

Yong Interview 4/9/2013

**Oral History and Community Memory: AMST 1903G**

**Interviewer:** Sophie Duncan

**Interviewee:** Samnang Yong

**Location:** Science Center, Brown University

**Date:** 9 April 2013

**Summary:** Samnang Yong describes his experience fishing in Mashapaug pond as young boy, having recently moved to Providence as a refugee from Cambodia. He also shares his impressions of how the pond has changed overtime.

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[Beginning of Interview]

**Duncan:** So I'm Sophie Duncan and It is April 9th, 2013 and we are sitting in the SciLi.

**Yong:** My name is Samnang Yong. I grew up in Providence.

**Duncan:** Alright. Great, so you grew up in Providence. Where in Providence did you grow up?

**Yong:** Acutally around Plain Street near Eddie Street. We stayed there for like a year or two and then moved on to Potter Avenue. That's when we started going to the pond. We were refugees and didn't speak English or anything like that back then. And I think just coming off a war zone area, I guess refugees, so we just kind of like went on our own just you know, fishing. That's how it came about I guess.

**Duncan:** So what country were you from and how old were you when you came?

**Yong:** Cambodia. I was 9 or 10 years old.

**Duncan:** When you came, do you remember what your first impressions were of Providence, and if you remember, the pond?

**Yong:** Well we came in November so it was really cold and I think it was snowing. So it was kind of my first time seeing snow also. And we were going to different churches because we were sponsored here. We didn't have any clothes or anything like that so we were just doing a lot of random things, meeting new people. You know, like, I think as a kid, and probably also and the experience before I came, I didn't really think much about my surroundings I guess. I don't know what to think about, definitely it was a better place than we just came from. I think that's it. What's the question again?

**Duncan:** I was just asking what your first impressions were when you came.

**Yong:** Yes.

**Duncan:** And so you said you went fishing in the pond. Did you go fishing with your parents or was it just you?

**Yong:** With my sister. I don't think we'd gone to school or maybe it was an after school thing. She actually remembers more than I did. I met with her this weekend just to talk more about it to refresh my memory. And I think I guess just after school and after walking around a lot on Potter Ave just seeing different things and we saw the pond. I think coming from a country where we were just always fishing in our backyard. We don't expect anything, we just go and fish for food and that was like extra food, whatever.

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**Duncan:** How close to the pond did you live?

**Yong:** It's probably four blocks from the pond. So it's pretty close.

**Duncan:** And can you tell me at all about the neighborhood that you grew up in and maybe how it changed over time.?

**Yong:** Well definitely it's changed a lot since I've been there. And now of course I still have some friends that live there so I go visit. It's definitely like a different view for me now as an adult seeing it. Again, definitely for us it's amazing when we first came. I didn't realize until later that it was the worst neighborhood. There is probably like a lot of drugs, a lot of craziness back there. Eventually we moved out once we kind of pick up and go off on our own and not be dependent. I think were on food stamps or some kind of money. We were supported by somebody that sponsored us. Like I didn't know any of this when I was younger. But definitely change wise, visually, I'm an artist so I think even as a kid I see more a visual thing. Everything to me is always beautiful. Once you, as I get older, I've definitely realized it's not a good place to live.

**Duncan:** Do you still live near the pond?

**Yong:** I live in Cranston now.

**Duncan:** Oh O.K.

**Yong:** Actually near Roger Williams Park.

**Duncan:** Oh.

**Yong:** Not that far actually from the ponds.

**Duncan:** Can you tell me a little bit about your art? [5:00]

**Yong:** Yes. Well growing up was hard to, I had to take ESL classes, you know, because I didn't speak any English. I always had this feeling I always want to take art classes, but I couldn't take them because I had to take the ESL classes. Finally when I moved to Cranston I think in 9th grade, I was in one of the ESL classes and the teacher came in and asked if anyone wanted to take art classes. The ESL class was an extra class, like one of those free classes kind of. I'm like, "Yes. Me. I do." And it just kind of took off. Like, I did really well and won a lot of awards. Then I went into high school, and kind of made history in Cranston. I won 14 gold keys or something like that and usually people just get one. And I won some kind of award where Claudia [unclear] She was the state rep. Then I got invited to meet Ronald Reagan but because nobody speak English I didn't get to go of course. I work hard. I worked like in high school, I did my drawing and painting until like midnight or 2a.m. And I got into RISD, I got

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into a bunch of art schools and RISD gave me like a lot of money so I went there. I've just been doing art since. I spent my senior year in Italy and then after that I worked at different places, art related. Actually I just came off of Paranorman, it's a stop motion animation feature film. It just came out last year.

