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Oral History Interview with Jonathan Blazon

Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.022

Interview conducted by Cynthia Lee on February 25th, 2012 in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

CYNTHIA LEE: This is Cynthia Lee, February 25th, 2012. Uh I'm interviewing Jonathan Blazon, in Park Slope, Brooklyn, for the Brooklyn Historical Society's Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations project. Hi, Jonathan.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Hi.

CYNTHIA LEE: (laughs) Uh let's begin by talking about when you were born and where you were born.

JONATHAN BLAZON: I was born on [date redacted for privacy] uh in New Hampshire, town of Manchester, New Hampshire.

CYNTHIA LEE: And what was it like growing up there?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh well, uh that's -- that's uh -- I guess uh I was part of a -- I grew up in a Chinese household. Because my mother is uh Chinese. And uh my father is French Canadian. Uh both of my parents came from uh minority groups uh in New Hampshire. Uh French Canadians are the first minority in New Hampshire, at that time. And uh my mother's family was one of only, I believe, uh perhaps three Chinese families in the entire state, at that time. Uh my mother's family owned a -- uh a Chinese restaurant. So I grew up uh in a household -- a Chinese household that was, uh I suppose, very un-- atypical uh relative to the experience of other people growing up in New Hampshire at that time.

CYNTHIA LEE: You say that being French Canadian was also considered being a minority.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yes. Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: And so I think maybe a lot of people wouldn't necessarily understand that.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: Can you talk about that a little bit?

JONATHAN BLAZON: (laughs) Sure. Uh the uh French-Canadian community in -- in New Hampshire came fr-- down from Canada uh in the early part of the 20th century, to work in the mills, uh textile mills in New Hampshire at the time. And they settled uh in

uh -- they settled all over the state, really, and became uh sort of the working class minority uh in the state. And it's really specific, I think, only to that very small region of the country there. But they were the um -- I think seen as sort of the -- the lower class workers. Uh also they were Catholics, very devoutly Catholic, in what was largely a Protestant um state at the time, too. And so they were definitely looked down upon by the -- by the Protestant uh population.

CYNTHIA LEE: Did you feel that yourself?

JONATHAN BLAZON: No, not on the French-Canadian side at all, because what I felt was from the Chinese side, because it was so much more blatant. Because, uh you know, on top of uh being a minority, we also -- the Chinese side, we also looked very different, uh and lived differently, very differently. So uh the -- I felt the difference much more starkly from that side of the family. I always thought that my father's side, the French-Canadian side, was -- was more uh white, so to speak. Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: When you say that your Chinese side lived very differently, can you talk about that?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Well, uh I perceived it as differently, when I ma-- What I mean is that we owned a restaurant and we ate different food than other people. Uh and we are a very large family, uh running a family business. We spoke a different language. Uh you know, my -- my grandmother and my great grandmother -- Uh my grandmother spoke little English. And then my great grandmother spoke no English. Um so I would say that more than 50% of my day was -- was in uh their dialect of Chinese, which is uh Toisanese.

CYNTHIA LEE: Can you talk a little bit about your family, like talk a little bit about, you know, who they were and are and maybe how your -- your parents even met --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- from these two different worlds?

JONATHAN BLAZON: So uh my mother is uh Chinese. She was born to uh -- Her -- her parents uh immigrated from uh southern China. Uh my grandfather came when he was 13, which would have been in 1931, uh came down through Canada, actually, and grew up in Boston Chinatown, uh went to uh --

[5:10]

(break in audio)

CYNTHIA LEE: So you were speaking about your grandfather.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Right. I was saying that uh he came over in -- I believe it was 1931 or -32, at the age of 13. He came over with his father, my great grandfather, who um I -- I never met, uh as he passed away, I believe, in the late '40s or early '50s. Uh but he was a merchant, uh who came into North America th-- via Canada, and uh from Canada ca-- uh was able to get work in Boston Chinatown, uh where he raised my uh -- my grandfather. It was just the two of them. I think they had, actually, a paper son which they brought over, as well. But there were no women. It was just men. Yeah. Um so uh my grandfather uh fought in World War II. He wa-- he was actually enlisted early. He was one of the earliest drafted into the war -- and um was actually sent to culinary school. Because I think they had uh pegged him to be more of a -- he would serve the troops as a -- as a cook. But I -- uh I think he was a cook and a soldier. And uh he fought -- he was at the Battle of the Bulge. And I know that he won uh -- he won a medal for -- for his participation there. Uh w--

CYNTHIA LEE: What was your grandfather's name?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh I can't remember his middle name. Uh his name is Yee Wing-S. I can't remember what the S uh stands for, right now, unfortunately. Uh Wing-S. Yee. Uh and they uh -- his papers said that his last name was Wing, because, of course, when he came over, the immigration officials misunderstood that, uh you know, uh the Chinese put their -- their last name first. So uh for many years he was Mr. Wing. And my whole family were the Wings. And all his children were Wings. And they had to all go and legally change their names to Yee, uh when -- when they were uh adults in the '70s, actually. Um so after he -- He fights in the war. Uh he comes back from the war. And uh -- W-- Uh as far as I know, my mother will tell the story better. Uh because he -- uh because he fought in the war, there was a senator uh in the Northeast who wrote a letter in his uh behalf saying that, because he served this country in the war, he should be allowed to become a citizen. Uh he was granted citizenship. And he was -- uh he was able to bring his family over. And then he brought his mother, and then his

wife, who was actually his second wife, at this time.

CYNTHIA LEE: Do you know what year it was when he was granted citizenship?

JONATHAN BLAZON: So it was right after the war. So it had to have been uh '45. Uh because she arrived in '45 or '46 and my mother was born in '46. So, I mean, it was immediately afterwards. Yeah. That was his uh -- And I should say that my grandmother was actually my grandfather's second wife. His first wife, uh who -- with whom he had already one daughter, uh died uh in China. And uh his mother, who was in China, actually arranged a marriage to my grandmother uh while -- w-- uh from afar. And so my grandfather didn't actually meet his second wife until she arrived, uh after the war, on a train to Boston. But they immediately started having kids as soon as they -- as soon as she got here.

CYNTHIA LEE: And then how did they end up in New Hampshire?

JONATHAN BLAZON: So um there was an opportunity -- Uh you know, he was working in uh -- in Boston. I believe he worked at a Laundromat first. Because I bel-- my uh great grandfather, uh I believe, had a Laundromat.

(break in audio)

CYNTHIA LEE: So how did your family end up in New Hampshire?

