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Title: Keith One Interview  
Narrator: Keith One  
Interviewer: Anna Takada  
Location: Chicago, Illinois  
Date: October 28, 2017  
Densho ID: ddr-chi-1-10

<Begin Segment 1>

Anna Takada: 00:00 This is an interview with Keith One as part of Alphawood Gallery Chicago Resettlement Experience Oral History Project. Your oral history project is being conducted in line with the current exhibition "Then They Came for Me: the Incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII and the Demise of Civil Liberties." Today is October 28th, 2017 at about 3:15 PM. We are recording at the Alphawood Gallery Oral History Studio. Keith One is being interviewed by Anna Takada for the Gallery. Um, so to start, can you just state your full name?

Keith One: 00:34 It's Keith One.

AT: 00:36 And um, where and when were you born?

KO: 00:41 I was born in Chicago, here in Chicago. This was in 1953.

AT: 00:46 Okay. Um, and like I mentioned, it would be great if we could talk a little bit about, you know, your- where your family was, um, during the war and then we can get a little bit into your experiences of growing up in Chicago. Um, so briefly, where, your parents, where were they, um, the time of the war and what happened?

KO: 01:08 Well, they lived in the Sacramento area. Um, Marysville was, my mother was from there, my father from Sacramento and they were both, um, sent to the Tule Lake Relocation Center. So they started there and then ended up at Amache in Granada, um, toward the end of the war. And, um, so from directly there, they, then they emigrated to Chicago, both of them, but they didn't know each other at the time. So they didn't meet each other until they arrived here in the city.

AT: 01:38 And what was the, um, the draw for Chicago for both families?

KO: 01:45 Opportunity. I think there was a fear for them to return to California. Obviously you know, very, very bad experience, bad memories and so to, to move east presented perhaps opportunity for jobs, a new life, let's say, away from the bad memories. And then I think that was the impetus for both of them to separately move to Chicago.

AT: 02:12 And do you know what, um, both families were doing in California before the war?

KO: 02:21 You know, I know my father, um, I think grew up in a very poor household. They were, they were farmers for much of their life. You know so there's a lot of manual labor going on. Um, and he had, um, two brothers and two sisters on top of it, and they all worked in the fields. I think it was the strawberry fields particularly they worked in. And my mother, I think she had a little bit of a better life. She, I think you heard from her, she had five sisters. Um, a very enterprising father. My grandfather who, you know, came to the United States as a young boy and, uh, endeavored to learn English and to work hard and to make a life for himself. Um, and so that's sort of, you know, that's, that was the beginning of both of their s- or the lives, both sides of the family.

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**<Begin Segment 2>**

AT: 03:11 And then, um, so Chicago, then, what were the, their respective families doing once they got here?

KO: 03:20 Well, I know that my father's father passed away, um, during the war, so, and I never had a chance to meet him. Um, and his mother stayed in California, she stayed there. Um, so on my mother's side, the entire family moved to Chicago. And I think you heard from my mother that she when, as I was saying, he's a very enterprising, my grandfather's very enterprising, hardworking man, and he had a succession of different businesses that he had. Grocery store was one. Uh, he had, uh, a dry cleaners as well and, um, and was relatively successful despite, you know, all the discrimination. You know, the cards were really, were up against him, right? I mean, they were stacked against him in many ways, but despite that, still succeeded to the point of being able to provide for his family and it's a very large family- six, six daughters and his wife. So, um, yeah, that's basically it for him. And he just, uh, and I, I had the pleasure to get to know him really well because he lived to be a nice long age and you know, and he, he spoke English, which was very, um, unusual for an Issei. And so I got to know him really well and we got to know each other very well. So, you know, of all the grandparents, I think he was certainly the closest for me.

AT: 04:48 Um, I'm so, sorry, I'm gonna just correct this one more time [goes to move microphone].

KO: 04:52 Sure.

AT: 04:53 And we'll edit this out. Um, yeah, that's one of the beautiful things about having editors [laughs].

KO: 05:01 Yes.

AT: 05:02 Um, and, and so your father, what, what did he end up doing once he got to Chicago?

KO: 05:12 Oh, he did a variety of different things. He was also a hardworking man, um, but uneducated. And so, you know, he had to take whatever jobs he could take. I know at one point he was selling vacuum cleaners door to door. Did that for a little bit. Uh, and then he finally ended up in a sort of an apprenticeship where

he, he decided that he was going to work in the tool and die industry you know, industry that's pretty much died today, but, at least here in America. But he, um, he worked very hard at learning that. He, hooked on with a company owned by this man, and, um, was successful in the business. He rose to the level of general manager in the company. Uh, but since it was a family-owned business, he could go no further. So eventually he left that company and he started his own business. And this is probably about 1971 when he did that.