**Duncan:** Oh cool.

**Yong:** It's a fun project.

**Duncan:** What kind of medium do you use for your art.

**Yong:** Oil. I trained traditionally, I'm more of a drawer than a painter but I love painting definitely always try to include drawing into my paintings. And my subject matter is always war, politics, discrimination, religion, and then homosexuality.

**Duncan:** One moment, do you hear that guy speaking?

**Yong:** I do.

**Duncan:** I'm just going to pause this really quick and ask them if there is a different room we can move to. Just I would hate for that to be the background of the entire interview.

**Yong:** Yes.

[Interview paused while people are asked to be quiet]

**Duncan:** So you were just talking about the theme for your art.

**Yong:** Yes. That's what I'm doing that way. Also I think before I get to all of that, I think that growing up like in a pretty much, when I was four the Khmer Rouge took over. So during that time there was a lot of running and escaping. So there's like no toys and stuff. So I think I learned how to make my own toy and sculpt out of clay. I think that's kind of like, also an introduction to being a creative person also. That helped a lot. I have exhibitions at different galleries. But since I've been working I haven't get a chance to do that between work and making all that work is pretty hard. It's a lot of time.

**Duncan:** What work do you do?

**Yong:** Well, I'm not working right now on a project. I was working for Hasboro toy for a while. Then I got into film on the more animation side. I work with a friend who knew about a project in Oregon and I decided to go out and work on a project. It's actually pretty fun. I was actually a character's painter in Coraline. Have you seen Coraline? It's very cute. Yes. So that was a project. After that I went out to Salt Lake City to work on a different project called Legend of

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Santa Clause. That's another stop movement animation. I was a lead painter there. Then I went back to Portland and worked on Paranorman. Right now I'm looking for work. [10:00]

**Duncan:** It sounds like you do quite a bit.

**Yong:** I do and it is always random. When I first came out of school I work as an interior designer. But all kinds of jobs. It's all fun jobs, and art-related, which you know is what I love, so.

**Duncan:** So how did you get connected with Polly. Sorry not Holly. Holly and the Urban Pond Procession.

**Yong:** I met Holly, I don't know. Over ten years ago I believe. I met them [unclear] her twins were like really, probably six or seven and now they are going to college which is ridiculous. And we worked on a project together. And it was similar with also a community project. I think she decided on the Cambodian community, which I think it was called dream, or wish dream. We did that and it went really well. We've been just keeping together as artists. You know, she's an artist. I think we started to do another project together, just an exchange of paintings where I do a painting and send it to her and she responds to my painting back and forth. It kind of ended when I was traveling a lot and I was always in different states or countries. And we always kind of kept in touch, so we're very close friends. And it just came alive again. She sent me an invitation about it when the project first started when I was in Portland. So I always kind of know what she's doing and when I came back and we had lunch a couple of weeks ago. It's when I made that connection, oh I remember that pond, that's where I went fishing when I first came to the country.

**Duncan:** And so have you ever participated in the Urban Pond Procession?

**Yong:** No. I've been away. This is my first year back here. I've been away for like seven or eight years or something.

**Duncan:** Oh wow.

**Yong:** Yes.

**Duncan:** And then so you went and you returned to the pond you said, so what was that like?

**Yong:** [unclear] I went with Holly so it was quite beautiful. There was an actual entrance. I didn't even know it's a park because of like the entrance going through that Job Lot parking lot. Right, you've been?

**Duncan:** Yes.

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**Yong:** And I'm like, "Holly are you sure we can go in?" Because there were just like the signs, 'no trespassing'. And it is really a beautiful pond. She mentioned its the first pond that's around Rhode Island or something.

**Duncan:** It's one of the biggest ones.

**Yong:** Yes, the biggest ones. It's not a manmade pond.

**Duncan:** Like the Roger Williams Parks ones.

**Yong:** Yes, yes. It's the entrance that I go in is at the other end of the pond where the train track is, where the giant company that putting all the stuff out there.