[9:46]

JONATHAN BLAZON: So maybe uh -- So my grandfather was in Boston Chinatown. Um I believe he worked in a Laundromat for a while. Uh and then he uh worked in restaurants. And I think he did a lot of odd jobs. Uh but given that he had had culinary training from the -- from the military, he now had a background in Western cooking as well as uh Chinese cooking. Uh and so he was now able -- he was now much more employable in -- in restaurants. And there was an opportunity in uh -- up in -- in um Hooksett, New Hampshire, a restaurant called the China Dragon, uh that was opening with um two of his cousins. I'm not sure exactly how they were related. But everyone was kind of cousins, at that point. Uh and he would come up and he would run the kitchen. He wouldn't -- he wasn't an owner of the restaurant but he would come and run the kitchen. And this is probably 19-- uh --50, -52, something like that. He had already had, I think, four kids who were born in Boston Chinatown. So he moved the family up

to Hooksett, New Hampshire, uh a town that had absolutely no Chinese that we know of, uh to open this very large restaurant. It was a restaurant and hotel -- very exotic, very high class for its time. Yeah. Uh so he moved -- uh he moved the whole family up here. The -- him and his wife -- Uh my grandmother's name is [Song-Ji] Yee -- Song-Ji. Uh she -- uh they continued to have children. They had eight, in total. My mother was the firstborn. My mother was born in 1946. Uh so even though he was working at the restaurant, uh he -- he wasn't the owner at that time. Uh what I mean to say is that he -- they weren't making a -- uh a ton of money. And especially when you have -- uh when you have a uh wife and eight children, plus -- uh and a few years later he brought his mother over -- so also his mother at home -- That's ten mouths uh to feed -- including his own, which is 11 mouths to feed, uh on a -- on a chef's sal-- cook's salary. So they were living very modestly. And uh my mother tells stories of them having to go back in the -- find weeds that were edible, that they could cook into a soup and eat it over rice, at some -- some days. I mean, it was -- it was r-- they were really poor. So cut to -- I guess to uh the -- the mid-60s. Uh my mother is uh now old enough to be working at the China Dragon. My uh grandfather got her a waitressing job there. Uh her -- and I believe her -- uh the number two son also. The two of them were working there. My father, who also grew up in the same town -- uh or the adjacent town, which is called Suncook, a predominantly French-Canadian town, uh was a busboy there, uh at the time. And so uh that's how they met. And so I'm guessing this is going to be in '66 -- '65, '66.

CYNTHIA LEE: What was the relationship between your family and the rest of the community that you were in?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh now, uh I don't know -- uh in the '60s, I really don't know that very well. I do know that uh they had built a sort of mini-community, uh the three families, if you will, who came -- the three Chinese families who came to open that restaurant. And they all lived very close to one another, uh all within walking distance. So they were their own little mini-community. But I know that the uh -- The children, of course, had to go to school. So they went to school with the local kids, who, of course, were -- at that time were -- you know, and probably never seen Chinese people, for the most part. So, I mean, there was the typical racism of the day. And each one of them, in

their own way, had to -- had to deal with it and go through with it. Uh and a lot of them didn't even know English by the -- when they went to school. And they had to learn it by -- just by going to school.

CYNTHIA LEE: And you talked about how your aunts and uncles ended up changing their name from Wing to Yee --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Right.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- when they were adults.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Right.

CYNTHIA LEE: At what point was this, the '70s?

[14:55]

JONATHAN BLAZON: It's in the '70s, yeah. Uh the-- you know, they didn't even know their birthdays, actually. Because, um you know, I guess, uh being -- you know, being more traditional, they didn't really celebrate the kids' birthdays. Um they ki--

CYNTHIA LEE: Can you explain that tradition?

JONATHAN BLAZON: You know, I don't really understand well enough to unders-- to explain it. Uh but their -- they didn't celebrate the kids' birthdays. It's not -- it's just not something you celebrate. And uh --

CYNTHIA LEE: Not appropriate.

JONATHAN BLAZON: And it was uh -- it was inappropriate. You know, it's not appropriate to celebrate one's birthday until they're well into adulthood and they have accomplished something in their -- in their lives. Uh but these are just kids. Um so they didn't even know their birthdays. And -- uh but they did understand the concept of birthdays. So they would always ask, "When's our birthday?" And then my grandmother would just kind of guess, based on more or less when she remembered uh them being born. And she was wrong in most of the -- most of the dates. And they only found out uh much later, by uh going -- and they all went and got their birth certificates when they got old enough to understand. And uh then that's whe-- that's when they had learned when their real birthdays were. And I think that's also when they became conscious of the fact that the family's name was actually not Wing. It was Yee. And so it's probably my mom who did it first, probably changed her name to Yee, and then soon

everyone else followed suit.

CYNTHIA LEE: Mm.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm.

CYNTHIA LEE: So what was it like for you, yourself --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Hm.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- going to school --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- making friends?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh so, for me, um I was -- uh I was a very, very shy, introverted kid. I mean, at home I was uh -- I was the first kid uh of the third generation that was a boy, um in a Chinese family. So, I mean, I was very, very spoiled. And I had so much attention. And I got everything I wanted. Uh however, when I was outside of the family, it was a complete opposite. I was completely introverted. I didn't know how to socialize or talk to anybody. And as a result, uh you know, going to school was just a nightmare for me and I hated it. Uh you know, being fi-- I can remember being five and going to kindergarten and just not knowing how to talk to anybody. I mean, the people I would feel the closest to were like the teachers themselves. And because uh somehow I knew who to talk to adults. Because I was used to being with adults all the time, not with kids my own age.

CYNTHIA LEE: Because --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Because there were no kids my own age. I was the -- I was uh being raised by this very large Chinese family. Uh my father was too. I should -- I should not forget to talk about my father. But uh there were no other kids of my -- I was the first of my generation. And so there was no one else my age. And they didn't have friends, themselves, who had kids, really. Uh so I just didn't have any socialization with people my own age. So I had to learn, as a kid.

CYNTHIA LEE: But you socialized with adults?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah. I would run around the restaurant. I mean, I grew up in a restaurant. And uh -- and I would -- I would make friends with everyone, all of the staff, the -- you know, all -- of course, all my uncles and aunts, the cooks that my grandfather

would uh bring up from Ch-- Boston Chinatown to work, the Americans who would come in and sometimes tend bar for us or some of the American waitresses. I knew them all. I knew a lot of the patrons. They would know me by first name. Uh and I got very adept at saying hello and charming them, and always managing to find a way to get what I want with them. But when it came to kids, I really just didn't know ho-- what to do, didn't know the first thing to do.

CYNTHIA LEE: So I notice you --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- used the term "Americans."

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: So did you not consider your family -- or did your -- con-- family not consider themselves American?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah, it's a -- it's a tough one. Uh I wish I remember -- uh I could remember exactly the terminology that they were using. And this would be the '70s, when I was that old. '75 is probably the earliest -- my earliest memory is '74, '75. Uh sometime-- You know, they would say -- I don't think they used -- they said "Americans." I think that's actually a much -- uh that's kind of a euphemism. (laughs) And I think it was much nastier. It was like -- uh they would often say uh, "the [lafun]," the derogatory term for -- for white people, basically. Uh but that being said, they didn't hate, you know, the Americans or the -- the people -- you know, the New -- people of New Hampshire. It's just that, you know, when they would experience racism, they would respond by, you know, using these derogatory terms. But, yeah, we felt a little different, for sure.

CYNTHIA LEE: And so --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: Would you also call folks who were not necessarily --

[20:02]

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- Chinese-American American?

