

**MC.0356**

**Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project**

**Maria Lian** – Class of 1970

(interviewed by Jean Choi)

August 17, 2006

This interview with Maria Lian took place August 17, 2006.

JC: If you could start with the basics, like what was your early childhood was like?

ML: In terms of...

JC: Where were you born?

ML: I was born in Shanghai, China, during the eight years' war between China and Japan. We moved around a great deal because of World War II and the internal war between the Communist and National Chinese Government.

JC: Did you have brothers and sisters?

ML: Yes, I had one brother and three sisters.

JC: So, when you were younger what was your schooling like—did your elementary school and/or family really encourage the sciences?

ML: I attended a Catholic elementary school in Shanghai. I believe that the Chinese elementary schools, public or private, emphasize more in math and the sciences. My family didn't particularly encourage science.

JC: When you were young were you always good at math and science?

ML: Right. Both in elementary school and high school, I was way ahead in the class. When I graduated high school, I was one of the fifteen top highest honors students among all High School Seniors who took the government's examination required for graduation in Hong Kong. Naturally, I got excellent distinction honors in all sciences.

JC: Did you like it though?

ML: Yes, I love math and physics.

JC: With elementary school, how is it like in Shanghai? How old were you when you first started going to school?

ML: I went to kindergarten at the age of five. I attended a Catholic elementary school, which is not quite a typical school model in Shanghai. I started learning English during the third grade while the public school starts the students at the 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

JC: Was it only girls?

ML: Yes.

JC: Oh, I see.

ML: We moved to Hong Kong when I was about ten years old. I continued schooling there until my graduation from High School.

JC: Why did you move?

ML: We were refugees because the Communists took over China. My father, a newspaper publisher and a successful entrepreneur, was on the blacklist. He had to leave China.

JC: Oh wow.

ML: Yes, my father was very anti-Communist.

JC: So you guys moved to Hong Kong and then you moved to a different school?

ML: Yes I enrolled in a Protestant school, which has both elementary and high school.

JC: And was it only for girls?

ML: Yes.

JC: What is schooling like usually in Shanghai? If you don't go to a parochial school?

ML: As I understood, the academic standard of the some public school are quite high.

But, I don't know much about it.

JC: Do boys and girls go together to school?

ML: I believe so. Both my parents went to parochial and private schools. So I wouldn't even learn anything about public school from them.

JC: Did they always encourage education?

ML: Yes. In our family, we were told that we would be encouraged to go to the U.S. for college as soon as we would finish high school.

JC: Why?

ML: They believed that getting a high education in the U.S. and mastery of English would help our future in China.

JC: Was that normal in China?

ML: Normal is relative. You know, it depends on the families. On my mother's side of the family, it is a traditional practice to send children abroad for further education.

JC: Why, because they felt that U.S. schools were better?

ML: I believe they wanted us to be exposed to a different culture and broaden our thinking after a solid foundation in Chinese language. There are excellent universities in China: So all of you, your brothers and sisters, you all went to the U.S. after high school?

ML: Yes. We came to the United States after graduating from high school for college and graduate study. Had the regime changed, we would have gone back to China after college education. Unfortunately, China was in a communist regime. While we were waiting for the political change in China, we started to work in the United States.

JC: So what was that like, your father being blacklisted?

ML: Pardon?

JC: What was it like to live knowing that your father was blacklisted? Were you really scared as a child, did you know what was going on?

ML: First of all, we were not as scared since we were too young to understand how serious the situation was. But, we learned from the servants about the outcome, once Communism would come; the roles would be reversed. The servant would be the boss and the boss would be the servant. We understood that our father would be killed if we stayed in Shanghai. On the other hand, we also believed our father would take us to a safer place as he did during the wars. Indeed, he moved our family from Shanghai to Hong Kong.

JC: When you were in high school you knew you were going to go to the U.S.?

ML: Ever since we were very young, our goal was to go to the U.S. for our college education. When my parents moved to Hong Kong, my father lost a lot of assets. So we were trying to study hard and apply for tuition scholarships from the colleges in the U.S. My father would support our room and board.

JC: Did you want to go?

ML: Yes, it had always been my wish.

JC: Why exactly did you want to go though?

ML: I, like all the teenagers, wanted to see the world, go somewhere, away from family. The United States was the best choice. I personally believe that it is the right age for young people who have the courage to explore on their own. So, that's why I told my children, "When you finish high school, you get out of the house and choose any college."

JC: Do you remember what it was like when you first came to the U.S.? What college did you go to?