AT: 06:12 And what was the business that he started?

KO: 06:14 It was also tool and die. So he used his, his knowledge, um, to start that business and probably took some of his customers from his, uh, previous, um, place of employment and built a small but successful business for himself.

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**<Begin Segment 3>**

AT: 06:31 And then, um, your parents, where did their families or where did they settle in, in Chicago? Which areas?

KO: 06:40 You know, generally in the Lincoln Park area, around here, Old, Old Town maybe more specifically, I think. Um, um, I think you heard from my mother, you know, they lived in a variety of places, but around Clark, LaSalle, uh, across from the Moody Bible Institute, um, that's where my mother was. My father was I think farther south of that, maybe more on the West Side of Chicago. I remember him saying he lived on Marshfield. So that was a street that he lived on as well. And so, a little bit separated in distance, but, um, you know, the, eventually they were to meet in Chicago.

AT: 07:20 And where did they meet?

KO: 07:22 I think it was in this fellowship group, um, through a church and it was, I think it was more a social club than anything else, but, um, it was an opportunity to meet other, uh, Japanese Americans who- Nisei specifically that, uh, were in camp as well and had emigrated to Chicago. So I think a lot of people sort of, uh, met their future spouses in that, in that place.

AT: 07:51 And when did they get married?

KO: 07:54 1950.

AT: 07:56 And you were born '53?

KO: 07:58 '53, right.

AT: 07:59 So, um, where, where were they living at the time that you were born?

KO: 08:07 Oh, well, once they got married, um, and this, this is interesting because I don't think she shared this with you, but you know they got married in 1950. They had a very difficult time finding a place to live because it, nobody would rent to Japanese Americans. They didn't want anything to do with them. So what they

did is they put an ad in the paper. They said, they said specifically 'Japanese American couple seeking apartment'. And the wonderful thing, there was a lady, a landlord who answered the ad and said, you know, I'm specifically looking for a Japanese American couple. She wanted to rent to a couple that had the camp experience. So, so they able to get an apartment. It was a small apartment, one bedroom apartment. And um, that's eventually, that's where we lived at least for the first five years of my life.

- AT: 09:06 And where was that apartment?
- KO: 09:09 Oh, let's see. It was on, um, let me think. Oh, it's on Hudson, which is not too far from here either.
- AT: 09:17 Do you know any, any more details about why the um, the landlord was interested in having Japanese Americans specifically?
- KO: 09:28 You know, no, other than she just said when they, she answered the ad and talked to my parents, they, she just said, I think she said something to the effect that, you, 'I feel very badly about what happened to a lot of the Japanese Americans. And I wanted to be able to help by providing a place to live, knowing that it was very difficult for Japanese Americans to find apartments to rent.' So, very compassionate woman, I'm sure. I don't, I don't know her name. I don't know if she's still around, but um, that was really an answer, you know, to their needs.

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**<Begin Segment 4>**

- AT: 10:09 And so after the five years on Hudson, where did your family go?
- KO: 10:15 My father decided that, um, and I think this had to do with the experience of the war, camp and everything else. They wanted to fully embrace American life. They wanted to, um, not that they wanted to distance themselves from their heritage, but, but just that 'we're in America, let's be Americans,' you know. And so they decided that they were going to move out to the suburbs. Now this is 1958, right? And, and so they decided, and specifically my father decided that it'd be great to move out to a suburb called Palatine. 1958 and, um, decided that he was going to build a house. Um, and it just to, the way he kind of wanted it. And so he wanted an all brick house versus, he didn't want to have to paint. So he said, I want all brick house. He, he had a vision for the future and he said, you know, some day, we might own two cars. So he made sure that the house had a two-car garage and this is 1958, right? Very rare. And the neighborhood was all, almost all single-car garages, but he looked ahead and, and it was great. The interesting thing though was that when the house was being built, he wanted to, to see what the progress, how the progress is going, but he was afraid to stand in front of the house and observe, still fearful of retribution, maybe, whatever, prejudice. But, um, so what he would do is he would come by the house, but he would be at a distance, the house, you know, number of houses away from a distance observing the builders, building the house. But he didn't, he didn't dare go close to the house that was being built. So, again, I think that's just a carry over from, you know, all the, the prejudice