JONATHAN BLAZON: No. No, no. Uh I didn't -- I didn't have that consciousness when I

was a kid. I always just -- I grew up and went to school and -- Because I'm half. I'm not full Chinese. Uh you know, the kids -- When I first went to school, in that same town, Hooksett, you know, that remained a pretty traditional, conservative town. They were -- they were pretty mean. And they called me "slanty-eye" and they ki-- they beat me up a lot in first grade. Uh and I think that kind of prompted my parents to actually move up north, to a town called Concord, New Hampshire, which was much more progressive, for its time. And once there, I mean, uh I didn't feel my -- you know, my heritage. At the time, we -- you know, at the time, we always called it "my race," whatever. Uh because uh it just didn't -- Their -- the kids weren't racist there and they didn't treat me differently. I think -- You know, and uh I made very, very good friends. And so I didn't have uh the feeling of being ou-- uh an outsider, as much. I mean, there were isolated incidents where we would -- I would be riding my bike through uh -- through kind of a poor, working-class part of town uh and you'd hear the, you know, "Hey, look at the Chink riding a bike." Uh and I would always get shocked. And I'd always remember, "Oh, my God. Yeah, that's right. I am -- I am half Chinese," uh at those moments. Uh one thing I will say is uh I was always proud of it. Whereas I know my uh -- my uncles and aunts w-- probably went through some period of self-hatred or, if that's too strong word -- I mean, they -- they wanted to kind of deny the fact that they were different. They desperately wanted to blend in and be American. I was proud from day one that I was a little bit different, you know, that I had this mixed heritage. Uh --

CYNTHIA LEE: Where do you think that comes from?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Well, I guess it had to have come from my mother and father. My mother and father were very progressive. Uh they were -- uh they were kind of hippies in 1970s, you know, when they had me. My -- my father had been to Vietnam and back. And they were very much uh in the antiwar movement, very much against Nixon. Uh and I think they were uh part of this new wave of -- of kids who were like trying to -- were feeling proud of where they came from and who they are and their individuality. And my mother was also very much a -- uh very aware of the early days of the, you know, feminist movement too. I mean, uh that struck a chord for her too. So that was something we heard her -- and around the house all the time. My father was a -- My

father went to the seminary, to be a Catholic priest. Uh but he was rejected or rejected -- the -- the teachings uh and actually turned around and did a 180 and became a staunch atheist and uh went to uh school to major in philosophy. Uh so he was an intellectual. And so his intellectualism, my mother's progressivism kind of -- that -- Uh I guess that's where my values come from.

CYNTHIA LEE: How did that go over with their own respective families? And the fact that they were together. I mean, did that cause any --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- difficulties within either family?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh in both families, yeah, I mean, especially in the -- in the Chinese side, my mom's side. Uh they did not accept that she was marrying non-Chinese person, at all -- uh and didn't -- for example, did not attend their wedding. Um and basically, you know, I don't know that drama or the s-- you know, the sequence of events but my mother didn't see or speak to her parents for probably two years, you know, between the time they got married and the time I was 1-1/2, before there was finally a cooling off period, uh and where my mother was kind of allowed back into the family. On my father's side, uh they were very accepting of my mother, actually, the -- the French-Canadian side. Uh and I should also mention that my father is French Canadian but his uh -- his father's heritage is actually uh Canadian Indian -- a Native Canadian. So I've heard them called Algonquin. I've heard them called Abenaki. Um I think it's probably Abenakis. But, uh for example, his -- my father's grandfather -- my father's great grandfather -- sorry -- was a full-blooded Abenaki. Uh and [25:00] his grandfather might have been too. Uh and they came down from the Lake Memphremagog area of uh Quebec -- uh changed their name to Blazon ("blaze-on"), Blazon (French pronunciation) uh upon arriving in New Hampshire to work in the mills, uh and slowly integrated uh into the French communi-- French-Canadian community within New Hampshire. So I don't know if that had to do with the fact that they were so uh tolerant and open-minded. But that family was, uh in terms of that anyway, you know, uh multiethnic marriage -- they -- they had absolutely no issue with it. So in the early days, the very early '70s, I probably spent more time with that family, with the Blazon family, than with the Yee's, because

my mother wasn't getting along with the Yee's at tha-- Uh she was a little bit excommunicated. And it wasn't probably until like '75 that we started -- '74, '75 that we went back and -- to the restaurant and uh reintegrated with the Yee family. So uh my father's intellectualism did not go over well at all uh with his family. I mean, they found him to be uh arrogant, uh a know-it-all. They're very God-fearing folks. So they found him to be proud, as well. Uh so uh I think they both had -- And he also come-- was the oldest in a family of nine. Uh so uh they had us -- they had that in common, my -- my folks, uh that they were both a little bit outcast from their family.

CYNTHIA LEE: And did you sense that, as a child?

JONATHAN BLAZON: No. No, uh I had no -- I had no clue at all. Yeah. Um I first started to sense -- Well, uh outcast, no. Uh I only -- it -- only because they told me uh when I was older. Uh but what I did feel is that I did feel the -- I did hear and was present for a lot of arguments between my mother and her family and my father and his family, really violent -- no, violent, it's not the right -- uh a lot of yelling and loud -- you know, speaking very loudly, like heated arguments between them -- uh which I interpreted, as a kid, uh to be much more serious than they actually were. They -- you know, in retrospect -- Uh probably on my father's side, they were more serious. On my mother's side, you know, it's just a family who works together ev-- you know, lives together and works together and is in each other's faces every single day and they probably were letting off a lot of steam. But unfortunately, as a kid, I misinterpreted that as um really not liking each other -- yeah -- which uh I f-- I find -- Uh I just think it's a shame, now, that I misunder--interpreted that way, because uh I feel like I didn't appreciate some of them as much as I maybe would have liked to, my grandfather being the most obvious one of those. Because my grandfather had such a volatile relationship with my mother.

CYNTHIA LEE: So did you, growing up, spend most of your time, like once the family had sort of been welcomed back into the -- the Yee family -- uh did you end up spending more time with the Yee family or the Blazon side?

JONATHAN BLAZON: So uh the Blazon side just had a -- uh a major falling out. The family split into two. And I still don't know the -- the details of that. But there was a lot

of pride and there was a lot of -- there was uh -- There was half the family that was on my grandfather, my pépé side and half that went to my mémé, my grandmo-- my paternal grandmother's side -- and my father, who just decided he was above the -- all of that, uh and opted out. In fact, all the males in that family opted out. So it's -- uh that's a -- that family had some major communication issues. Um but we really stopped seeing them after 1975, 1976. And I really lost contact with most of them for the next two or 2-1/2 decades.

CYNTHIA LEE: Do you think that affected how you saw yourself --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yes.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- or how you identified yourself?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Definitely. Because I never -- uh as a kid, uh I thought of myself as being half Chinese. And I didn't think, "Oh --" uh you know, I never said to myself, "Oh, you know, I'm actually half Chinese and half French Canadian-Indian mix," uh which is actually even more unconventional. But, uh for me, it was like, you know, I was just -- I just had in -- in my mind I was half Chinese, half white. Yeah. Because uh and my father's side was almost an afterthought. I just didn't see any of them -- except maybe his brother Johnny, once in while but that's it. Mm.