ML: I remember very well when I first came to the U.S. It was such an experience that I will never forget. I learned English over ten years, but very little in conversation. I was so relieved that I didn't have to ask anyone in order to get a drink or snack when the plane had a layover in California. There were all the vending machines. Then, I got an allergy breakout somewhere during the rest of the journey. When I arrived in Macon, Georgia, Wesleyan College already had sent a Professor who had been in China to meet me at airport. Wesleyan College, out of the seven Wesleyan colleges, is the first women's college in the United States. From time to time, we had joint concerts with Harvard University, which is the oldest University for men.

JC: Really?

ML: Wesleyan College started as a conservatory in 1836. It taught arts, music and sports in order to nurture in students a well round personality. It started almost like a finishing school. Later on, it evolved into a college.

JC: Wait, where is this again?

ML: In Macon, Georgia.

JC: So how did you choose to go there?

ML: I got a full scholarship from Wesleyan College.

JC: So you didn't know anything else about the school?

ML: I only knew that three famous Sung sisters went to Wesleyan College. Actually, my full scholarship was from the endowment bestowed by Madame Kung, the oldest Sung sister. Before the full scholarship came to me, I got a partial scholarship from Bryn Mawr College. I wish I had attended Bryn Mawr College.

JC: Really? Why?

ML: Academically, Bryn Mawr is a more reputed college. Whereas Wesleyan was a finishing school. The good part was that I love music—I took up Piano and singing, just trying to grab the opportunities to learn everything. In fact, I took advantage of learning many things when I was there.

JC: Was it really hard when you first came? Did you come by yourself?

ML: Yes, I came by myself. But, it wasn't hard. At the age of eighteen, everything was new and interesting to me, I never thought it was hard. For me, it was even easier when someone from the college met me at the airport. I was quite ill by the time I got off the plane because of the allergy breakout and sleeplessness throughout the whole trip. It was about a 70 hour-long flight on a propeller airline (gasps). I couldn't fall sleep on an airplane when I was young.

JC: The plane ride was 70 hours long?

ML: The plane crossed the Pacific Ocean, with stops at Guam Island, Los Angeles, and Dallas before reaching Macon, Georgia. I suppose that the airplane had to stop over to refuel many times for a long, long, long journey. It was in October, and school had already started. So, the next morning, I got up and went to the first class regardless of the jet lag and fatigue. I remember it was English class.

JC: But you already knew English, right?

ML: I knew English at the Chinese high school level; This English class is a requirement for the college level. At the end of class, while I was trying to ask for some instruction from the teacher, I threw up and was quite sick. They took me to the infirmary and I stayed there the next three days. Those were my first few days' experience coming to college in the United States.

JC: Did you make friends easily? It was all girls, right? So was it more comfortable?

ML: Yes. It was a women's college. It was very easy to make a lot of friends in the dormitories.

JC: Were there a lot of Asian women?

ML: No. There were only three Asians in the colleges.

JC: How many women went there?

ML: I would say maybe a hundred students per each class. The total student body was around four hundred students. It's a small college.

JC: It's small, but there were only three Asian women, right?

ML: Right, when I was there. In those days, Asians were really a minority in any college or university.

JC: Did you study mostly science at Wesleyan?

ML: My major was Chemistry. But, I did try to take a mathematics class; there was only one advanced course that I could take. There were only three students in the class. I took music classes as well as joining the Glee club.

JC: Chemistry. So you were interested in Chemistry?

ML: Not really.

JC: What were you interested in then?

ML: I was more interested in Physics and Math. In the Chinese culture, parents had their sayings. My father said, "You're going to study Physics? What is a woman going to do with Physics? Why don't you study Chemistry?" In Hong Kong, one had to take a qualifying exam to be admitted into the department that one wishes to study in. When I took the examination for Physics, Chemistry was required in the test. So, I didn't have to

take an exam for Chemistry when I switched into Chemistry, which my father had advised.

JC: So the whole time you wanted to study Physics?

ML: Yes, at that time, I really did want to study Physics.

JC: But somehow you decided to also pursue Biochemistry at MIT, right?

ML: Well, I already had a Master degree in Organic Chemistry from University of Chicago, and I worked at a research lab. Then my boss was offered a position at Harvard University. So, I followed my boss and moved to Boston. Actually, I had a choice to either go to San Francisco with Dr. Rudi Schmid, the Director of the Laboratory, or Boston with my supervisor, when the laboratory was split up. I liked Boston. It was the turning point of my life to end up studying at MIT later on.

