaign, to put up lawn signs all throughout the county. So it was an incredible amount of work. I, also, saw that in the broader Korean community here in Minnesota and, also, around the country. Here in Minnesota, there were a lot of people in the Korean American community that were very captivated by my campaign, because my personal experience and who I was spoke to them exactly in terms of what their American experience was of coming over here and having all if the various challenges that all immigrants face, but, then, also being Korean. It was great to see so many people help, participate, whether it was through coming to a fund raiser or putting up lawn signs. There were some people who went out and helped campaign and did door knocking and all that kind of stuff. Then, beyond the Minnesota Korean American population, I got a lot of support from Korean Americans nationally. That's because there have been some Korean Americans who have already run for really, really important offices, like Sam Yoon, who ran for...

**IO:** Boston mayor

**JC:** Yes, the mayor.

**IO:** From outside of Minnesota. He[Sam Yoon] is the second generation. Is there any encouragement from them?

**JC:** Yes, it was great. Because they had already run for a very high-profile race, they had developed a group of other Korean Americans throughout the country that were very interested in supporting Korean American individuals who were running for important positions. So Sam Yoon, who was a former council member in Boston ran for mayor in Boston, he helped me get connected to a number of those individuals, and we raised a very good amount of money just from people that I had never met before, people that just because I was Korean American and they knew I had a good chance of winning, they wanted to help me get over the top. So that was really nice to see.

[someone else speaks – unclear]

**IO:** I think I put that kind of story on my Facebook at that time, after the election, that sixteen people, seventeen people, across America, Korean second generation, got into the public office. What was thinking about...

[break in the interview]

**JC:** There are so many other Korean Americans that won their elections. I think that is really great. It says a lot about how far the Korean American community has come in terms of being engaged in our civic and political aspects of our country. It was really great to see that. I think there will be more and more of that happening. In fact, there was one particular candidate [Steve Kim] who didn't make it, but he was running for attorney general in the State of Illinois, which is a really hard race to run in a statewide election. I think that will happen at some point where we'll see a Korean American get elected at a much larger level.

**IO:** Yes.

You got in your future plan: City attorney is different from county attorney. What is your plan in the future for community?

**JC:** The job that I was elected to do to be county attorney is a really, really important job. It's not as high profile as some other positions like the Minnesota attorney general or things like that, but it's a really, really important job. My goal is just to do a really good job in that role, and to make change in the criminal justice system. It takes a long time. It's hard to get something done in one, two, or three, or even four years. In fact, it takes many years, many terms, I think. I'm going to be really focused on just trying to get the job done and do a lot of the things I talked about during the campaign, to try to address some of the recidivism that we have amongst juvenile crime and try to get kids who are getting into trouble on the right track in life, to focus on domestic violence and do everything that we can to prevent it and to hold the people who break the law accountable for that. The list goes on and on of all the things that I want to accomplish. I think the most important priority for me is just to do a good job. Typically, the person that has

been elected to county attorney, they tend to do it for a long time. So I don't know what the future will hold for me, but, all I know, is that I'm just kind of committed to doing a good job and, then, whatever happens with future opportunities, they'll come about because I've done a good job in what I'm doing today.

**IO:** I think in our Korean immigration history, your winning of your county attorney election is a lot of significances for your family and you and our Korean community and furthermore, to Asian Americans, you know. Your ceremony on January 5th swearing in, at that place, what were you thinking about. What was your thought?

**JC:** It was just a really neat day. I was actually a little bit surprised by so many people that showed up when I took my oath of office. The whole third floor was packed with people that were supporters of myself and Matt Bostrom [Ramsey County Sheriff]. It was really neat to see that. I'm very aware that that there's a historic aspect of my swearing in. I know all of those things. But I think what was probably just most on my mind was just the enormous responsibility that I have of being the elected Ramsey County attorney. So my thoughts were probably mostly on getting ready to get down and get to work, start getting to work on those things that I wanted to do. I was kind of relieved when all of the swearing in stuff was all over with, because that's very ceremonial. Then, I got to focus on the job. [chuckles] What's most rewarding is just to start thinking about that. That's why I worked so hard during the campaign was to get the honor and the privilege to be able to do the job and to serve the public.

**IO:** Do you have any last words? You can talk about your parents. What is the significance of speaking as an interviewee to this oral history?

**JC:** Sure. I know with respect to my personal story, I'm glad that I had the opportunity to kind of tell it a little bit and I hope, in a lot of ways, I really believe that my story, even though part of my story is about being elected as Ramsey County attorney, in a lot of ways, though, my story really is just like anybody else's story of kind of that immigrant experience. I think there's a lot of commonality amongst immigrants who come from anywhere whether it's Russia, or Africa, or wherever it might be. There are differences, lots of differences, but there are also many, many commonalities. What I predict in the next ten, twenty, hundred years is that there will be people just like me, somebody who was born in Africa or someone born somewhere else who will be elected to high positions in the State of Minnesota and not just here in the state but across the country. We'll one day look back upon the wave of immigrants; I came here to this country in 1973. During that time period, there were many, many Asian immigrants that have come to this country. Then, we saw in Minnesota a high influx of Southeast Asians, Hmong immigrants coming to this country. I really think a hundred years from now, people will be looking back on that and thinking of it as just a part of our history and nothing more or nothing less. Today, when we look back on Minnesota history, we think of the Irish immigrants. We think of the German immigrants. We think of the French immigrants like in Frog Town [Saint Paul neighborhood] and all of those things. Well, there will be very similar types of stories and neighborhoods that will exist in Saint Paul based upon kind of our immigrant story and will look very, very different, I think, in the future as well.