and everything. Just even their, their experience with, uh, trying to find an apartment, right. You know, thinking well what, you know, with a neighborhood like this will it welcome a Japanese American family? Would they? But yet he wanted the safety of, at the time the suburbs, right. Just, you know, safer than the city. A better place to raise a family, have a yard, um, cleaner air, maybe it's better schools, whatever. So, you know, really, just a visionary in terms of all that so early, you know, to think about all those things. Um, and the house got built and we moved in. Uh, but thankfully they had no issues at all. Neighbors were very welcoming and uh, they were very grateful for that. And I think very lucky because it wasn't, not even a year later, another Japanese American family that wanted to move into the neighborhood did the same thing and building a house, oh, it must be three or four houses down from where they had their house and they would visit the house regularly as it's being built. People noticed that though and apparently there was a petition that was, that was raised to, opposing their move into the neighborhood. So my parents' fears were valid, right. That that could happen. But they're just fortunate enough that their immediate neighborhood was very welcoming and unfortunately this other family, not as welcoming, so.

AT: 14:13 How far away was this home from your family?

KO: 14:13 Probably five houses away.

AT: 14:16 That's so interesting.

KO: 14:16 Different street, but five houses away. It's just, it's just who lives around you basically. So, but over time, I mean their immediate neighbors across the street, both sides of their house and everything, they became all good friends. And just this morning, my mother was saying, it was interesting, this is just this morning, she's remembering her neighbor that lived right next door and when we moved in and my brother and I would sit on the on, there was a couple stairs in front of the house just sitting out there just, just looking around and um, quietly and her neighbor saying those, 'look at those cute Japanese boys just, just sitting there. Aren't they cute?' Now maybe we were, but you know a lot of people might not have thought that, right. But her neighbor next door said, was, was just wonder- she says 'this is great. I just love having you next door.' So very, very fortunate they had neighbors like that.

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**<Begin Segment 5>**

AT: 15:15 And um, so was most of your upbringing in Palantine then?

KO: 15:20 Oh yeah. Yep. Went through grade school, junior high and high school. So yeah, I lived there entire-and my mother still lives in the same house today.

AT: 15:34 And you have two younger brothers? Um...

KO: 15:37 Yes.

AT: 15:39 And what years were they born?

KO: 15:42 Well, uh, Darrell was '55 and then Jeff who's here also with me in '59.

AT: 15:51 And, um, can you tell me a little bit more about what that was like growing up in, in Palatine?

KO: 16:00 Well, um, I said our, our neighbors were welcoming, you know, I think when we went to school, um, it was a little bit different, right? Palatine at the time was just all Caucasian. There were no, no minorities. There are no African Americans, no Asian Americans. I was the only one, basically. Kindergarten was pretty, there wasn't much issue. I think when you're five years old, kids don't know the difference really. Um, but in first grade I had a different experience. And um, this is kind of interesting because, you know how you do the school pictures, you take school pictures, you get all dressed up, take the school picture, and then you wait for it to come. And then you bring it home from school and you give it to your parents, right. And it's got, you have the big picture and it's got all the little ones, all just in there. Anyway, um, my mom pulls out that picture of me in the first grade and I did not have a smile on my face. It was more of a frown. And she goes, 'oh, what's,' she says, 'what's wrong? How come you look so unhappy? Why do you look so unhappy?' And I said, 'well, oh, what, you know, I don't, I don't like this.' And she said, 'well, what is it that you don't like?' And I said, 'well, I don't like my face.' And my mom said, 'well, why don't you like your face? You know, you have a cute face.' And I said, 'it's different.' And that was what, that was in first grade, probably my first, you know, realization that I was different. I mean, at least physically different because kids told me I was.

AT: 17:52 Even at that young age.

KO: 17:54 Oh yeah.

AT: 17:55 First grade.

KO: 17:55 Yeah, yeah. So I remember in grade school and the early years, there was always a few kids that would make fun. You know, they'd say, you know, call me a Chinaman or they, um, or they would, you know, do things with their eyes, you know, and they go, you know, you go, Oh, you know, [slants eyes with fingers] 'Chinese, Japanese', and they'd say American knees [points to knees]. I mean, jokes like that. So, you know, so I felt that, you know, that discrimination, certainly not pervasive, really wasn't pervasive, but there was always a few kids that were like that, you know, and at least early on, but I'd say after like three, four or five years maybe, because we became part of the community, part school, and I participated in sports and got involved in things, that all that eventually just went away, you know, and then, and eventually other minorities started to move in. Some they had that one family I mentioned to you that were discriminated against. Um, there were a couple other Asian families that moved in when I was in high school, that kind of thing. American, uh, African American family too. So it became a little bit more diverse, not as diverse as it is today, but back then it was pretty, you know, getting pretty, uh, a little bit more diverse than it used to be. So that all that kind of went away. But when I grew up, I always felt, since I grew up with mostly Caucasians, I just felt like a Caucasian too. I mean, I just, all I saw were Caucasian faces around me and not really looking at my own. And so that's, that's how we grew up, my brothers and I.