JC: How did you know about Boston?

ML: I learned about Boston from my supervisor, Dr. Stephen Robinson, who went to Harvard Medical School. I would have chosen San Francisco, if it didn't have earthquakes. Actually, I had preferred to work with Dr. Schmid.

JC: So you chose because of the earthquakes?

ML: Yes. Also I always liked Boston because it's a college town with tremendous culture. If it was another city, I might have gone to San Francisco. Actually, it is my favorite city now.

JC: But did he move to MIT?

ML: Well, no. Dr. Robinson was teaching at Harvard Medical School. The research laboratory was at Beth Israel Hospital.

JC: So how did you end up at MIT, then?

ML: After a few years of working in the laboratory I realized the need to study more than what I had learned in Organic Chemistry, which was my major. Studying Biochemistry would help me understanding more of what I was working on. That's why I chose to go to MIT, and I got the NIH training grant to study Biochemistry.

JC: You got a grant?

ML: Yes. I got the NIH training grant. In those years, most of the graduate students in science had some financial assistance from the department. Of course, the NIH grant was the best. It had no strings attached. I could concentrate on my course work and research.

JC: So when you went into MIT, what did you think when you first went?

ML: First of all, I was very familiar with MIT already because I had been in Boston over four years, and I was very active in the Chinese student communities. So I already got to know about MIT from other students' view. When I was accepted to MIT, I was thrilled. My first thought was that I was very lucky to get into this prestigious institution for my higher education.

JC: Where'd you move? Which dorm?

ML: McCormick Hall.

JC: There were only women there, right?

ML: True.

JC: But women were still a small percentage?

ML: Yes, around 5% of the student body.

JC: Was it hard because there were such a small percentage of women?

ML: I didn't think so since I was a science major. Ever since I entered college there were always very few female students in almost all classes.

JC: That didn't bother you?

ML: It never bothered me.

JC: So you never felt that other people treated you differently because you were a woman?

ML: I never was treated differently.

JC: Or unfairly?

ML: What do you mean?

JC: If they thought you couldn't do something as quickly or as well as a man?

ML: No. I was never intimidated by anything in that sense. If I had a question, I asked.

Most of the time, I excelled. But, I do remember when I was at the University of Miami, someone told me, "Do you know if you ask questions, people would think that you're a nerd." It never bother me what other people said. I suppose that is how I was brought up. My father always told me that I am intelligent enough to do anything that I want to.

JC: That means you're confident too, that's good.

ML: Academically, yes.

JC: You were at MIT for how long?

ML: About two years.

JC: Two years. Did you enjoy learning Biochemistry at MIT?

ML: Yes, I guess I enjoyed the learning environment in the Biochemistry department. My strength and love leaned more towards Physical Sciences, which is more on reasoning and logic. MIT's Biochemistry leans more towards to the Biological Science, which was not the best fit for me. So, I just completed my Master's degree.

JC: You never thought to switch to Physics?

ML: Actually, I thought of switching my major when I was at the University of Chicago, but I didn't think of going into Physics... At that time, I discovered computer science.

JC: What interested you about the computers?

ML: I love Mathematics plus machines (computers) as well as logic. So I went to see a math professor and considered going to study computers science. My perception of computer science in the Math department was a disappointment. If Computer science were in the Engineering department, I would have switched.

JC: So then after you were done with MIT, you decided to switch?

ML: No, I continued doing medical research until I had a second child.

JC: When did you get married?

ML: 1972, two years after I graduated from MIT.

JC: Where did you meet your husband?

ML: At the Beth Israel Hospital. Our research labs were on the same floor.

JC: Right after MIT, you worked at Beth Israel?

ML: Yes, I went back to Beth Israel working for Dr. Robinson. I had an agreement that I would go back to his laboratory after studying Biochemistry.

JC: Did you enjoy your time in Boston? Did you enjoy MIT?

ML: Yes, very much so. Boston is my favorite city now. That's how I had influenced my children going to Boston. I wished that I had studied as an undergraduate at MIT. Apparently, both my children were inspired to have their educations at MIT.

JC: So you did like your experience at MIT even though you didn't like Biochemistry very much?

ML: MIT is a great academic institution. It was a very lively learning experience even though I didn't pick my favorite subject in MIT. I got so much out of MIT in those two years simply because it is a very stimulating and challenging institutions, also, it allowed students to have opportunities to learn about all aspect of the cultural life.

JC: Lively why?

