

Community Archives Center Oral History Project Transcript

Chace Hunter, Interview date: 8/25/22

- dindria: Hello, this is dindria barrow of the Community Archive Center of Tacoma, and I am here with
- Chace: Chace Hunter.
- dindria: Hello, Chace. How are you
- doing? Chace: I'm great. How about yourself?
- dindria: Oh, doing great. Thank you. Little bit warm for my taste. Yes, yes. <laugh>. And it is August 25th, which is why it's warm, right. 2022. And we are in the main branch of the Tacoma Public Library System. Mm-hmm. Let's begin.
- Chace: Okay. Great.
- dindria: Name some of the places, people or things you call home.
- Chace: Absolutely. So, Tacoma is home for me. Washington is home, Pacific Northwest is home. Hilltop much more specifically is, is home to me. Yeah, so I grew up, here in Tacoma. I, my family and I immigrated to the US or specifically to Tacoma, uh, and the Hilltop area back in 1993. And then we moved to South Tacoma afterward and finished high school at Mount Tahoma. And then I went to Western up in Bellingham, for college. Returned back home, bought a home in Hilltop. So yeah, I mean, it's, it's Tacoma, Hilltop, uh, Pacific Northwest is definitely home to me.
- dindria: Right on. The next question hopes to dig a little deeper. Who are you and where do you come from?
- Chace: Okay. Who am I is a big, uh, loaded question. Similar to the first prompt, my family and I, are refugees, Cambodian, the Khmer Rouge era refugees. So we, my ancestors are from Cambodia, Vietnam, China, and Thailand, but more specifically with my recent ancestors, more so from Cambodia. And then during the Khmer Rouge, uh, my family fled, seek refuge in Thailand. I was born there. Uh, I, and then we immigrated here, uh, back in 1993. I was eight years old, then started, third grade. Didn't know any English words, didn't know anything about America. So it was definitely a, a hard transition, uh, in, in my early years. But Tacoma is all I know. And I, I fell in love with it. And it's, it's definitely home. That's, that's kind of the gist of where I'm coming from.
- Chace: A little bit more about myself. I identify as a gay man, Asian, again, with the background of ancestors. Ancestors coming from China, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. And then, yeah, uh, I am bilingual. I speak, uh, uh, Cambodian. I did minor in French in college, but I don't practice French as much as I would like to. Let's see, what else? Who am I? I'm married to my husband, let's see, we're coming on six years married. It's weird to say because our anniversary is actually in a couple of days and but we've been together

for 11 years. We met here in Tacoma, at The Mix, a gay bar down in downtown Tacoma. Let's see. I'm currently the executive director for AHAT Home Care. It's a small nonprofit, providing affordable housing and adult family homes to individuals who are living or affected by HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C.

Chace: So we provide three different programs. One is the adult family home. So we provide 24 hour caregivers to those who are unable to provide care for themselves. We currently have five residents living 24/7, and we have caregivers 24/7 available to them. The other program is an affordable housing program. It's more so for transitional folks who are living with HIV who have been experiencing unstable housing, such as domestic violence and homelessness. So we provide rapid rehousing to get them shelter as soon as quickly while we provide case management to help them transition back into society. We also provide rental vouchers, similarly to Section Eight vouchers to help those who are living with HIV, but want to live independently on their own while working or transitioning into the community, the society. So those are our three programs.

Chace: Previously I worked at the Health Department doing disease investigations, and was activated for COVID, managing vaccine clinics, during COVID vaccine. I also worked at Pierce County, during human services providing case management to aging and disabled folks. And then I was six years with the, with Pierce County AIDS Foundations, also known as PCAF for short, doing HIV prevention there. So I've been in HIV for over a decade, doing preventions and educations, and that sort of feel. So that's a long story short, that's, that's kind of who I am, where I'm from, that sort of thing. So, yeah.

dindria: Excellent. It sounds like you do some amazing work in helping people take care of themselves and to be healthy.

