

What sparked activism for you?

Um, well, I went to a liberal arts college in the Midwest that was very progressive. And, well, left wing, kind of had a tradition of left wing politics. It was investigated by the McCarthy commission in the 50s because they had a course on communism, which was really not acceptable at the time. Forget that it was educational. But anyway, so I arrived, and mainly I went to this college because my mother thought it was a great place to go. I wasn't so keen, but they accepted me and gave me money and nobody else gave me as much money as they did. So that's where I went. And it was amazing. It was wonderful. And I became totally politicized there.

In the - well, we supported various causes. At that time, in that era, which was late 50s, early 60s. The only thing I can really remember is fair play for Cuba. And, of course, civil rights, which this is so typical, I think it's gendered. But anyway, a bunch of my friends actually were Freedom Riders, and went South, and I kind of felt like oh my god, you know, this is a black and white issue, I don't really have a place in there. And I think that was me being a holding-back-woman.

Because I have a friend who was in Canada at the time. He saw the lunch counter shots, the footage, and he said, I'm going down there, and he just took off from college. He just took off and, and joined SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). And I think about that, and he had another Japanese American friend who was down there as well. And I was just trying to figure out, why did I think that wasn't my issue? And and I think at the time it was me thinking oh, you know, I don't really feel comfortable. I don't want to put myself out there. I don't want to intrude in something that, you know may not be for me, I might not be accepted in that issue.

So, going on, I went to New York after college, and of course, it was feminism. It was, you know, all the women's lib and raw burning and stuff like that and, and I was totally supportive and realized that in all of those left wing politics in college, it was the men who did everything, organized everything, did shit, the women kind of took notes and brought coffee and you know, we did like the behind things. We did the housekeeping, right? We were the wives of the real people doing this. things. And, you know, that was, that was an interesting thing I learned from feminism. And gave me a different viewpoint on how I would deal with politics from them. Right? Like, why am I in the kitchen?

then when I came to Canada - were many things that took place between my getting to Canada - but when I came to Canada, I was drawn into, oddly through a baseball game into working with a group of people on a history of the Japanese in Canada. Here I was a Japanese American, working on a history of the Japanese in Canada, but the history is very similar. And so I thought, I have things that I can contribute. And it was interesting this group was half shin-issei, and half sansei. And the shin-issei were very strong in the group. This wasn't something that was spearheaded necessarily by the Sansei, although we all do work on it. But it was truly a collaborative effort between the shin-issei and the sansei. And it kind of made me more aware of myself as of Japanese heritage, because previous to that, really all my connections had been

with whites, the only Japanese I knew were family, which meant that all of this group immediately became my family.

And that's how I'm related to them, right? Because it was the only way I really knew how to relate to Japanese. And so it was a very, it was a great experience from the project. Then, in 1977, it was the the hundred year anniversary of the first official Japanese immigrant to Canada, Manzo Nagano, and the feds were pouring money into our community to do a national celebration. And one of the proposals was, again by a shin issei, who had also been part of the photo project, that was they do a festival. And it was all, it was a big deal. The nissei who were of course, the ones in charge of the money, weren't so sure it was a great idea to do a festival. First of all, it's calling attention to ourselves. And they weren't sure that was a great idea. On the other end, we had got this money to celebrate this occasion. So, but then, it was like, who would come? You know, we're gonna pour all this money in, right? Who would come? What if nobody comes? And we're like, Hey, come on. We'll just do it. We'll do it.

Where the Japanese used to be on Powell street, and the Powell grounds. There were a few Japanese businesses, but not many. There were seniors who lived in the neighborhood. Um, but it was kind of, it was very rundown, that neighborhood had much deteriorated. But, you know, it was decided to do the festival in this park, where the [redacted] baseball team used to play and reclaim it as ours. And so the Powell street festival was born. And well, a bunch of people who had gone to university together and become politicized by a Japanese American teacher. He came up and he started a group that they called the Asian Canadian students something and they kind of got, you know?

became aware of themselves as a force. And it included Japanese and Chinese Canadians who were all going to UBC. And a bunch of them had gone to Japan, checking out their roots, right, came back and started working at this Senior Center [Tonarigumi]. They had the language, and they wanted to work in the community. And actually, it was the man who ran [Tonarigumi] who proposed the festival. And then he had all these Sansei, who were working for him who helped with the festival. And so the festival kind of came out of this Asian Canadian sense of identity. Right? It was like a perfect meeting of money, and celebration, and assertion of, you know, heritage. So, and I was one of the people who worked on Powell street festival, having been brought in through the photo project. And, and it was really exciting. The second year, San Jose Taiko came up and, and that looked like so much fun. I mean we'd seen Ondekoza, and we were really impressed. It was like strong and powerful and that was great. But it wasn't something you would look at it and say, Oh, I want to do that. Because there were all these men up there and half naked, and you know, I don't want to do that. But San Jose Taiko, they were like us. They were Sansei, they were mixed men and women, and they laughed. And they had fun. And they were powerful. And, and they were billeted with us, you know, amongst the community, and they encouraged all of us that we should do it. You know, I mean, we fawned over them and said they were terrific. And they said, you can do it, you should do it too! And so we did. And we did start out with the notion that we wanted to be

a strong Asian presence in the performing arts, and a strong presence of women who would break down stereotypes of what an Asian woman is. Madame Butterfly or Susie Wong, right. We would be tough and strong. And so when KT, then KT, Katari Taiko was the name of the group, the first taiko group in Canada, we were all Asian Canadian; and then it's certain point we ran a workshop and we decided to recruit. And lo and behold, some white people wanted to join the group, which never really occurred to us that they would want to do that. And so we had to talk about it. So I should say Katari Taiko means talking drums, and it wasn't the drums, it was us because we were a collective. We did really talk a lot.

