

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Kaylynn Kim Oral History
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Interviewer: MS – Unknown
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Male Speaker: Okay. We'll start from the beginning.

Kaylynn Kim: Okay.

MS: Say your name and spell it.

KK: Go now?

MS: Yes.

KK: Kaylenn Kim, K-A-Y-L-Y-N-N. Kim, K-I-M.

MS: Tell us what kind of work do you do?

KK: I'm a lawyer with Allen Matkins Downtown Law Firm, specializing in real estate, finance, and transactions.

MS: Tell us, you didn't grow up here. You grew up in Korea and you came here to Oklahoma. Tell me about that.

KK: I came to the U.S. when I was seventeen. To Oklahoma first and stayed there for three years and made my way to west coast here.

MS: Why Oklahoma? I assume it's because your father was working –

KK: No. I came all by myself. At that time when you wanted to go study abroad in Korea, you had to be consulted by some people who are specialized in that type of consulting. I think Oklahoma State, they had a pretty good promotional package at that time. It attracted me, and I decided to come. Of course, my parents made the decision, not me, but I agree with my parents.

MS: When did you come to study?

KK: Where?

MS: When. When did you study and where?

KK: In Oklahoma City University, undergraduate. I went to chiropractic school in California. I was a chiropractor prior to becoming lawyer. So, law is my second career.

MS: So, how did you first become acquainted with the port and what were you learning about it?

KK: My husband used to be captain of LAPD and stationed in San Pedro area. I think it's called San Pedro police station. He asked me to come sometimes to the community meetings and what not. So, that's, I think, I was exposed to first became aware of ports and the existence of the port. I was more exposed to the issue of policing, violence, crime, unsolved murders that's happening

in Wilmington, not so much of port activities.

MS: So, when did you learn about the port being an important part of the economy of southern California?

KK: When I became the commissioner. It was an eye-opening experience for me, all the numbers and jobs that we create. I'm still learning more. I just went with the mayor to Washington, D.C. as part of the citywide lobbying efforts. We were talking to members of Congress and everywhere we go, we talked about port. How port impacts every state in the United States. I was very proud.

MS: I mean, you're not the only one. Why do you think the port of Los Angeles is not better known it seems? Certainly, even in the United States, but even in the world, it's not. Everyone thinks, "Oh, New York, that's a big port," New Orleans, Galveston, Seattle, San Francisco.

KK: Really? I thought port of LA is a well-known place. You don't think that. [laughs]

MS: I don't know. I mean, maybe we [inaudible].

KK: The port is a very unique industry, and it could become irrelevant to people's daily lives. I think that's the irrelevancy or I think that might be the reason why people don't seem to relate their lives with the port activities. But when you think about it, whatever you buy, you can find anything. Household goods in your house all come from somewhere and ended up going through the port. I think the port of LA's presence in the world is pretty, pretty strong. I've been traveling a lot, so I know that a lot of environmental measures that we passed here ended up being adopted by other ports. So, I think we are leading the way.

MS: So, what do you say when you take some of these trips and you're meeting people to introduce them to the port of Los Angeles and its importance to describe it to them?

KK: I'm sorry.

MS: When you're traveling and you're representing the port, what do you tell them to describe this place and its importance and significance of it?

KK: People that I meet, they are already aware of the function of the port. I go out a lot to Asia, and this is a place where east west meet, really. Majority of the goods are coming from east and ended up being here and consumed locally and nationwide. But I think we also kind of need to know the culture aspect of who's moving goods and what's happening overseas. So, we talk about a lot about cultural issues and the differences in operation and efficiency wide and environmental impact and how the residents or community reacts to the port. For instance, in Hong Kong, in general, the people are very proud of their port. So, environmental issues over there are not as, I would say, heightened issue as what it is here. Although, efficiency and functions and operation wide, they're much more active over there.

MS: Well, I mean, much of the center of Los Angeles is twenty miles away. In Hong Kong,

you're sitting right on it.

KK: Right on it. Busan, same thing, Japan, same thing.