ML: Because MIT provides a lot of cultural activities and parties that you are free to do whatever you want to when you have the time away from the heavy load of studies. I went to the University of Chicago, which is a very challenging school as well. I remember that I could not possibly find activities on campus to fill in between studying and working in the lab. At MIT, there were distinct relaxing opportunities there. MIT's Tech newspaper provided us information on concerts and different cultural activities available on campus that I would take an hour in between my studies to attend. My mind would be refreshed when I went back to study or back to work. When I was a graduate student at MIT, I saw that the opportunities available to the undergrads were so amazing. I believe in studying hard and playing hard. My children got the message.

JC: Were there some really memorable professors that you had or people that you met at MIT?

ML: Most of the professors that I had were great. I had a few memorable professors. Prof. Ingram was already a Nobel Prize laureate when I took his Protein course. Prof. Luria got his Nobel Prize immediately after I took his course in Biology. They were all very inspirational. But, I was actually most involved in writing a paper on genetics when I had molecular genetics with Prof. Baltimore. He was my favorite professor. I was extremely happy when I learned that he got the Nobel Prize a few years later.

JC: How did you decide to go from Boston to Miami?

ML: the University of Miami offered my husband an Assistant Professor position.

JC: So then how did you get into Computer Science?

ML: Well, I volunteered at my husband's research lab one day a week while my children were growing up in Miami. I knew I had to study more in order to work in the computer area even though I already took two computer classes at MIT. I applied to the University of Miami to study Computer Science. I had already planned to take one course each semester and finish the Masters degree in six years while being a mother of two young children. After I studied two years, I found that I was missing the connection between courses since they were not offered every year. So, I applied for a teaching assistantship and hired a housekeeper who could cook and look after my children. I finished in another two years instead of four years.

JC: Did you enjoy Computer Science?

ML: I loved Computer Science. At MIT I used Fortran in my research's data analysis.

JC: Are you wearing an MIT ring?

ML: Yes.

JC: Do you still wear it all the time?

ML: Yes. I wear three rings daily: my Wedding ring, the MIT beaver, and a ring in memory of my mother.

JC: Where did your mother live?

ML: Well, in the last nine years of her life, she lived with us here in Coral Gables. Both of my parents stayed with us nine months each year, and they spent summers in Vancouver.

JC: So in Miami, you worked in a lot of different places?

ML: Yes, quite a few. The first job was at the University of Miami Cancer Center.

JC: What did you do there?

ML: I was a database analyst working on data with mostly breast cancer patients; I automated data on the patients' visits and gathered statistical data for physicians. The second position was upon my friend's recommendation; I went to Bacardi to work as a consultant to set up automation for their pricing filing system. I also gave computer-training seminars for the professionals in addition to hands on training with accounts. After two years, I went onboard as senior corporate planning analyst at the time, instead of as a Bacardi employee; I was chosen by the McKenzie consultants to work on an Acquisition of the Martini-Rossi project. I believe it caused some internal disturbance. I got laid off in the middle of acquisition, the victim of a downsizing trend in the industry.

JC: So you totally went away from Biochemistry then?

ML: Yes, actually, I enjoyed the corporate environment more than the research lab although it is much more challenging.

JC: Did you enjoy the computer science enough that you wanted to do these different jobs?

ML: Right. All the work that I did was based mainly on computer knowledge and skill.

JC: And then you moved onto Cargill America?

ML: Yeah, do you know Cargill?

JC: No.

ML: It's the biggest private company in the world. Cargill was the biggest private company of the United States. Naturally, it was the biggest private company of the

world—based in Minnesota. Cargill's core business is moving the grains and food around the world. Newspapers would report that Cargill's ship was stopped on the way to Russia. There was embargo going on with Russia.

JC: Embargo?

ML: Yes.

JC: So what exactly did you do?

ML: In the beginning I was working as an office temporary worker. After a week or so, I saw the computers were not used to their potential and most of their works were manually handled. I volunteered to automate some of the procedures through the computer. So, making a long story short, I finally became a consultant in both hardware set up and software applications. I worked for Cargill's Argentinean division, which had just moved from Switzerland to Coral Gables, FL in order to reduce overhead. After I worked there a few months Cargill decided to move the Argentinean Division to Monteverdi, Uruguay. I helped moving the computer operation and trained the software application to personnel in Uruguay. Then my work switched to automate some Pan-American division's financial reports which included 8, 9 countries. After the projects were completed, I was offered the position in the accounting department as an Account Receivable manager. I turned it down and found a position at the University of Miami, in the School of Continuing Studies

JC: You only worked at Cargill for one year?