CYNTHIA LEE: At a certain point, you moved to Brooklyn.

[30:01]

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: How did that happen?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh you know, that's flashing forward a lot there. Uh --

CYNTHIA LEE: Well, is there anything that you want to cover before we flash forward to Brooklyn?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh yeah. If it's OK, I just want to mention briefly that uh my grandparents had a restaurant after the uh -- the China Dragon. My father -- my grandfather finally had enough money to open his own restaurant. He opened a restaurant called the [Wing On], in uh -- in Bedford, New Hampshire. He made a lot of money doing that. Uh but he put all his kids to work in it. And that's where the resent in that family started, was uh all those kids being forced to work in that restaurant.

However, it was a successful business and he made a lot of money. Uh they closed in 1974. Um and my grandfather really wanted to retire, at that point, from being, you know, the owner and the runner and uh manager of the restaurant. And he also was desperate to keep his family together. Because it was their dream to have like a little China in Hooksett. And the whole family would all buy houses, uh all relatively close to each other, and they would all ge-- marry other Chinese people and we'd have one big new Chinatown in -- in Hooksett or something. Uh and so, out of desperation, he -- I'm -- yes, I'm totally guessing, actually, it's out of desperation. But f-- whatever reason, he made this crazy decision to give a lot of money to his two oldest kids, my mother and her brother Ed, to open up a -- a restaurant in Concord, New Hampshire, called The House of Yee. And, uh in fairness, it was, for two years, uh a really big success. It did -- it did great. He -- my grandfather continued to be the cook there. So the food continued to be very good. Uh but uh af-- Uh then they -- they drew in a lot of people. And my mother and Ed had great ideas for bringing people into the restaurant, including like getting uh off-Broadway actors from New York to come up in the summers and be singing waiters and waitresses. Um they had uh this -- uh really crazy uh dining room designs, including a massive gong and a massive fountain in the middle of this restaurant that seated 300 people. Uh but after two years, the -- their youth and inexperience with managing a big business like that, uh I mean, became an issue and the restaurant uh -- and the restaurant finally closed down, due to the mismanagement and just debt. Um the reason I mention that is because that restaurant -- I'm always surprised now, talking to them, like that it was only probably open for about three or four years -- but that it -- it -- um the memories of growing -- of being in that restaurant and spending time there in the summers or after school uh is such a major part of my childhood and is so important to all my memories and so many things I think and feel now. Uh that restaurant closed in -- in 1979 or -80. And then my grandparents tried one more time with the next round of kids, Howard and uh Jeannie, in 1981 or -82, to open up a new restaurant, called the [Gem (short E) Sun] or Gem (short U) Sun, um also in Hooksett, uh which stayed open until about '86, uh which is the time I came to Brooklyn.

CYNTHIA LEE: You say that that -- uh The House of Yee was such a big influence --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- in your life. Can you talk a little about that? Why do you think it was or --? And ho-- in what way has it impacted your, I guess, development?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Um well, I think, firstly, it's the time when you -- just because of my age, it's the time when my memories were really --

CYNTHIA LEE: How old were you?

JONATHAN BLAZON: So it would have opened when I was six and closed when I was nine, something like that. So those are like the -- you know, really the f-- real formative years, in terms of like the memories that, you know, you -- you retain. Uh yeah, it's a good question. I guess I've never really explored that as much, like how it -- Think it exposed me to uh a lot that maybe I shouldn't have been exposed to, as -- or, you know, kids that age don't usually get exposed to. And it was a -- it was, again, in an environment of adults, and living in the hedonistic '70s. So there were uh -- [35:00] You know, I wasn't aware of actually the level of hedonism that was going on but I was aware that there was drugs, that there was sex, that there was, you know, fighting and uh all sorts of adult stuff going on, that I shouldn't -- or, you know, that I -- I don't think it probably was -- I wasn't prepared to process it, at seven years old. And I think that definitely had an effect on the -- the way I -- on my values and the w-- the things I thought or -- w-- you know, were compelled to as an adult. And I think it all goes back to those -- you know, those -- that period between '76 and '79. And my -- my parents also broke up uh during that time too. So, there you go. Yeah. Can't forget that. (laughs)

CYNTHIA LEE: Do you think that there's also some aspect --? Uh you know, you say that you think of yourself, at that time -- Also, you were beginning to really think of yourself more -- about -- about being Chinese, less so about being French Canadian--

JONATHAN BLAZON: Right.

CYNTHIA LEE: --Native American.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Right.

CYNTHIA LEE: Uh being in a situation, you know, in a -- in a restaurant, in a restaurant family, where basically you're -- you're serving uh a non-Chinese clientele, do you think that that relationship somehow also impact how you were thinking about your identity

and --? Do you understand my question uh?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah, I do. Uh you know, I was proud as a kid. I was proud of uh -- of uh being part of this family that owned this -- what I thought at the time was just this amazing restaurant, like a business that was just so far ahead of its time. Even I didn't know what was going on in the back with the numbers and the money. They didn't know how to handle that. But they -- they could put on a show. And I saw, you know, people come to the restaurant, the -- the praise they would give, how much they liked the food, the -- how they would come back, how they had a great time, they -- You know, people loved it. People came -- people would drive an hour to get there, which in New Hampshire is just unheard of. You know, they would make reservations, you know, weeks in advance and drive an hour. They'd get dressed up to come to this place. It was an event. For two years. Uh so it made me proud, made me proud that these were my -- this was my family that was running, uh you know -- And so uh I was proud about being uh half-Chinese, you know. So definitely it formed -- it had that effect, which is the opposite effect for my uncles and aunts. Uh I think they -- they just hated it. They hated the restaurant so much -- uh that they desperately wanted uh what -- you know, what they would consider a regular life. And so probably, I think, you know, that whole -- for them, like their ethnicity or their being Chinese was so attached to the s-- you know, this -- the slavery (laughter) that they were in, that they had to endure in the restaurant, that uh it was -- uh it was really the opposite effect. Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: So would you like to talk about how you ended up in Brooklyn?

JONATHAN BLAZON: So my mother, at The House of Yee -- going back to The House of Yee -- met her -- uh what would become her boyfriend for -- of 25 years. His name's John [Saeger]. He was a jazz guitarist, who was playing gigs at the lounge at The House of Yee, The House of Yee had three -- had a dining room, a banquet room, and a lounge. And he was um in the lounge. Um and my mother was breaking up with my father, at the time, and she was going out with John Saeger. And I know there was some significant overlap there uh. Uh but John is the reason we finally moved, because John's music career -- Uh he -- he was -- H-- you know, he was extremely progressive in terms of his musical tastes. He was into jazz and then into uh like uh kind of the post-punk, new

wave thing. And he was into Brian Eno and a lot of very progressive rock, Robert Fripp, long story short, all this music that was appreciated or even known in New Hampshire. And for him, really, the only logical thing to do was to move to a big urban area. Uh and so they wanted to come New York. And in nineteen-eighty-- uh oh, uh since 1986 -- actually, 1984. It's the end or 1984, September, 1984. They just packed up and moved to Brooklyn, moved to Eastern Parkway, 135 Eastern Parkway, Turner Towers, across the street from the Brooklyn Museum. We subletted a uh five-bedroom prewar uh apartment from a -- an orthodox Jew who was uh in Israel for a year -- and sublet the apartment to us. Yeah. So my first experience of Brooklyn was thinking that everyone lived in these massive apartments. Uh --

[40:16]

CYNTHIA LEE: Do you know how they ended up Brooklyn and not another borough of New York?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh John's uh friend from junior high school was living here. His name's Josh [Kenney]. Uh and we had actually come to New York on a couple occasions to visit Josh. And we had always stayed in Brooklyn. So Brooklyn was kind of a known quantity. Also, Josh moved in with us in that massive apartment. So uh I -- I think that's how it happened. A year later we moved to Park Slope, after the uh -- the tenants returned from Israel. We -- uh we uh moved to Seventh Avenue and Ninth Street in Park Slope.