Chace: Yes.

dindria: Yes. And, and anytime that you come up with any story that has to do with maybe why this became an interest for you or how you came to be the executive director, if you think of any stories, please feel free to interrupt me and just share.

Chace: Yeah, absolutely. So, let's see my story of how I came to be. So, I didn't expect to be in the social work field, so I earned two bachelor's degrees. My first undergrad at Western was in English and minor in French. So I went for my passions. I love writing poetry growing up. Uh, so, you know, I believe in myself as a poet. So I got creative writing emphasis English major. And then I was planning on going to grad school to continue with, English, but after college, I, you know, I, when I graduated was during the first recession back in 2008, so finding jobs to keep myself, you know, afloat was, was very difficult at that time. So I didn't really find any things to keep me going. So I decided to go back to school.

Chace: and I was going to pursue a Master in Education through the UW Master program for K-8. When I went back to school to get prerequisites classes, I fell in love

with psychology. I hated psychology during my first undergrad. I didn't get it. I didn't understand it. And then I retook psychology and just kind of fell in love with it and, reroute myself and got a second bachelor's degree in psychology. And then I was, planning and pursuing. So I finished my second bachelor in 2011 through the UW Tacoma. And I plan on pursuing a master's in psychology and working to become a therapist. So I applied to PLU for their marriage and counseling program, as well as Seattle U, their psychology program. I did not get accepted to either one of them, but, during that time, a friend of mine told me about PCAF needing, new staff for their new contract for at the time it was called, Obamacare Healthcare.

Chace: So they needed somebody to help people educate the community about healthcare insurance plans that are available through the Affordable Care Act. And then I just, from there, I just continue working. I was already kind of doing HIV work when I was volunteering for Gay City up in Seattle, so I'm already familiar with HIV and STD prevention, and so it kind of align along the line. It aligned with what I was wanting to do since I graduated from college, which was to work for a nonprofit and giving back to the community. So this position kind of spiral me into a social work route. I did think, I did think about getting a master's in social work. And I didn't pursue that route because I felt like I didn't need another transitions or reroute.

Chace: So, and then I fell in love with what I do as HIV prevention and education. I was certified as a phlebotomist, as well as a medical assistant through PCAF. And then I took a hiatus and went to Pierce County Human Services and provide case management because I was just like, I need a break from HIV field. And realized during that year that I was like, I do miss HIV, I do miss working in providing people education about STD prevention. So, an opportunity came for the health department to do disease investigation work around STD and HIV-- I love that. And then I was activated for COVID, which exhausted me and burnt me out. And during that time, I was also looking for leadership positions because when I left PCAF I was in a leadership role.

Chace: So I kind of missed doing, providing leadership as well. So when AHAT was looking for a new, executive director position, a friend of mine also told me about the position. So I was hesitant at first just because I felt like I wasn't fully ready. But she convinced me to go in, put my name, and throw my resume and cover letter in. I got an interview and got an offer. And that's where I am now, as an executive director. And, you know, continue to giving back to the community, especially the Tacoma Pierce County community, just because I love where I'm at. I love the community here. And we know that especially currently we're experiencing houselessness crisis, and so to be able to be at the forefront in providing affordable housing is definitely part, or it's within my core value. So it it's truly is amazing to be part of the work, part of the forefront to provide a much needed resource to the community.

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dindria: Right on. Thank you so much. It really, it really helps to understand kind of how we create our paths through life and our journey and that, you know, many times those journeys get rerouted, right? And so I love how you use that term. The last question, you may feel like you've already answered the first part, but I love connecting the past to your future dreams.

Chace: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. So, the work that I'm doing now is actually in some way creating a couple of paths. It's, again, this is not within, like, you know, when I was in high school, what's your five years goal plans? What's your career goal plans? Again, my life, my career, path has rerouted me. My education reroute when I think I, I knew where I was going. I thought that I had a true calling. It wasn't it. So, you know, and I think the good thing that my experience taught me so far is that it's okay to have my plan diverted. And sometimes it's for the best. And sometimes, you know, you, you learn a lot through those experiences. And so, like I said, I thought I wanted to be a writer, and I still love writing.