ML: Yes, It was a temporary job that ended up as a contract consultant.

JC: Even though you turned into a consultant.

ML: Yes, it was very nice. I didn't expect to work in accounting regardless of how much I liked numbers. The Account receivable Manager's position didn't attract me.

JC: Ok, so you went from there, and then you went to the School of Continuing Studies?

ML: Right, remember I studied in the University of Miami for the Computer Science? I had a professor who was the Dean of the business school. Dean Sugrue talked to Dean Holden, who was the Dean of School of Continuing Studies. She needed someone who could provide her an accurate status of the finance of the school anytime. With my experience in finance working in Bacardi and Cargill I got the position.

JC: So what exactly did you do?

ML: I started with restructuring the school's finance because Dean was often nervous about the financial status of the school. I monitored revenue and expenses for her. I assured her that it was seasonal. I actually had experience in working in the finances at Cargill and Bacardi, and Bacardi's revenue at that time was almost a one billion dollar and Cargill's Pan American division, was a 700 million in revenue. The School of Continuing Studies, financially, is independent of the University; the total budget is only 7 million (laughs). To me, it was a piece of cake. As a special project manager, I first streamlined the accounting operation. The, I helped each department with how to use computer applications for more efficient processes. My major responsibility was finance. Later on, I picked up the project to install the latest version of network for all departments in the School of Continuing Studies. Actually, our school had the most advanced network in the University. I finally was promoted to be the Director of the finances and the network. Dean Holden brought a close associate, Sharon Taylor, who

wanted to take over the network. Dean Holden told me that she could only have one of us due to the downsizing of the school. You know what happened a year later?

JC: What?

ML: Sharon Taylor was court marshaled out of the School of Continuing Studies. She must have done something terribly wrong.

JC: Really?

ML: Yes. Sharon was always trying to do improper things to colleagues, students, and teachers, which was beyond my imagination. When I was in charge of the school's computer training classes, they were very popular. Sharon requested the Dean to take over from me. Since she was the associate Dean, I handed it over to her. Actually when I was working with her, my health was affected. I'd seen all kind of doctors, cardiologists, endocrinologists, etc. at that period of time. Later on, Doctors found out that it was the stress from the work. So it's really important to know sometimes the pressure from work can really affect you in health. In a way, I was happy to leave that environment. Later on I was fine—nothing was wrong with my health (laughs).

JC: Really? Wow.

ML: It was the pressure from dealing with personnel. It was not the work itself, so I'm very glad MIT later on had their management program for engineers. MIT nurtured a lot of top scientists or engineers, but these people did not necessarily know how to manage people.

JC: Really?

ML: It's very different when you're in "people to people" management—it's a lot more intricate than doing work. Put it in simple word, politics, right? (Laughs) It's politics

everywhere, knowing what I know now; I would have handled a lot of things differently. But, if you know how to manage, you'll be more effective overall. When engineers work in the office where managers are non-engineers, they were really being suppressed, or not able to do the potential of what they could produce, or simply they could not deal with the managers. The most obvious case was with the astronauts. Remember the, one of the, tiny little o-ring...

JC: The foam?

ML: Not foam, the o-ring—the first space shuttle that came down. They discovered an o-ring that could cause trouble. The scientists had informed the management, but the managers didn't take it seriously.

JC: When you moved on, you were saying your last job, the one at the school continuing studies, was it? You had a hard time especially with the dean...

ML: No, it was the associate dean.

JC: So were they jobs that you really enjoyed?

ML: I did enjoy all my work. You know, I had a staff of ten and over thirty part-time computer teachers...I managed them well. But I couldn't manage the associate dean. Do you know what I mean? If I had known how to deal with her, that would have been a lot more effective. It's probably easier to manage people under you than to manage those of the same latitude position. My staff was very loyal to me. When they heard that I was going to be laid off because of the associate dean whom they claimed was not easy to work with, they wanted to be out. They left and all ended up at a better position at the University. I like to work with young people, and I encouraged them to do better. Most of my old staff still gathers once a year to chat about what's going on with them.

JC: So when you liked working somewhere it was because more of the people or what you were doing?

ML: I think it was both although I am more oriented with work. But at the School of Continuing Studies we worked as a good team, and others called us the happy group.

JC: So your passion was more for computer science at the very end?

ML: Oh yes.

JC: You're happy because of that?