CYNTHIA LEE: And what was that like?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Well, it was a dump. I mean, uh we didn't have a lot of money. Uh and my mother was working um at a women's health center called Choices, at the time. And my uh -- Well, John Saeger -- We never called him my step-dad, because, you know, even though he was my mom's partner, uh well, number one, they weren't married and, number two, he's only 11 years older than me. So I never thought of him as my step-dad or my father. So I just called him John. Uh John was trying to make it as a musician, uh and wasn't really making any income. So the -- they just didn't have a lot of money. So we found -- yeah, we moved to the south part of Park Slope, which at that time was not uh what it is today. It was still pretty low-rent. And um the apartment was

in terrible condition. I remember we moved in and uh it was uh -- just garbage everywhere. The floors were completely wrecked. We had to redo the floors. We had to remove all the garbage. I think we -- we took 17 garbage bags out of there. It was disgusting. Uh but, you know, I was a kid, so I didn't really know -- yeah, I didn't know better. And I was starting uh -- I got into a school called the High School of Art and Design, here in New York City. So that was kind of exciting and scary and terrifying -- and terrifying. And so I had all that to deal with, coming to Brooklyn. And the, kind of, culture shock of a New Hampshire kid coming to New York City was -- was a lot to deal with. Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: Can you describe the culture shock?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Well, I'll give you an anecdote. When I walked into the -- my first high school here, which was Fort Hamilton High School, in Bay Ridge -- Uh I walked right in. And there's a security guard in front, which, I'd never seen a security guard in a public school before. And I asked -- I said to him, "Excuse me, sir. Can you tell me where the principal's office is?" Because I had to go to report to the principal's office. Because I wasn't coming in at the beginning of the school year. I was coming in, uh I think -- I think it was mid-October. And the security guard just looked at me and said, "Wow, you are not from here, are you?" That's how different I was. And that's how different it was to actually ask an adult, with respect, (laughs) uh for s-- for some help. Uh and so I did not know how to communicate with kids. You know, kids would say, "Hey, what's up?" and, you know, in the hallway, passing, and I would stop in my tracks and say, "Well, not too much. How about you?" And it wasn't uh -- You know, so I just -- I wasn't making any friends. Uh and it took me probably to two years to really understand how to make friends here. And then, when I did, the people who I made friends with were uh kind of similar to me, in that they were socially awkward people. Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: How much did your background have anything to do with, you know, how your social interactions were going or --? Did it play? Did your identity as being hapa, you know, really play into how you were feeling?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Well, yeah. It's interesting. And -- and this is something that

stayed with me for the next three decades (laughs) or the next two decades, is that, uh you know, uh I came to a city where, you know, I was not so special anymore, not so different. In fact, there were a lot of people looked a lot more Asian than I did, uh especially in my -- you know, where I went, Art and Design. I mean, uh the -- it was probably about 25% Asian. Uh and I wanted to be part of them. Like I felt closer to them and I could relate with them and I felt comfortable around them. But they didn't see me as one of them.

CYNTHIA LEE: Because --?

[44:51]

JONATHAN BLAZON: Because -- well, f-- because I don't look uh like Asian right away. I mean, some people see the features in my face. But I think, and especially in a city like New York, where there are so many Latinos, people will think first that I'm probably Latino. Uh and I would -- I remember I would always try to insert in any conversation some kind of mention of my mother, just because -- so I could say that she's Chinese or -- any way to do it. And it was so awkward, and at times, where, you know, uh it would just be completely inappropriate to the conversation. Uh [so], "Oh, yeah. My mother's Chinese." You know, and we're talking about, you know, hotdogs or something. Uh and, you know, people would just (laughs) look at me and -- "OK. Uh and --?" Uh and uh I -- and I did that until I was probably 35, 36 years -- uh but older. Until I was 38 years old, I was still ins-- trying to insert my Asian heritage into every conversation, so people would know.

CYNTHIA LEE: Did you have a way of just identifying or describing your identity, that you were happy with?

JONATHAN BLAZON: No. No. Uh I would say I was half Chinese, half French, which is not true. I'm half Chinese, half French Canadian-Indian. But it's too long a story. And, you know, as a kid, you know, French Canadian has no kind of cachet at all. And people don't even know -- a lot of people (laughs) don't even know what that means. And they -- "[Oh], Canadian," you know. So uh it got me a lot more play to say I was half French, half -- half Chinese. Then people -- You know, when I was trying to impress a girl, they -- sometimes they might say, "Oh, that's exotic. That's different. Ooh, how interesting!"

So I would use that a lot.

CYNTHIA LEE: How did -- actually, how did your family --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- describe your identity?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh yeah, that -- yeah, that's actually a very good question.

Because my family said the same thing. Because in New Hampshire, when you say you're French, it means you're French Canadian. So uh m-- they would always say that - - uh my mom would say, "Yeah, my -- my kids are half French and half Chinese." So that's true. You're right. I mean, I grew up saying that. But it's -- when you -- when you leave New Hampshire, that means something else. It means that your -- your parents are from France and not from French C-- French Canada. Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: And did you uh -- h-- did you and your -- your brother ever talk about -- about this? And you have one brother.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah. I have uh one -- one brother. I have a half-brother and half-sister, as well. But I have one brother. Uh I don't have a lot of memories uh of us talking about that. I remember one time a kid on a bus at junior high school called my brother a Chink and I smashed his head into the window. You know, I didn't -- I didn't experience a lot of racism as a kid but, when I did, it made my blood boil. And I would -- I would just get into this frenzied rage and I would like -- I was a really Goody-Two-Shoes kid. But I would -- the only time I would ever get in trouble or in a fight was because someone would call me a Chink or call -- worse, call my brother a Chink. And then the - - uh then I couldn't stop -- I couldn't help myself.

CYNTHIA LEE: So if you had racist remarks made to you, growing up, it was about being Chinese --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yes.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- not uh necessarily about being of -- of different ethnicities.

JONATHAN BLAZON: No, it was about being Chinese. Correct. Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: Not about being of mixed heritage.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Not about being of mixed heritage. Uh --

CYNTHIA LEE: Was there a particular attitude about that?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Well, for most people, they thought it was kind of different and cool and interesting. And it was something that could -- that I could talk about, as a conversation piece, as a starter.

CYNTHIA LEE: In New England.