AT: 19:43 And what about at home? Um, at home, did you, um, in what ways were you, you know, maybe connected to Japanese heritage if, if at all?

KO: 19:59 Well, that's the thing. I think, as I mentioned earlier, I think the effort, my parents effort was, let's become, let's embrace becoming Americans. And when we would eat meals at home, my mother would cook every day. We'd have the normal spa-, we'd have spaghetti, we'd have meatloaf, we, you know, we have chicken, all that kind of stuff. But the, but one constant we always had though was rice. So no matter what the meal was, there was always rice. And I think it was because my father, he would always want rice no matter what it was. And, um, I remember one day she served something, which I forgot what it was that didn't demand rice at all. And he just said, hey, where's the rice? You know what I mean? He just, it was just expected to have it every day, no matter what the meal was. So, um, so I remember that. But other than that, you know, everything was American to the 'T' in terms of, you know, how we lived, the clothes we wore, the food we ate, everything else. But there was still, I mean, we had extended family and we'd get together for holidays. New Year's was, was especially popular time where we could eat Japanese food. Um, so we kind of stayed in touch with the, with the Japanese side, but most of the year we just lived as regular Americans.

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**<Begin Segment 6>**

AT: 21:22 Did you ever come into the city at all, in Chicago? When you were living and growing up in Palatine?

KO: 21:28 We still had some family members that lived, extended family members that still live in the city, so we would come in for that. You know, my grandparents still lived here, some aunts and uncles, some cousins did. And so we would do that. But in, in many ways though, I think we, moving away. I think that changed that dynamic quite a bit because then you, you did lose a little bit of that, um, heritage, that connection, culture a little bit. Um, 'cause I know some people that, that stayed in the city, some were Sansei, that I think were much more connected to their heritage than, than we were.

AT: 22:10 Um, and so the times that you would come into the city, um, were you aware or did you recognize like a Japanese- something of a Japanese American community here? Or is businesses or restaur- you know?

KO: 22:29 A little bit. I mean it was mostly the North Side here, Lincoln Park area, I think, um, Lakeview. I think we saw some- where there were some Japanese businesses still around. Um, but you know, we saw that decline over time. It just, it just decreased and I think people end up scattering and that, that cohesive community that sort of used to be there, you know, just kind of started to, dissolving quite a bit. So I mean, to the point right now where, I don't know, you know it it's, you know, how strong or how big a community that that truly is today.

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<Begin Segment 7>

- AT: 23:09 Have you visited, um, Japanese American communities or like Little Tokyos or Japantowns on the West Coast?
- KO: 23:17 Oh yeah, oh yeah, yeah. Because I, I enjoy Japanese food. So, um, yeah, Japantown, both in San Francisco and LA. I've been there and I had an aunt that lived in Japantown, one of my mother's sisters still lives in San Francisco. And so we'd go there, we were there last year, my wife and I, and we strolled around J-town and ate some ramen, and did, you know, did some things like that. Went shopping at the Daiso store, things like that. So, yeah, we, we still, um, yeah, yeah.
- AT: 23:56 What has that felt like for you? Go- visiting those, um, those types of areas or communities?
- KO: 24:05 Oh, yeah, it seems familiar to me, right? I mean, it doesn't feel like it's a distant thing at all. Um, but it's not an everyday thing that I, that I experience. One thing that we've always wanted to do was travel to Japan because- never been there. And so we have the opportunity next month to go, my wife and I and my brother and his wife, Oh, we're going, we're going to go, it's a tour, but we're gonna go for two and a half weeks. We just have to go. It's, it's our heritage. It's our, um, it's the homeland in many ways. So we'll see. We'll see how that, how that goes going there. Not speaking the language is gonna be, makes it a little harder. And I, I wish my parents would have taught us Japanese growing up- it would've been so easy for us to, um, to learn as young children. But again, I think it's, they wanted to be, embrace becoming Americans. So they didn't focus on that. They didn't focus on teaching us Japanese. They didn't tell us about their experience in camp. I think that was, stays in with the theme of, you know, let's just become Americans. So I think they were successful.
- AT: 25:28 Do you have any, uh, expectations or feelings about this upcoming trip? Having never been?
- KO: 25:37 Um, I, I think I'll find it, um, even not having been there, I think I'll still find it familiar in many ways. Because, you know, even growing up, I mean, I, I've heard Japanese words all my life, individual words that we call things. Um, I understand to a degree the culture of politeness, being reserved, um, being clean, being neat. I mean, all those things are still things that I learned from my parents, right? That's probably very Japanese, um, and I, I expect that, I'll see all that also in Japan as well. So I think it'll be familiar, but also very different experience.