ML: Yes, I emphasized using computers more in practical application. That's why I had the interdisciplinary degree within the Engineering, Mathematics, and Business school. I took quite a few courses at the Business school in order to learn how to apply the computers applications to the corporate world. Later on, in each corporation or institution, I streamlined the processes with the computer. And at the same time I gave trainings to improve people's skill in the computers. I enjoyed seeing the productivity and efficiency as a result of my effort.

JC: And so you continued to kind of jump around a lot in Miami right?

ML: Well, after I worked at the School of Continuing Studies, I actually took only one more position in a HMO. During a luncheon, my friend asked if I would like to work for AvMed, because they needed people with my skill. I went for an interview and got a position. AvMed is an HMO that operates only in Florida. It was the last organization that I worked for and for over five years in finance, auditing and clean up the HEDIS (Health Plan Employer Data and Information Set) procedures.

JC: I did notice in Miami that there aren't a lot of Asian people?

ML: That's true. AvMed in Miami had only five Asians.

JC: So you've been in a lot of situations where you're the minority.

ML: Definitely.

JC: Starting from when you came for undergraduate and continuing through most of your schools, you were the minority?

ML: Yes, as a woman and a Chinese, but, depending how do you define "minority," right? Chinese is not counted as a minority.

JC: But still, there weren't a lot of Chinese people?

ML: No, it is true.

JC: Has that ever been hard for you?

ML: I think in school, it never was hard. But in the working environment, it had some obstacles.

JC: Why in school is it different? Like at MIT for instance...

ML: Schools give recognition on your performance regardless your age, gender, or race etc. It is a fair system. But it was different in the working place. Such as my accent alone will let other thinks that I am not competent as others regardless if it is relevant to the job.

JC: Both your children went to MIT? Did you encourage them to?

ML: I think I probably inspired them.

JC: Why do you think so—did you talk to them about it?

ML: Of course. From time to time, I have always expressed that MIT is my favorite school among all the universities that I attended. I inspired them through conversation or chatting with others. I never told them which school to apply to or study at. Sometimes my daughter would say to me, "Mommy, I wish I would have gone to Wellesley," or "I

wish I would have gone to Swarthmore.” But on the other hand she was very proud of being a MIT graduate. She told me a couple times, “I’m glad I went to MIT, Andersen Consulting or Accenture assigned me over others to this great project.” (Laughs) There’s always bad or good no matter what you chose.

JC: She’s funny.

ML: It is true; somehow, she would get all the good projects. And she’d say, “I know it’s because I’m from MIT.” They would look at your resume—they checked where did you go to school to start with. So the more good companies picks you, the better your resume look.

JC: What I find interesting is that, you’ve gone to a lot of different schools...

ML: I’ve gone to more schools in China too.

JC: Really?

ML: I moved from school to school because I am a proactive person, which led to my entering many universities or colleges. When I finished high school, I took three college examinations and passed them all. In Hong Kong each college gives its own entrance examination. I got to choose the college that I liked. After I studied at Chung Chi College for a few weeks, the admission acceptance letter came from the university in Taiwan that my high school sponsored me. My father gave me a choice. I went to study at Chen Kung University for my freshman year.

JC: You went to Taiwan?

ML: Right. In Taiwan, I studied Chemical engineering. Because my father already got me to study chemistry in Hong Kong, so I said all right, I would study chemical engineering, which is actually a little closer to what I like, Engineering. While I was

studying there, I applied to Wesleyan College, which granted me a full scholarship.

After I finished my freshman year, I went back to Hong Kong and waited for the exciting journey to Wesleyan College. My father didn't want me to idle at home while waiting for the visa, etc., so I took another entrance examination and attended the Chinese Baptist College that was close to my home. Luckily, the paperwork didn't take too long. I was on my way to Wesleyan College by October 8, three weeks after the school started. All together, I attended one university and two colleges before I started the college in the United States.

JC: Oh my goodness, I didn't know!

ML: It sounds like I was touring colleges.

JC: So out of all those colleges--because you said maybe your kids were inspired by you to go to MIT because you say these nice things about it—why at MIT did you study something that you didn't like?

ML: At that time, I never thought that I could start over again. I was already in the research work, which is related to Organic Chemistry. Biochemistry would help me more. So I studied biochemistry in MIT. Yes, I would have liked MIT a lot if I were in your generation; I probably would go to music school for singing. You know that's my favorite hobby now.

JC: So you like singing the most?

ML: Yes, ever since I was in junior high school, I have been in choirs or glee clubs before we had children and moved to Miami. After my parents passed away, I joined the church choir, the Chinese choir, and recently, my husband and I also joined a Taiwanese choir. Where are you from?