JONATHAN BLAZON: In New England, yeah. Uh for people who were Asian, I think they -- they didn't relate with me as much. And that was always disappointing for me, that uh I couldn't be Chinese. Because I wanted so bad to be Chinese. And I felt Chinese and -- You know, I would, you know, be ready to kill someone if they called me a Chink but then, you know, I would meet someone Chinese uh and they would not relate to me at all. And I hated that. I hated it -- still hate it. I still don't like it. You know, uh I have Chinese friends today who sometimes forget I'm Chinese. And they -- they tell me things like, "This is what we eat," you know? And uh -- and it just makes me mad every time.

CYNTHIA LEE: Well, how does it make you -- how does it make you feel, when that happens?

[49:48]

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh like I don't belong to -- to any race. I mean, you know, I think this is something that a lot of mixed-race people say. But you -- you do end up in between. Because you're not -- you're not American or white, really, because you have this other heritage and this other culture. But then, when you go to either side, you go to the French Canadians or you go to the Chinese, they don't really see you completely as part of them either, because you don't -- uh because you have this American culture and you have this other-side culture too. And so it's frustrating. I've -- I've always -- I grew up thinking I was Chinese and then I grew up and people always want to tell me I'm not. I'm -- You know, so, yeah, I've always found that frustrating. It's probably why I've tried to insert my ethnicity into conversations for so many -- for so much of my life, because I'm just so desperate for people to see it in me and to see me --

CYNTHIA LEE: Mm.

JONATHAN BLAZON: -- that way.

CYNTHIA LEE: Mm.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: I mean, not to jump too far ahead but you now have a daughter.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: So -- And you -- you still live in Brooklyn --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- or you're back in Brooklyn.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm. I went to France for ten years to study, and uh lived there for a while. But now I'm back. Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: Which we -- uh maybe we could go back to your time in France.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: But how do you see her experience potentially being, uh since she's also of mixed heritage?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Well, it's so much more common today. And I think that's something important to say, is that, you know, in 1970 it was no-- really rare, of any mixed heritage. I mean, you know, maybe uh you'd get a Catholic and a Protestant, you know. But, you know, to get, (laughs) uh you know, a Chinese and French Canadian together, uh it was -- you just didn't -- I'd never met anyone like that. Uh I was probably 12 or 13 before I met another hapa. I mean, you know, it's -- it's -- it was rare. And, you know, for my daughter [Zoë], it's -- won't be rare at all. I mean, there are so many. The uh -- Uh I don't know how she will experience her mixed heritage. But it will -- I mean, it's certainly going to be different, you know, especially growing up in Brooklyn. I mean, that's -- so multiethnic here.

CYNTHIA LEE: Do you see a difference between when you arrived and today, Brooklyn?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Uh yeah, when I -- Uh the '80s were still pretty -- you know, there were -- it was still the old attitudes, in terms of race. I mean, it was getting better in the '80s but, you know, there were a lot of stereotypes still about different races and different ethnicities, for sure, and -- and in high school, I mean, everywhere you went. Uh I went to France. I was in France most of the '90s. When I came back, everything had changed. And I think where I noticed it the most was on television -- which is kind of -- You know, in the States, television is our culture. That's

-- you know, that's where we get all of our information, all our values from, unfortunately or fortunately. And suddenly the cul-- television had become multicultural. And you saw, you know, all different-colored people on TV.

CYNTHIA LEE: Can you describe --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- television before you left for France?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh it was all white Protestant people. You'd have a few token ethnic people in there, who were very stereotypical. Uh and they would --

CYNTHIA LEE: What year was this?

JONATHAN BLAZON: -- stick out like a thumb, you know. I went to France in '93.

CYNTHIA LEE: OK.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh -- And so, yeah, things were slowly changing. But um everything was so uh homogenous. Uh when I came back uh -- You know, and uh it's -- you know, it's especially in the commercials, you know, on television. You know, so it's economically driven and market driven, uh that -- you know, whatever advertisers on T-- were -- were understanding the economic power that these other, you know, ethnic groups were having now. And so suddenly I'm seeing Asian people in commercials, uh I'm seeing uh an entire commercial, a national spot, that has no white people in it. It just -- that was just inconceivable in '93. And so in ten years it had changed so much! Like uh I -- I was just kind of awestruck by it when I came back in -- in 2003.

CYNTHIA LEE: Did you feel that on the streets of Brooklyn, as well?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh the s-- no, the streets are -- they're kind of the same. But it's the attitudes and the way people talked. And it was almost like the generation had flipped. And people were just so much more aware and so much more, you know, politically correct, and had just been educated. They'd been made aware of uh d-- that different people have different cultures in this -- in this country. And so, yeah, it was a -- it was a night and day kind of thing for me.

[55:03]

CYNTHIA LEE: Uh when you went to School of Art and Design --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- that was also in Manhattan.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: So do you think it was also different being in Manhattan versus being in Brooklyn? Did you think that there were any differences?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah. I was proud to -- I was kind of -- like I thought it was cool to go to the city. You know? Uh I thought it was cool to live in Park Slope, actually. Uh because I know Park Slope was changing and becoming -- you know, starting to become back then what it is today, you know, kind of like this real uh very attractive place to raise your family. But uh it was starting that then. But I liked the fact that uh I -- I went into Manhattan, midtown Manhattan -- it was on 57th Street and Second Avenue -- to go to school every day. Made me feel uh worldly and important. (laughs)

CYNTHIA LEE: Did Manhattan feel more worldly?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yes. For sure!

CYNTHIA LEE: (laughs)

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh Brooklyn felt --

CYNTHIA LEE: How so?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Brooklyn felt more uh residential and, uh at that time, dilapidated. You know, downtown Brooklyn was really ugly then. This whole -- this whole thing of - - this whole idea of brownstone Brooklyn really only existed in some pockets, like uh northern Park Slope, Cobble Hill, Boerum Hill, Brooklyn Heights. That's it. Uh otherwise it was -- it was ugly, it was rundown. It was uh mismanaged. Yeah. So Brooklyn was not a place where you wanted to -- It wasn't like the destination like it is today and --

CYNTHIA LEE: So the kids in high school --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- I'm assuming, came from all parts of the city?

JONATHAN BLAZON: All parts of the city, yeah. Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: And --

JONATHAN BLAZON: So most of my friends came from uh Queens.

CYNTHIA LEE: And were any of them also of mixed heritage?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Hm! That's uh -- I don't think so. No, I don't think so. So the friends I made in high school were white. Uh one was Latino. Several were Asian but full Asian. Yeah, that's -- uh that's interesting. You know, actually there were very few, even at that time, very few. Yeah. So this is nineteen-- the late '80s. And, yeah, there were very few mixed-heritage -- you know? -- even -- I guess the closest -- the -- the most common was probably Latino-black, at that time. But even like uh black and white, you didn't get too much of that. Asian mix, not too many. I can't think of one, actually, uh at Art and Design. Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: So were people surprised when they heard that you --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah, yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- were mixed heritage?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh it was -- it was really kind of like a conversation starter, you know? For a teenager, it was kind of like your -- wore it on my sleeve, a little bit, because uh it made me interesting. Mm.