MS: So, it's in New York, the same thing.

KK: Same thing.

MS: What is it that's unusual compared to other ports that you've visited about Los Angeles as a port?

KK: Los Angeles is much more a receiving port. So, when you talk about the activities, the activities out in Hong Kong are very diverse activities, which means they transload and receive and unpack. It's very different type of activities as compared to what we do here. We receive stuff and try to push those goods out of the port. So, each port has a very unique function. It's very, quite fascinating to learn.

MS: How did you get involved with the commission? How did you get engaged with them?

KK: I think I just got lucky. [laughs] First, I didn't know. It's not that I wanted to be on the port commission, to be honest. I just didn't know any better. But when I was offered port commissioners, I talked to a couple other people who were former commissioners in the past, including former port commissioner. I learned a little bit more about the porting and international trade goods movement and the impact on the trade that just got me so excited. But your question is how do I –

MS: I'm not on the Board and you are.

KK: I was very active in the community. I think you need to, right? I got involved with doing a lot of political events and fundraisers, got to know a lot of stakeholders. I think that's how I became involved in politics and ended up here.

MS: So, when you joined the commission and didn't really know much, was that a kind of an overwhelming, "Oh, my God, what have I got myself in here?" I mean, what was it like when you first got engaged with the commission?

KK: In the beginning, I think, first six months, I still didn't know what I was doing. But when we were about to decide on major EIR, terminal expansion EIR, that's when I felt how important this commission role is. It's impacting on the project itself. At the same time, the community, there's a lot of check and balance that I have to play. So, that's when I really realized that's a very important role that I am playing, and I can't take it lightly.

MS: Also, I mean, as a lawyer, you shouldn't be too not aware of this, but it's a contentious position. I mean, there's a number of opposing forces that you often have to balance. Talk about the different forces that are competing for the court.

KK: Yes, we have the residents. Community who's affected by the negative impact from the operating side. We have also had businesspeople who need to move goods as efficient as possible, less costly as possible. So, business community and we have environmental community who advocates environment in general, and we do have residents. So, we have to balance those three communities' interest and their rights and what not. The balancing has been very challenging, but I try to be reasonable. I try to pay attention to what they have to say. But at the same time, I like to stay in the fairground and see whether what they're asking is reasonable as measured against the other side. So, balancing has been always challenging.

MS: So, how does the board relate to the management? Geraldine and others or the executive director? What's that relationship?

KK: I think we have a wonderful relationship.

MS: I mean, more than just a personal sense. I mean, institutionally, how does that work?

KK: The charter gave the board the authority to run the department. We are the head of the department. We hire a general manager to run and operate. I think there is a reason why commissioners are there above general manager. Again, that's check and balance. We conduct hearing and we make sure that staff or senior management, or management is doing within the scope of what charter has authorized. So, it has to be check and balance and I don't believe that if it's neither has to be strong, it has to be balanced. We can't have a strong staff. We, commissioner, can't have two control commissioner and weak management, neither way would succeed.

MS: Personally, now that you're engaged in the board and its activities, what are your particular passions about the things here?

KK: My passion is to bring more jobs to the local community. I particularly believe that since we are doing a lot of environmental talking about high tax and biofuel and alternative environmental technology. We have a consumer base right here at the port. We've been talking with staff, and other commissioners support my idea or our idea that we should try to look underutilized land surrounding the port and see whether we can create like sustainable or green concept. Some special district so that we can incentivize these companies, whether it's local or overseas, to come and base their technology or research right in Wilmington, where the consumer base is right here. So, that's my passion. I want to work on economic development. True sense of economic development, not just by way of moving goods, but actually try to utilize the resources and the potential that we have here and creating more jobs and make this place a more viable place.

MS: What are the big challenges that are facing the port, I mean, that you deal within the commission?

KK: The balancing is very important, environmental. We can't allow the business to grow at the expense of our health and our kids' health and our community's health. So, the balancing has always been challenging. Also, coming up with measures which will impact both sides, whether

negative or positively. But we have to figure out the impact, not in the general sense, but in detail sense so that we know going in, what we are impacting and what we are expecting down the road. That is always difficult. You can easily draw stick figure or skeleton, but having the meat fill in and do that in a certain time period, that is very challenging and difficult. That's been the challenge.