JC: My parents are from Korea.

ML: You are a Korean.

JC: Could you separate what you liked from what you were studying? Because it's hard to imagine how you went to MIT and liked it even though you didn't really like what you were studying.

ML: The chemistry part was okay, you know. It was the biology part I didn't like. So that kind of dragged me down, although I loved Doctor Luria's lectures. I enjoyed any excellent professors' lectures. But it was not fun to study those subjects because a lot of professors were really inspiring by the way they gave the lectures. In fact, I enjoyed all good lectures regardless of the subjects.

JC: So you make the most of your situations then. But you wish you could go to singing school now.

ML: You see, in China, if a girl goes to sing, you know what I mean, also in Korea. In the Oriental culture, singing is not a proper profession, you know. (Laughs)

JC: So if you could do it all over again, would you forget about all of the sciences...what would you do?

ML: I love Math and Science. I would do a double major in science and music.

JC: You didn't feel free to choose what you wanted to do?

ML: No, not in the Chinese culture and environment.

JC: You were away from your parents?

ML: Right, but they still controlled over me as a moral obligation because they spent all their best efforts to raise me--you understand? They were trying to give me the best. So, it is a kind of like an invisible control. (Laughs) I suppose if I were the rebellious type, I

still could have done what I wanted even in the Chinese Culture. My younger sister chose what she liked to study. The Chinese culture has been changed slowly.

JC: Would you have gone to all the schools you went to?

ML: Well, some of them were my choices already. However, I would have chosen Bryn Mawr. But, they didn't give a full scholarship, whereas Wesleyan College did. As for University of Chicago, MIT, I definitely liked both of their academic challenges.

University of Miami was the best in Miami to study for the Computer Science at the time.

JC: So if you feel, like you said, everything was situational, then what really influenced your career or your life in the end?

ML: The main influence was my father's remarks. He told me repeatedly that I am capable to do whatever I want. So, I always aim high. Studying in outstanding institutions and striving for Excellency in work. Of course, my career was influenced by my proactive attitude towards the ever-changing environment. For example, after I had children, my career evolved into whatever could provide for my children the best education and care. When it comes down to it, my children were my top priority.

JC: So once you had your kids, "it's all about my kids."

ML: Yes, I focused more towards raising my kids.

JC: What about before your children?

ML: Before children, singing, learning and going back to school were my practice. I would have gone back to school if I knew I found myself to be thirsting for certain knowledge or skill. I joined choirs all throughout my high school, college, and graduate school. In Boston, I joined the MIT choral society and many different choirs such as, "Chorus Pro Musica." I was in the Harvard Medical School choir, and I sang at

Tanglewood. Only during the period when I raised my children, I found there were conflicts. Singing was on hold over twenty years.

JC: Oh, so you must read music and everything.

ML: Yes.

JC: How did you learn how to do all of that?

ML: I started piano lessons when I was around six. It continued through college. I started taking piano and voice lessons in college and continued even when I was working. That's why I told you music would have been my first choice, right?

JC: When you were young, did you have a dream of what you thought you wanted to be?

ML: Yeah, I had a dream to be a doctor. The reason was that my grandmother had asthma. When I was young and I spent time with grandmother in the summer, I would say to her, "I want to be a doctor and cure your asthma." You know, it was a dream. So I think that has something to do with why I was interested in medical research later, to compensate how I gave up medical school. It had some impact. I didn't go into medical school because I could not face taking an anatomy course. Some parts of my life, I chose what I could and escaped from the negative impacts.

JC: So after you dropped that dream, did you have another dream, or did you just kind of study? Is that what you did?

ML: Working on the medical research was somewhat to compensate for my lost dream. When I followed my boss to Beth Israel Hospital – Harvard University Medical Research, I thought we could make some break through. That's why I went back to biochemistry and then tried to do more research in the area of erythropoetin.

JC: I'm confused then, because I thought you also stopped because you didn't like it a little bit.

ML: No. I didn't like it. But if I had been staying in Boston, I would have kept on going with the same project that I had been working on.

JC: Even though you didn't like it that much?

ML: Correct. But, I didn't dislike. It is still in science. If the children came along, I might drop it. Like I said before, my life focused on them. When I was doing research, I was very focused. I was working day and night. However, Miami's climate of research attitude is quite different from Boston's.

JC: How different? Why?