CYNTHIA LEE: Uh how did you decide to cross (inaudible) and uh go to France?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm. Yeah, uh it was not a long, thought out decision. It was -- I went to -- I went to the School of Visual Arts. Uh I graduated. I wasn't working as an artist. I was working as an usher at Lincoln Center. I was not making money. I wanted to uh -- I wanted to go back to school, and really -- Because I had gone to school to be an illustrator. And I had -- At that point in my life -- I'm 22, 21. I -- I thought that commercial art was kind of -- I looked down upon it. I thought of it as kind of like selling yourself out. And I was -- had the goals and aspirations of being like a -- like a real artist, in the -- you know, with a capital A, that I had something to say to the world and something to express in a visual form, blah blah blah. And uh so I took s-- I took classes at Art Students' League. I -- my mom gave me a trip around Europe uh as a graduation gift. Uh she helped me pay for that. I did the whole backpacking thing around Europe, 21 days in Europe. And uh I want with the -- my program was that I was going to look at uh graduate schools, uh in three different countries, in France, Italy, and Spain -- which I did. And uh I did not thi-- I did not think it would be France. I --

CYNTHIA LEE: Why?

JONATHAN BLAZON: -- thought it would be Italy.

CYNTHIA LEE: Why did you think it wouldn't be France?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh I guess I had these kind of preconceived stereotypes that a lot of Americans do of France being a little snooty. You know, and I didn't see myself as snooty. I saw myself as really the opposite of that, you know. Uh I thought it would be Italy. I thought it would be -- like I just -- Italy was kind of -- the stereotype of Italy was -- seemed much more in line with my passionate 21-year-old self. I thought that's what it would be. But it -- but, when I went, at the end of the 21 days, there was no question it was France -- it was going to be France.

[1:00:13]

CYNTHIA LEE: Why?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Uh I can't explain it to you. I got to Paris and something just spoke to me. It's just I had -- like in France they say a coup de coeur. Uh you just get like -- I got like uh hit by cupid's arrow walking down the Boulevard St. Germain in 1993, said, "This is where I want to be." It was that irrational. I went back to New York uh for the next nine months, studied French intensely, and began the whole uh application process, to -- Uh I applied to -- to two different schools in France -- three different schools in France. I got accepted to two of them. I chose to go to Dijon. Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: Did it -- at any point in the process, did it feel familiar? I mean, was there something about French culture --?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yes. It did. It did. And it's -- it's funny thinking back on it now. Because, you know, my culture's -- the -- the -- that side is really French Canadian, which is totally different than French. You know, and that's not fair, to say it's totally different. There are -- there are some similarities. Uh but uh it really is very different. And maybe it was the language, you know. Because, you know, the -- the way -- you know, when you speak a language, just the -- kind of all uh the culture that's within -- inherent in the language kind of shapes the way you think. And so I know that, as a kid between one and five, I probably spent a lot of time hearing French, uh and being in that, kind of, argumentative culture. Uh and it just -- something just hit me when I was there. And, yeah, it was a familiarity. And I learned French really fast. Uh I mean, I didn't

speak a word of French in 1992. By 1994 I was comple--
 [1:02:06]

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[0:00]

--tely fluent. I mean, it was fast. Yeah. And it was easy, easy. Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: And so how long were you in France and -- and where were you? And
 how would you like to --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Spent --

CYNTHIA LEE: -- remember that experience?

JONATHAN BLAZON: -- six months -- The best part was actually the first part, the first
 six months. Uh because it was such an adventure and so rewarding. Because I went
 there terrified, alone, isolated, didn't know anybody. First time I was away from -- from
 my family. And uh I didn't -- There were no Americans. I didn't speak the language. It
 was completely terrifying. And the fact that I was able to make friends, find a place to
 live, you know, find myself a good situation, learn the language, uh know my way, like
 by heart, around the whole city, is uh very rewarding and confidence building for a 23-
 year-old, 24-year-old kid. Uh so those -- that's my fondest memory, those first six
 months in Paris, learning -- studying French uh and just -- just learning to assimilate the
 culture. Uh and then the year later I went to school in -- I went back to New York for six
 months and then went back to -- '94, I guess, uh the end of '94, to uh go to school in
 Dijon. Yeah. I was there uh for five years, because they did not accept any of my
 undergrad credits. So I had to start all over again, which made me mad. But I loved
 being a foreigner living in France so much that I said, "I'm just going to do
 undergraduate again." So I did undergraduate again in three years and then I did my
 graduate in two years.

CYNTHIA LEE: What did you love so much about being a foreigner in France?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Hm. I liked being in the role of the -- kind of the little underdog,
 that uh has to prove himself. Uh because, uh you know, I grew up with kind of a chip on

my shoulder anyway, one, because, you know, of this mixed heritage thing, uh the other because -- because uh I'm -- was much shorter than anyone in school. I was -- I -- I'm not -- I'm five-six today. But when I was uh -- you know, when I was 14 I was four-six. I was a head shorter than anyone, any other man, for sure. So I had a huge chip on my shoulder. Uh and I just felt I was different. And I thought our family different. And, uh you know, I probably had a little bit of a su--feriority -- inferiority complex going at the time. And so being a foreigner kind of -- just kind of fit that to a T, you know. I liked having to prove myself to people uh and really impress people and prove them wrong and turn heads. And I liked it. I liked being different. And uh I probably hid behind it too. Because I was able to hide my, kind of, shyness and, kind of, social awkwardness behind the fact that I was a foreigner. And so that was convenient, as well.

CYNTHIA LEE: What do you think you were representing when you were in France?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Well, that's a good one. Uh I was representing the United States. I mean, you know, I always told people in France too that I was half Chinese, because it worked just as well in France as it did in uh -- as it does in the States -- or as it did in the States, that, you know, being multiethnic there, also unheard of. I mean, I guess in France what you had uh was, you know, some uh mixed North African and French. Uh that was kind of the most common multiethnic. And some hapas, actually, because of the Vietnamese-French, also. But uh I was pretty kind of still very unique in my multiethnicness (laughs) there too. So uh -- But uh anytime I tried to -- to do like the Chinese side, people -- they just saw me as American. I was the American. So I was really representing the United States there, and New York. Yeah. And -- and I would say, you know, "I come from Brooklyn," and every kid in France knows Brooklyn. It's -- the -- the name Brooklyn has a cachet overseas. You know, it stands for uh cool, trendy, hip place. And it was also kind of uh dangerous too, because there was still, you know, the reputation of Brooklyn in the '70s and '80s and Bed-Stuy and East New York and how dangerous it was. Yeah. Uh so I would say I was from Brooklyn. They thought I was worldly, cool, and a little dangerous, (laughs) which suited me well, you know.