So that became our name, we thought it was very appropriate. So, white people in the group, really tricky. I did an interview with a woman for a book that Tamio Wakayama and I put together, he was the photographer of our street festival. And one of the interviews I asked this woman, well, how would you feel about, you know, if Katari Taiko took in non Asian people, and she said, well, we should, you know should be open to everybody, but seeing a blonde person up there playing taiko, I don't know.

And so you know, I thought about that when we were having our discussions On the other hand, there was so much out-marriage In the Japanese Canadian community, that there were all these partners who were white, who were active in the community, who supported us. Then there were the children who were have eventually going to be quarter, eighth. At what point do we say 16th? You're not Japanese. You can't join the group, you you know you're not Asian. There's not enough. So it just became a non issue because we were a community group. We were the community group and we had to represent the community. And the community included all kinds of white people. As partners mostly, fathers. So we did we opened it to pretty much anybody because we were a community group.

We were also political. And one, in the questions, when we recruit people. We always do interviews and we lay it right out, okay, we support certain causes, we support unions, we do peace, peace marches and demonstrations and you have to be comfortable with that, or you shouldn't play in our group. And everybody agreed. I mean, there was one guy who said, Well, I'm probably not as left as you are all, but all the the things that you mentioned, I can complete support and he said, So, I think I'm gonna be fine and he was fine. He played for everything.

So, KT, I don't know where KT stands now in terms of activism. I assume they are still pursuing it. I mean doing benefits and stuff like that. Things have calmed down it seems more in Vancouver. I belong now to a group called Sawagi, which is an exclusive group. We are only East Asian and indigenous women, and it doesn't feel so bad now because they are other groups. If people aren't, I mean when we were Katari Taiko, we were the only thing in town. So if you didn't join us you were not going to do taiko. Now there's a lot of choice. You can play for a bunch of different people if you're a man or if you're white, there are alternatives. So we can be exclusive and not feel terrible because we're just an aspect right.

Um, and we do play for a lot of women's things, we play for unions multicultural stuff, We also play for corporations if they're not really, really bad and we do make choices about who we play for. We will not play for anybody. And we always want to know who we are playing for before we take a gig. I don't know there. There aren't-

So one of the probably the last thing that Sawagi did in terms of performance, and of course we haven't performed in months. But in terms of activist performance was, there have been, the downtown east side of Vancouver is very poor. Full of homeless people, full of SROs, in terrible condition. And one of them was closing down that was closed down. Because it was unlivable, I mean really unlivable. And the owners wouldn't do anything to fix it up. So the city said you're finished. Well then, they were these people out on the street. What are they gonna do? That was, it might have been terrible, but it was inside and it had running water, the toilets sometimes not, you know heat sometimes not, windows Sometimes broken and not repaired, but it was somewhere Inside where they Could be be safe And so these people in Uh, you know, on the street. To there was a rally for them in front of The abandoned SRO and we played for it and the street was closed off. I don't even know if it's closed off legally but it was closed off and we performed and other people performed. And so those I think The Downtown Eastside issues are really urgent and Sawagi Taiko would always support any attempts to alleviate the situation.

In Vancouver there are blacks, And there was a black community that was uprooted and pretty much dispersed. Similar to The Japanese Canadian community. They were moved for economic reasons. The city wanted to build this viaduct from downtown heading toward out of town so that people could rush out and, and their community was right there in the middle. So they got pretty much destroyed. Interestingly enough, off those viaducts the city then wanted to widen the street to make a freeway out of town, which was going to go through the residential area of Chinatown.

And a bunch of those same people who started Powell street festival when out with the residents and blockaded it, refused to let them work. They did. They were successful. It got stopped, the freeway got stopped. And now they're talking about tearing down the viaducts because they kind of, these big white things come out onto this small street, which is kind of crazy. So there's there are these cars tearing through Chinatown, tearing through [], which is the name of the neighborhood, on their way out of town. So it's all changing, but it's interesting that that the Chinese Canadian community said Oh, no, you are not coming through here.

and I do and a lot of those young Chinese Canadians were from that group that started at UBC if they, they were quite a powerful group.

How do you think about activism now?