**Duncan:** So is that where you went fishing?

**Yong:** Yes, yes, yes, because that end is closer to Potter's Avenue.

**Duncan:** And you lived on Potter's Avenue?

**Yong:** Yes, yes.

**Duncan:** Did you go back to the area where you'd formerly gone fishing?

**Yong:** Recently?

**Duncan:** Yes.

**Yong:** I mean, because of the Asian Market, I go to the Asian Market for shopping stuff. I definitely drive by there. I see my old house. See different people there.

**Duncan:** Yes.

**Yong:** [unclear].

**Duncan:** And when you were growing up, were you aware at all of what the Gorham site was? Or was that not even on your radar?

**Yong:** No. That was not on my radar at all. We just, from my perspective at that age, it was just like a big building, we did not know it was a factory of any kind or anything like that. Because the pond back then, it was pretty wild too. Just, the trees were bigger. Now I think it just looks more dead and dry or something. Before it seemed more lush. Maybe because I was younger and they were a lot bigger.

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**Duncan:** And when you returned to the pond, were any of the parks there that were there now, or were those new when you returned?

**Yong:** I'd never been to that entrance where I went with Holly. I don't know. I definitely didn't know that was a park. It just was a pond. I think coming from Cambodia, a pond is always a community kind of thing. Like, everyone goes and does the same thing. It's shared. It's not like it's just somebody's pond [15:12]. So we just kind of go, "Oh, you know, water. There must be fish." So we went fishing

**Duncan:** Did you know of other people who would go fishing?

**Yong:** I do. But they all like move out different places now. Yes. Like sometimes we run into people but my sister and I we would go there a lot. I just saw her and we decided I think it was a couple of years we would go there and just fish. And we didn't even having fishing poles. I didn't even know the kind of fishing pole that exists here with the reel. We'd just go there, like break a long branch, and put a hook on the stick, yeah.

**Duncan:** So can you tell me what kinds of fish you caught and how successful this was?

**Yong:** We probably was like the first people to fish there, like I think there were a lot of fish. Usually I think, it's just like Sun fish or [unclear]. Is there a fish called [unclear]?

**Duncan:** Sure.

**Yong:** They are kind of like sun fish. There is, there is.

**Duncan:** I don't know fish very well.

**Yong:** I know in the summer there are a lot of [unclear]. There may be catfish. I'm not sure. I thought there were but I talked to my sister and she said that she don't remember that. She remembered that I caught a huge snapping turtle. And then [unclear] I was like, ah yes, I remember that.

**Duncan:** What did you do with the turtle?

**Yong:** We freaked out because we'd never seen a turtle. We put it back in. Tried to get the hook off and put it back in. They look more viscous than the regular turtle.

**Duncan:** How big was the turtle?

**Yong:** It was big. It was just big. It's actually a pretty disgusting thing, thinking back. Just like back slobber. If we had turtle and we caught it. Just like dirty black dirt all everywhere. [unclear] giant snapping turtle.

**Duncan:** Where did you go to school in the neighborhood?

**Yong:** I first went to Webster Elementary School. I started in fourth grade because of my age and then I went out to Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and then [unclear] and then we moved to Cranston and went to Parkview in Cranston and then Cranston East. It's quite a difference when we moved here. You can see they are totally different neighborhood and people, you know.

**Duncan:** When you talked to your sister, what her memories of the pond?

**Yong:** The memories tend to combine with, "What were we thinking? It's so crazy. How could we not know that?" Or like, "I can't believe we did that. Like it's so gross." But we had a good laugh out of it because growing up she's always with, we do a lot of things together in the camp. Like we were selling anything to the Thai military in the camp on the border. Vietnamese, there was a lot of Vietnames during the war in Cambodia also for some reason. We were selling either rice or salt to them. So we had a connection there just always doing things together so when we came her we kind of did the same thing. She always kind of, she's older, like watch over me, take care of me.