ML: There are some researchers in Miami who are still pretty dedicated, I should say. But most of them are not. They will leave the laboratory at five o'clock. It is very hard to do live science research when you look at the clock. You know what I mean? I would be very frustrated. I can't do an excellent job with research work if my children are of the utmost importance to me. So, I told my husband that I would go back to school to study computer science, which is a field that I love. The more flexible working hours with computers also would not interfere with the upbringing of the children.

JC: So it all worked out then.

ML: I have been lucky, I guess. With computers, I could work at home. When my children were young, I used the modem connection. It was slow in those days. But I could work through very late at night. My husband would ask, "Are you still working?" Sometimes it would be two o'clock in the morning. The working schedule was a lot better for me. I could do a good job both for my children and career.

JC: That's good though.

ML: I also think I'm lucky that I have a husband who is the breadwinner. I could switch my career and jobs around much easier. If I had to be the breadwinner, I don't think I could have done all the things I did. But my life would be more miserable, right?

(Laughs)

JC: So both your kids went to MIT. They graduated, and your son lives here (Brookline, MA), and where does your daughter live?

ML: In San Francisco. She moved from Boston to San Francisco about two years ago.

JC: So then why did you stay in Miami?

ML: My husband's work is in Miami. Now, we would stay on for sure, since the weather's a lot easier for us. In the summer, we can travel or come to Boston or a cooler area and stay away from the heat and hurricanes. I don't think we can deal with the winter here in Boston after having lived in Miami for over thirty years.

JC: Was the winter really hard back then too?

ML: No, I didn't think so. I believe it was easier when I was young. I actually love the snow. But, I haven't really come up here for winter at all ever since I left Boston.

JC: But do you remember it being really bad long time ago?

ML: Occasionally.

JC: But not as much as now?

ML: That's what I heard from the weather news, snow piled up so high. And schools are closed. We had that too back then, but not so frequently as I recall. The weather is so extreme now. I never remember being hot in Boston and then having the winter so cold. It's very extreme.

JC: Miami's a little extreme too. The hurricane last year?

ML: That's only once for many years. Winter is never (laughs) too cold. Actually, winter is very pleasant. Were you in Miami a whole year?

JC: Yes, I was there for a year.

ML: So you enjoyed the winter, huh.

JC: It was very good. So I guess just wrapping up, do you have anything that you would really like to say, or something that you really have to explain?

ML: I omitted one of the reasons that I chose MIT. My uncle (second cousin) also went to MIT.

JC: Really?

ML: That was how we first learned about MIT when we were young.

JC: What did you know about your uncle and MIT?

ML: Well, he's a world famous architect.

JC: What's his name?

ML: Mr. I.M. Pei. He designed the Louvre Museum in Paris, the John Kennedy Library and the John Hancock building in Boston.

JC: Wow, what's his name?

ML: Last name is P-E-I. Initial "I," initial "M."

JC: So he went to MIT.

ML: Indeed. He went to Harvard graduate school too, actually. But it was never came up when we were young.

JC: Why didn't he mention it?

ML: Oh, it is not he didn't. I mean the family never mentioned. Also, he was an architect, and Harvard was never known to be an engineering school in China. He went to Harvard for a master's degree, I believe.

JC: So he told you a lot about MIT?

ML: No. My mother told us. Uncle I. M. came to United States before I was born. His success also led me to apply MIT when I decided to further my education in Boston.

JC: Well why didn't you apply for undergraduate school at MIT?

ML: Oh, the tuition was too expensive.

JC: They wouldn't give you a scholarship?

ML: That time, we were not aware if MIT gave scholarships or financial aid to non-US citizens in undergraduate study. But universities usually provide graduate students with financial aid.

JC: So were your parents very proud of you when you went to MIT? Or any of the other colleges?

ML: I believe they were proud of me. Over all, we fulfilled their dreams of studying abroad.

JC: Were you yourself so interested in the name of MIT?

ML: When we were young, MIT was already known to be a great school to go. Yes, I was very interested in the name of MIT even before I came to the States. Then, I visited MIT quite frequently during the years I was working in Boston.

JC: Because you liked what you saw.

ML: Right, Harvard is very famous in the liberal arts, as well as MIT is known for their science and engineers. Have you heard of the joke about it?

JC: No!

ML: The joke is about the “10 item or less” line in the grocery store, which implies that MIT is strong in math and Harvard’s strong in the literal.

JC: We have jokes now, but I don’t remember them!

ML: Yes.

JC: Ok, well, thank you so much!

ML: You’re welcome. It helps me to know more about myself as well. You actually have my life story.

JC: Yes!