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<Begin Segment 8>

- AT: 26:26 Now you have, um, just a few more questions as we wrap up. Um, I'm wondering if you could, um, like in a few words, uh, describe the, um, the Japanese American experience or community in the Midwest. How might it be unique or...?

KO: 26:58 Compared to what, West Coast for instance?

AT: 27:01 For instance, or.

New Speaker: 27:01 Well, I, I have a friend on the West Coast that, um, we ended up working up working for the same company. He's also Sansei, but I, I, I saw his experience much different than mine. I mean, because again, I, I think he was more connected to the culture, a, greater, uh, Japanese population on the West Coast surrounded more that, not just family, but just the community and everything else. I think coming out, coming to Chicago where that was much smaller and then eventually moving out to Palatine, which there was none at all. There was a stark difference there in terms of that. So, um, in some ways I wished I was still, and experienced that community, but I can also appreciate the, my parents' desire to embrace, you know, just being an American, living the American life and everything else and learned a lot about that as well. So they're different. I don't know if it's better or worse. Some ways it was better and maybe some ways is worse, but definitely different.

AT: 28:18 And are there any ways that you've seen um, uh, some of the impacts of either the incarceration or resettlement to Chicago? Have um, like those legacies playing out in your own life or experiences?

KO: 28:38 Not so much because as you heard my mother say, she didn't talk about it that much. So we didn't, I don't think we understand or realize the full impact of, you know, being pulled away from your home and your, and you know, where you grew up, your business in the case of my grandfather. And, and in one week's time just be sent off somewhere. Um, and then all the prejudice and retribution that came even afterwards as we talked about the difficulty of getting an apartment to rent, things like that. You know, that's many years of hardship in many ways that I can't fully understand. One because they didn't talk about it. But secondly, it's just, um, unless you live it, I don't know how you'd really fully understand it. An exhibit like this certainly helps. And we've seen other exhibits too. But again, it's, it's all- you're seeing our pictures and words, but to live it, that's gotta be totally different.

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**<Begin Segment 9>**

AT: 29:44 And at what point in your life did you start, um, 'cause it seems like you've investigated a little bit, what happened with your family? At what age um, did you start looking into that and what inspired that search?

KO: 30:01 I'd probably say it was even after college because again, I mean it wasn't really spoken of and um, I, I think it's just, um, yeah, just relating with my grandfather for instance, and in his last days, certainly. Um, and the interesting thing, he had recorded some, some things, uh, of his life also, not on film but, but just of uh, audio recording that I've had a chance to listen to a little bit and also gave me a perspective. And it also peaked interest in terms of, well, what, what did they really go through? So, and I remember asking my mother a lot of questions about that too. But again, I think there's a reluctance to share that or maybe it's so painful that it's just wanting to block it out a little bit or not relive it. Maybe

that's, that's the reason. So I don't think I could fully understand, but certainly coming to the exhibit, we're trying to at least better and bringing my sons here, you know, Yonsei, we want them to also understand that as well.

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**<Begin Segment 10>**

AT: 31:16 Last question. Um, what, what hopes do you have, um, for your children and maybe grandchildren or what kind of, if you could pass down some kind of legacy or, or message to them, what, what do you really want them to have or to understand?

KO: 31:39 I think I want them, I want them to have some pride in their heritage. It continues to get diluted, obviously as, um, you know, we have, um, you know, interracial marriages, children, hapas, that, um, um, would seem to maybe dilute that, but it, but, but it doesn't mean that you can't know that that's still part of your heritage, right. And, um, you know, understand what the Japanese Americans have gone through. And that that's a legacy that has helped them, right? The reason why they're here, the reason why every successive generation has worked hard, to provide opportunity, right? And so it's, it's great to see them succeed. I also want them to be reminded that that success is built on previous generations, hard work, that they could have this opportunity today. And I think my, my sons understand that certainly, I mean, they're both being very successful in their own right, but they know that it's come down from previous generations. So if they can just know that, embrace that, and hopefully for my grandkids and future generations, I hope that that will still carry on that way.

AT: 33:03 Well, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me.

KO: 33:06 Sure. You're welcome.

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