**Duncan:** Did you ever go swimming in the pond?

**Yong:** I don't think so. I don't remember.

**Duncan:** Also just going back to the fishing in the pond, I didn't catch how often did you say you did that?

**Yong:** I think we, I would say like three or four times a week after school. That was like, we didn't know what else to do. You don't speak the language, we had to go play. We don't know anybody, you know. So when we found this pond it was pretty much like [unclear] go fishing and bring it to my mom. [20:00]

**Duncan:** Did your parents ever ask where it came from?

**Yong:** No. It also, we found this herbs. We thought it was like basil. And it was [unclear] basil and we used to eat that also. I don't actually remember the taste but talking to my sister it kind of tasted like Asian basil, Thai basil, like mint like smell to it. That was used to make a sauce or dip for the fish. Yes.

**Duncan:** So it was a totally pond grown meal.

**Yong:** Yes.

**Duncan:** So now have you learned about the pollution from the Gorham site?

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**Yong:** Afterward like, I don't know how many years after we moved to Cranston once we understand English and all that stuff and driving by it and stuff, it was like wow that does not look [unclear]. It just looked really dirty and pretty bad. We realized like wow what are we doing.

**Duncan:** What did it look like?

**Yong:** It just looked like more rundown and more trash back there. It wasn't like when we first came and like even the fence was more rusted and dirty. It was just very different. It changed a lot from when first got there. I don't know what happened. Time or people didn't clean or just more people, refugees move in. Or more people fishing and just get it dirty, don't clean up after themselves.

**Duncan:** Was there a refugee community in your neighborhood?

**Yong:** Yes. In the '80s it was a big refugee camp from Cambodia that came to Providence, Rhode Island.

**Duncan:** So do you know how many other families lived in your neighborhood were from Cambodia or were also refugees?

**Yong:** Quite a lot. They all grew up in Providence and now they moved. I think in mid '80s, late '80s people start moving to Cranston once they start to understand the language and be able to make it on their own. Start getting jobs and people start buying houses and moving away from the area.

**Duncan:** When you lived there did you ever go to Murphy Trainor Park or JT Owens Ball Field?

**Yong:** Is that on the other side of the park? I actually worked in a jewelry company that's in there in high school. I think just a part time job or something. My friend in Providence was like, "you want to work?" And I'm like, "Yeah. I could use some money." And then I think it was like two dollars an hour or something. God it was ridiculous. It was something like that. Six, Seven dollars. It's ridiculously bad. And I think my other sister's husband later worked in Gorham.

**Duncan:** Really?

**Yong:** Yes.

**Duncan:** So you have another sister?

**Yong:** Yes.

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**Duncan:** Is she older or younger?

**Yong:** She's the oldest.

**Duncan:** So how many siblings do you have?

**Yong:** Just four. A brother, two sisters.

**Duncan:** So did your other siblings go fishing with you?

**Yong:** No. My brother was doing his own thing. I don't know. They didn't go. We were the youngest so we just ventured out and kind of do our own thing. They had other things to do. Maybe trying to feed the family. I don't know.

**Duncan:** That was your job I thought.

**Yong:** Yes.

**Duncan:** And so when he worked at Gorham do you know what he did?

**Yong:** No.

**Duncan:** And so when you worked at the jewelry company, how close was it to the pond?

**Yong:** It's actually like I think kind of the side of the building is also. Like you can see the pond from the building.

**Duncan:** What streets were it at?

**Yong:** No idea. It's like a long time ago.

**Duncan:** Do you know if it's still there?

**Yong:** I think it is. It might be still there.

**Duncan:** And when you worked there would you ever go outside and I mean use that as a more recreational passive use of the pond? [25:00]

**Yong:** Maybe. I know my friend and I at like break time and stuff would go out there, play, and do something. We liked greens. We liked trees. So I think it was those trees we liked to go under it and play around in the shade, some things like that.

**Duncan:** Where was your friend from?

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**Yong:** He's in Seattle now. He's from Cambodia also. Is that what you mean?

**Duncan:** Yes. After, so now after you've seen the pond and it looked more run down, do you know at all why that could be?

**Yong:** I'm not quite sure. I think it's just, I don't know. It seemed like every year I drive by that road it just looked dirtier and dirtier. It's like one of those roads where it's almost dead. Not many traffic go through it, you know. So it just kind of, nobody really pay attention to it.