MS: What about the competition of the marketplace? There are other ports along the west coast. There's talk of ports in Mexico, certainly the big Asian ports, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. Who are the competitors of the port of Los Angeles? How are we stocking up with competition?

KK: We are competing not just against other overseas ports, but amongst ourselves along the coastal line in the west coast and east coast. It was interesting that I visited Pier 400, Maersk Terminal, APM Terminal. They were showing how the goods been distributed, all the logistics, the movement of the ship, ships and goods in the world. Now the manufacturer is centered right in China. People who move these goods, they're going to find out which way is fastest and cheapest. That's all the activities of the port and development follow that depend on where they are in terms of the locality proximity of all the activities occur, or manufacturing. If that shifts to India, then India is a midpoint. They could either go to west coast or east coast. So, it is a very difficult question to answer because it will depend on so many variable factors, have to be considered into. All the environmental measures or fees and the policies, it would all affect the business. So, the bottom line is it will depend on where the business is and who is moving, which way is closest. But ports are competing up and down the coastal line and against other countries, for sure.

MS: You're competing across the bay to Long Beach.

KK: That's right. Yes.

MS: So, you probably have picked up some of the history. I mean, San Francisco has this great natural port. San Diego is a great natural port. Seattle is a great natural port. New York, Boston, Philadelphia, there was nothing here. There was a mudflat when they first started, totally man-made port. What do you think about the history? What do you think people should know about the history of this place? And this really started with nothing to being the number one port in the country. I mean, what does the history tell us about this port?

KK: What does the history tell about this port?

MS: Why is it important to know that history? I made an unfair question, but you're not an historian. You can pick something up if you like it. [laughter]

KK: Can you repeat that question again then?

MS: Well, I mean the story of this port is remarkable in the sense that unlike every other port in the world. We started with almost nothing. There was not a natural port here. It was man-made port. Developed to be the number one port in the United States. I mean, if you could sort of tell me how astonishing that is.

KK: First of all, back then when the board was created and port was about to begin in its operation, I think there was a clear direction where the port has to go. Whoever did it at that time, I can't name who was on the board or general manager or the mayor. They had a clear vision. This is the center. This is going to be the gateway to Pacific Rim. If you distinguish our port from San Diego and other port, we're a heavily containerized port where we knew the population here will have a demand for all the goods that come through this port. It's not a cruise, it's not waterfront, but it is heavily containerized. All the development occurred with that direction. So, if I were to rationalize and how this the development of the port occurred, I think there was someone that the leadership knew how to take advantage of geographic situation that we are in.

MS: A final question, what do you see as the future of the port of Los Angeles from your perspective? Do we have a promising future? Or are we going to be in competitive disadvantage? Or what's going to happen?

KK: In the long run, I think we do have a promising future.

MS: Why don't you start again?

KK: Okay.

MS: For the long term.

KK: For the long term, I believe that we do have a remarkable future with all the policies that we are setting. We're leading the way. But it's difficult when you are leading the other ports and don't have much of cooperation, it is difficult. So, in the beginning, in the short term, I think we will have a lot of challenges. We'll see the effect and impact of all the policies that we made or the measures that we passed for the past three years while we were acting as a commissioner. We'll see that impact coming in, and we'll see how that is going to translate into an economy and business and even on the environmental community. So, it will be difficult in the beginning, we might see some cargo diversion. It's not because of the policies or measures that we pass, it could be because the center is shifting from China to India, who knows?

MS: Personally, at the end of your term, what would you like your legacy to contribute to the port?

KK: I really like to push this green valley concept. I think we do have the demand here. It will be wonderful to see Japanese green tech or Germany high tech company based here employed and provide their technology to the port here.

MS: Perfect. Is there anything else you want to talk about?

KK: No.

MS: Good. Thank you.

[end of transcript]