CYNTHIA LEE: So when you uh -- when you came back from France --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- how did that experience change you or -- or --? Or did it? And did it affect how you -- how you viewed yourself? Uh --

[5:06]

JONATHAN BLAZON: Sure. Uh I think it -- it gave me enormous self-confidence, which I never had growing up. Uh I had kind of a -- a phony, superficial sense of self-consciousness-- uh self-confidence. I was probably -- I don't know uh but I think I probably often came off as a little bit self-righteous, as a kid. When I came back from France, I had been -- (laughs) People had -- I had been through so many arguments, that -- you know -- and, uh you know, in -- in the good sense of the term -- you know, the French like to argue, as part of their culture -- uh that it had just uh allowed me to look at myself, have some perspective on myself, and be able to laugh at myself. And that was the biggest thing that France taught me, have a little bit of sense of humor about myself, not take myself so seriously. And that gives you self-confidence. And so night and day who I was before I went to France and after I went to France. There's no -- no comparison.

CYNTHIA LEE: You almost self-conscious.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: So was there an element of that that you had to fight?

JONATHAN BLAZON: Self-consciousness? Sure! Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Uh I was uh -- I f-- was very conscious of who I was. I was different -- and short uh and shy, and, yeah, very self-conscious about it. And uh made me very unhappy as a kid. Because uh I had a hard time making friends. It was harder for me than for the -- for a lot of other people.

CYNTHIA LEE: Mm-hmm.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: So you're back in Brooklyn.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: And is it a mis-- a different experience?

JONATHAN BLAZON: I first came back in 2003 and had to move back in with my mother, which was not a great experience, having to move back in with one's parents. Uh and then, you know, I met my wife, and uh moved in with her for a while before we got married. We got married in 2007. I was living in Manhattan, and living in a high-rise on

the Upper West Side, which, to me, was kind of like the culmination of a dream. It was like the Jeffersons, you know, moving on up. It was a big deal. Uh but we had our baby, uh in 2008, and we needed more space. So we bought a place in Brooklyn. And I was -- uh I had a lot of trepidation coming back, because I thought it would be -- uh it would feel like moving backwards a little bit, coming back to live where you kind of grew up as a teenager and where you weren't very happy, you know, and very comfortable in your own skin. But, um you know, Brooklyn's completely different. And my experience now is completely different. And uh Brooklyn is a vibrant and energet-- uh and very -- It's a great place to live. And so I'm very happy to be here now. And I love what's happening in this borough. Uh and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. I feel like in the center of the earth here -- center of the world. Yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: What do you -- what do you see for your daughter, moving forward?

JONATHAN BLAZON: So I guess what -- uh in terms of Brooklyn, uh I do have hesitations about what type of education she'll receive here and about the type of people she'll uh meet and be -- be friends with and like how foreign that will be relative to my experience as a kid uh and how I'm going to relate to that and help her -- be able to help her. Because I don't know if I'll have a point of reference to help her, necessarily. But, um you know, I'm hopeful. I'm hopeful that -- Uh you know, she's already here in a very good daycare. Uh and -- and all the people we meet here are -- are friendly and well educated and very forward-thinking and uh -- You know, so that give me a lot of hope, moving forward. Mm.

CYNTHIA LEE: Is there anything that you want to say or -- or add, as we're coming to the close of the interview, and thoughts that you might have about uh being of multi-heritage or, you know, your daughter also being multi-heritage?

[9:50]

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah. So, uh you know, uh I think, in -- in me, I still want to be Chinese. And uh I've been taking -- like I've been taking Cantonese lessons for the last uh four years, which, as an adult, is -- is almost a uh crazy thing to do, really. Because it's uh -- you know, it's not even, and uh the -- the national language of China anymore. Uh it's a spoken dialect that is actually endangered. Uh it's not even the dialect of my

family. My family speaks Toisanese. But it's the dialect of my wife's family and of a lot of my friends. But for some reason, it's very important for me to learn it. Because I still want to be Chinese -- and in me. I don't know w-- I'm not sure that I've come to terms with why that is. But uh I like the fact that my daughter's three-quarters Chinese. And -- and I wish that she -- Like her hair is light brown now. Uh I want it to get darker and I want her to look more like her mum. Because I want her to be Asian. And uh so uh I -- I'm not sure I've come to terms with that completely yet. I think, you know, being mixed-race, I've always felt a little -- uh I f-- always felt a little uh misunderstood by Chinese people. And I still wa-- I want to be accepted by them. And something -- something that's bugged me too is that sometimes I've gotten the attitude from Chinese like, because you're mixed and you don't look completely Chinese, it's been somehow easier for me to blend in -- you know? -- that somehow I didn't have the same kind of struggles they did. Uh and so that's always kind of affected me too. Uh yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: That's interesting.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Yeah. And the -- you know, and the fact that, you know, uh it is -- the -- the fact that y-- I don't ha-- I have -- so few people who have the same experience as me, that, uh you know, I -- I think I've always uh wished that I could share my experience more with people uh. Uh and that's just no-- something I've never really been able to do. Mm.

CYNTHIA LEE: Did you ever think you would actually marry someone who was Chinese?

JONATHAN BLAZON: I did and then I didn't. And then I did. Uh (laughs) the first serious relationship I had was with a Chinese girl -- uh not very serious about her at the time. Uh you know, and uh that ended poorly. And so I thought for a while, especially when I was in France, that -- When I was in France, I wanted to be French. And I was embracing the other side of my heritage much more than -- And then, when I came back to the States, uh I was just open-minded, uh (laughs) I guess. But meeting someone who was Chinese, uh it just felt so comfortable and so -- so much easier, you know. And -- and fortunately, my wife never looked down upon my mixed uh -- my mixed heritage, never thought of me as being less Chinese, th-- uh as other Chinese people do. So, yeah, I guess, in -- actually, in verbalizing this right now, it -- uh I'm kind of revealing to

myself that it's still a point of -- it still kind of hurts a little bit that Chinese people think of me as being less Chinese --

CYNTHIA LEE: Mm.

JONATHAN BLAZON: -- of not being Chinese, actually. I shouldn't say "less." They just don't even consider me as being Chinese. And I hate it. I really do.

CYNTHIA LEE: Do you think that's something that, then, you would need to explore with your own daughter, like her need to identify with that aspect of her heritage or --?

JONATHAN BLAZON: I want to be careful with my daughter that I don't project my own uh -- my own issues on her. I think she's going to have to find her own identity. I mean, I'll certainly be happy to talk with her about it, as much as she wants to but um -- Before she was born, we -- and uh we were selecting names for her. I really wanted to give her a Chinese first name. Uh and then I remembered talking to it -- talking about that to some of my Chinese friends or my cousins and them saying, "Why would you do that her? She's growing up in the United States. Wh--? You know, uh sh-- Let her blend in," you know. And like listening to him -- them say that, it's like, well, it's -- well, yeah, it's really about me, so my own identity issues, w-- that I want to project on my daughter. I want to make sure that everyone knows my daughter's Chinese, uh because then, by extension, they'll know that I'm Chinese. And that's -- it's -- You know. So I w-- don't want to interfere in the way my daughter identifies herself. I mean, we'll -- we'll have to see how that one goes. Uh yeah.

CYNTHIA LEE: Well, thank you --

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: -- very much, for this time.

JONATHAN BLAZON: Mm-hmm.

CYNTHIA LEE: It was great.

JONATHAN BLAZON: OK. Thank you.

[14:49]

END OF AUDIO FILE 2