**Duncan:** Since you live now near the Roger Williams Parks Pond do you see any sort of comparison or contrast between the Roger Williams Parks Ponds and Mashapaug Pond?

**Yong:** Yes. Just knowing what I know. It's a park. I think it's just more taken care of. It's just more beautiful. More people go and relax. Now the place is more just, I mean it doesn't look anything like a park. I mean we had to go through woods to get in there. So I don't think anyone was here [unclear] to go in there. Do that entrance right. If this is the entrance where Holly is, we're at this end. And it's like a train track and two main roads here and it just kind of that space between there it always looked kind of sketchy, like even now. It's just run down.

**Duncan:** So do you think if it were more welcoming it could be more of a used park area?

**Yong:** Oh definitely, it's beautiful. I think for that whole area, definitely people would go enjoy that area.

**Duncan:** And as an artist, what do you see what's the potential for art to make a difference in terms of the pond, especially considering the work that UPP been's doing?

**Yong:** Definitely it's good where can just go and relax and sit and look at the water. Bring their kids and just hang out, if it's clean you know. I think a lot of people there now are like Latinos, this is just my thinking. Like were from a tropical area. So any things like that it's just really nice to go sit down and relax and break up the neighborhood where I think it can be stressful with a lot of concrete and everything just almost run down, you know. So I think it would just be a nice place just for people to go and relax, you know, even just after work or something like that.

**Duncan:** When you were younger and went down to the pond, were you ever able to go around it?

**Yong:** No, that was the only spot we know. You know, we pretty much had to avoid people, houses and stuff because we don't know them.

**Duncan:** And what year did you come to America?

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**Yong:** November, 1981.

**Duncan:** How old were you when you moved to Cranston?

**Yong:** I went to Parkview. That's like in ninth grade so I don't know thirteen? Twelve? Thirteen?

**Duncan:** So in Cranston did you ever see Spectacle Pond?

**Yong:** No.

**Duncan:** O.K.

**Yong:** Once we moved to Cranston I had no idea about that pond, I actually kind of forgot about it until like Holly did this project. And I was like, "Oh, O.K. I remember that pond." [30:00]

**Duncan:** When you moved away from the pond, you never went back and fished at it.

**Yong:** No. Then after that once or sometimes we would go shopping at the Asian market and we were like, "Wow. This place is. I can't believe we did go fishing there."

**Duncan:** It's amazing how it changes over time.

**Yong:** It's like, I guess it's what you know. When your in a new environment, you don't speak the language. I don't even know if there is signs, we probably wouldn't even know what it means so it just a body of water that you think you can use.

**Duncan:** Given that that's obviously a problem, do you think that people are still fishing in it, because they don't notice the signs?

**Yong:** I think this is the other possibility of mindset. This is just my opinion. Because like where we came from we just expect this country is a lot cleaner. We just came out of a war-zone, a third world country, it's like coming to America. We just think that everything is going to be nicer and cleaner and didn't think anything of it. You know, you don't realize that there is pollution and all that stuff through businesses and anything like that. So you just assume, "Hey it's America it must be nice and clean."

**Duncan:** Were you upset at all when you found out about the pollution, or how did you find out about it?

**Yong:** I think just seeing the different, moving to Cranston, different people, different area. People keep up their homes or there yards, you can kind of see the difference. We weren't upset,

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we were just we just couldn't believe we did all of that. That was pretty much it. We can't really blame anybody because we just didn't know.

**Duncan:** Do you feel like if you were able to go around it you would have explored more? Or did it just not occur to you to explore more?

**Yong:** I don't know. I knew where the company is Gorham is. I know we were uncomfortable, like we shouldn't be doing this. It seemed like, I don't know, this big company there.

**Duncan:** You didn't feel comfortable doing?

**Yong:** Going fishing there and stuff. Like we didn't want to get caught or something. We're like new, we were being kind of, it's safe to say, being sneaky about it. Because the wooded area, we'd like cross the train tracks, we'd gone down, and do the fishing and leave.

**Duncan:** So it was a surgical strike. In terms of the wildlife there, aside from the turtle and fish, did you see anything else ever.