Today there is not a lot of activist stuff. There isn't even much women's stuff. I mean there is a women's march every year. We're not very proactive. We don't go out and it's hard because

they march. We don't have we don't have fan drums, we don't have anything that's really portable. We have gone on anti racist marches with, I had a I have a first nations drum that I made. We had percussion But, you know, it was actually a very small March. There weren't very many people at it. So it was kind of sad actually. Although it wasn't very big. But there were people who came out to harass. It was really that was, It was interesting that for such a small demonstration, there are always people who want to push you back. I think now that would be more interest. Definitely is more interest. We do have Black Lives Matter marches, we do have stuff, but I think because the population of indigenous people is larger than that of blacks Here in Vancouver, the indigenous people get much more hassle than than anyone else. And so I think That's that's initiative that needs to be dealt with and worked on.

What do you think is our opportunity at this moment in time?

I'm really terrible. I'm not, I'm not really good at initiating things. I'm not a visionary. I would like to say that as I mentioned earlier, I think here, in Vancouver. Maybe on the west coast, certainly in Canada in general, Problems with relations between the police and indigenous people, societal restrictions on indigenous people is a major issue.

Sawagi was asked by paddle street festival in 1990, I think or something like that to do a collaboration, which they had asked other groups to collaborate with other cultural groups to put on a performance for Powell street festival. So it was our turn to be asked and I had recently done a kind of improv was the span that Diane Cardona put in touch with me, named Russell wallis who works at the native education college and runs a community group, gives drumming sessions and grew up with a mother who was a repository of indigenous songs. And he was very close to her And he learned all of these songs. And so that's what he does is he has a group and so he had invited me to be part of this. It's a Indigenous festival called Talking Stick, and he was doing putting together a show of different singer percussionists who would each do a little five minute segment and then we would do a jam. And it was terrific. About a week before I emailed him and said, Are we going to have a rehearsal? am I going to meet these other people? He said yes, two hours in the afternoon at two o'clock before the show we're gonna meet and I'm like Holy Christ. That's when we're gonna practice? And so I said to my husband and daughter don't come, I don't want Know what this is gonna be like!

And so we met and there was, though I can't remember who the different people were. But there was, there was Deb who played a, it wasn't really an accordion it's smaller. She played that and she sang [] songs. and there was a South Asian guy who played drum and sang and that was me And there was Russell there was a Korean who didn't sing but played percussion. He wasn't Korean. He was a teacher at UBC. He was white but he played Korean metallic things. and so we all got together there and we did our thing. And then we jammed and so, and so then we did the performance and, and it was wonderful. It was really wonderful. And fun.

So anyway, when we were asked to do a collaboration, I thought Russell, I thought this would be really good and we're going to do a real collaboration, they're not just gonna sing with us drumming and we're not just going to drum with them singing They're going to learn how to drum. They're going to play taiko and we're gonna learn the song And we're going to dance. And that's what we did. We put together a real collaboration and Three of them learned Renshu, and they really had a good time and we had a good time and since then collaboration has had a long life. We played for The Vancouver opera's 50th anniversary. We played up in New Whistler at the little cultural center. We've played in little pieces of the collaboration which was 45 minutes long, we played sections of it kind of all over, And it's been this wonderful, I mean, we've all become friends. Because we keep doing these shows and know each other and we eat together and we, you know. And one of the women really loved playing taiko. And when we did a workshop She took the workshop and just you know, really, really was so enthusiastic. So when we were recruiting, I suggested that we might consider her and yeah, I wasn't sure that she would actually join because she lives 30 miles outside Vancouver. She has two kids. She works and It would be, you know, hardship for her.

But she does, she just loved taiko. So, we asked her and she was so excited because of course, we were East Asian. She was not East Asian and she never thought that we would invite her to play with us, and so she was really thrilled and accepted and She is now part of sawagi. And I think that that kind of reaching out is an important thing Because we were originally just East Asian, East Asian right. But to expand to include an indigenous woman, I think is perfectly understandable.

So I should say that one reason I thought of this was, my husband at one point was obsessed with pottery, First Nations pottery. And first he started with rugs moved on to pottery. so we used to go to the southwest A lot because also I have cousins who live there. We would go to Santa Fe just once every two years. And In one point below, there was no Cultural Center, But somebody that we met in the parking lot said Oh you want the potter, he's over there that's his house! We said he won't mind if we just come? No, no. He'd be happy if you come. So we went there and knocked on the door. He was happy, he was eating lunch. But he came out and he showed us his pots and he showed me his pit, and everyone was off looking at the pots and and he came next to me and he said, you know, you and me look the same. And I was really like, Oh, this is so exciting. He says, we look the same! And it's true. I think that The root is you know if you're splitting it up into Caucasian Negroid and Mongoloid, First Nations and Asians would probably be coming from the same root. And so it seemed to make sense to me that we would ask Winona to join our group. Because we are from the same group. We are the same.

Anyway, I'm just saying that I think all you can do is, I mean, we would play for any activist group that asked us to play any progressive social justice issue, but I think just kind of trying to make relationships, build contacts. I think that's an important part of what can be done in taiko. And I think it's simple for people to know where taiko comes from. I think it's important to know that what we play is not just Japanese taiko, it's Japanese Canadian taiko. It is something we created and it is unique to us. And Winona I think understands that.