**Yong:** I don't remember. I'm sure there were, but like I don't remember a lot.

**Duncan:** What did you do in the winter time?

**Yong:** Probably stay inside.

**Duncan:** No fishing?

**Yong:** It's really cold. No. We were just cold. I think it was just a matter of getting used to the cold and the snow too. Most of the time we pretty much just stayed inside. I think we got a t.v. Watch a lot of t.v. Actually, I learned a lot of my English from television. A lot of Saturday morning cartoons.

**Duncan:** What month's do you remember going to the pond?

**Yong:** Definitely the summer. In the summer. Whenever the summer comes, June, July, August. Those three or four months I think we would go out there. Yes. I was just asking my sister actually, "Where did we get the hooks if we were using those sticks over there?" She was like, "I don't remember either, somehow we have hooks. But we don't have a fishing pole." [35:00]

**Duncan:** It's actually quite incredible. So on average how many fish would you catch in one day?

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**Yong:** Definitely several. Like six or seven. I don't know what moms make. Its been a while. Yes. Like that amount.

**Duncan:** That's a lot of fish.

**Yong:** Yes that is a lot of fish. But we do have like there's six of us.

**Duncan:** Did your parents ever go to the pond?

**Yong:** No. I think the same thing. Even in Cambodia, it's usually just the kids venture out and do things and just go do random things and bring back whatever.

**Duncan:** And the pond, did you ever use it for any of the artwork that you do?

**Yong:** No. I forgot about that pond.

**Duncan:** And so when, was the first time you remembered it again when Holly sent you the note about it, or had you talked to anyone about it since you left?

**Yong:** Just my sister. She live in Lowell, Massachusetts now. I mean I knew about the project for several years now that it's been going on? Or is it five years?

**Duncan:** I'm not sure. A few.

**Yong:** I knew about it when she started, but I didn't that was part of that pond. I thought it was a different area. Then when she showed it on a map and the train tracks, I was like, "Oh my god. I've been there. That's where I fish also." And I thought it's a good idea to get involved in what she's doing. It's a good be involved with the community. Maybe I can help the new people that come in new immigrants and [unclear] know what's going on in that area.

**Duncan:** Definitely. And I think that's most of my questions. Is there anything else you want to add?

**Yong:** No. Well this is what I didn't realize as I was walling through the park with Holly. She was talking about I guess that waterflow through a smaller river that go out in the salt water in Salter Grove, right? And I fish out there also.

**Duncan:** So you still fish?

**Yong:** I love fishing. Every summer I go out fishing in the ocean throughout the coast of Rhode Island. So like oh my god, it's still polluted. Just to have no idea, because you don't really have a connection. I see actually a lot of people fishing at the pond, not the pond, the Salter Grove.

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**Duncan:** So has that impacted your fishing at all?

**Yong:** No, I love fishing. But because we fish differently. It's not as like a sport fishing. When we fish, we keep them. We have to eat them. It's like we don't believe in like catching and releasing. So like now I just give it to the people there. I mean, I try to tell people about it. Like that pollution, that's bad for them. Actually I caught a huge Striped Bass that I took to Holly's house. I'm like, "Holly, look at this fish I caught." It was actually like up to my chest. It was huge and it was as big as, I put it next to the twins. Have you met the twins, her kids? They're so cute. They were like small and the fish was like this high, taller than they are. And I can't wait to see them again. I was supposed to meet with them. And now they're already going to college. It's ridiculous how time goes by so fast. I think that's it. I don't really.

**Duncan:** I remembered one more question.

**Yong:** O.K. Yes. Sure.

**Duncan:** So when Holly took you there, she took you past the Job Lot center, but where else did she take you when you went there?

**Yong:** That was pretty much it. We go in there and just kind of look at the water and show me the, she talked about the procession that she does, going around the pond, which is very neat. I think it's a great project. I think it's amazing that someone could do that, put it together, get the community involved and learn about that whole area. [40:00] I'm sure that will communicate by other people so that people are more aware.

**Duncan:** Well, thank you so much.

**Yong:** You're welcome. I hope it's very useful.

**Duncan:** Oh it was really helpful. I haven't really gotten anyone else to talk about fishing in it so that's really exciting. So if you want to just sign these and I have to just capture 30 seconds of room tone for editing so it'll be quiet for 30 seconds in case they need extra room noise.

**Yong:** O.K. Sure.

[End of Interview]