Chace: You know, I still write little short stories here and there, just to kind of remind me of my, my own personal history. And it's usually just little thing about that because I love David Sedaris. I love his work and I would I see myself similar to David Sedaris, that kind, that genre of writer. So I thought that's where I was going with, with my life after my undergrad. And I was like, Nope, that's not it. And I thought I was going to be a teacher, and I realized that, you know what? I do love kids, but not every day. So I was like, I can't do this. This is not my path. So I love psychology. I love you know, providing good advice, to my friends and stuff like that.

Chace: and I thought that's where I'm going as well. And I mean, like, I still do feel like I'm still going that route. But again, you know, life and career take me took me to a different path. So I love phlebotomy, I love medical field. So right now I'm in a class to become a certified nurse assistant. I did apply to become a registered nurse, so I'm on the waiting list for UW's accelerated Bachelor of Science and Nursing. That is to start this September. But it looks like, because the health career field is very competitive, so I may not get in, but that's perfectly fine. I will reapply. I still love nursing. So my career path right now as an executive director, the Department of Social and Health Services does require me to have a certified nurse assistant, at least that kind of licensing to continue to provide the services that I do as an executive director at AHAT Home Care.

Chace: Again, that's also, you know routing me toward registered nursing, I feel my end goal depending on where I'm going again, it's not a concrete path. So it's whichever route, I'm pretty flex flexible nowadays, knowing that my life's changed throughout my career path and education changed throughout the years. So I have two paths. One is to continue with my executive director role, continue to pursue that route. Uh, so, I see myself in the next two to five years, you know, continue working at AHAT and getting it all running and smooth and be making it all successful. And then, jumping into another organizations and help them grow and succeed as well. Just kind of that

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route, two to five years, in different small organization to help them grow and provide better services to the community or going to the nursing field.

Chace: The end goal for nursing is to become a ARNP, which is an Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner, but nowadays, they call it a doctorate of nurse practitioner. So DNP is the new term that they call for that. So my end goal is to be a nurse practitioner, should I pursue the nurse route. So that's my dreams. Either one I'm happy with. Again, those two still giving back to the community in, different kind of ways.

dindria: Absolutely. Oh my goodness. I think about the medical field and how essential the medical field is for all of us. And, and we've learned that through the pandemic, right? So I really just, I, I encourage you to move on down that path and, and find your passion. With that are there any other stories that you want to share about growing up or about coming to the United States in Tacoma?

Chace: Yeah, absolutely.

Chace: Yeah, let's, let's do that. So again, I grew up here in the Hilltop. I used to live a few blocks, 15th and G Street, which is just three, four blocks from this library. So I remember coming to the library to check out books and videos back then. It was VHS from the library with my dad, just because we're like, we know that we love cartoons. So back then there was VHS of like Disney cartoons, Dumbo, Robin Hood, that sort of thing on VHS. And my dad loves like war history, because when he was in the refugee, when we were in the refugee, he was also in the military fighting against the Khmer Rouge. So I remember not seeing him much when we were in the refugee camp.

Chace: So that's kind of off topic a little bit, kind of all over the place with my history here. So yeah, so I grew up here in the Hilltop 15 and G, which is fairly close to the Tacoma Main Library, the downtown library here. I went to Sherman Elementary School, finished there from third to fifth grade, and then I started at Jason Lee Middle School, from finished sixth grade, the first part of seventh grade. And then, from there in January of 1998, we moved to South Tacoma. And then I started Baker, and finished Baker and went to Mount Tahoma. So back in the nineties, you know, like, Hilltop was not the safest place, but it was the most diverse place, a diverse area in Tacoma to be between Hilltop and East Side Tacoma.

Chace: And it still is pretty diverse, you know, in comparison to other parts such as North Tacoma, for example, that's there, or even northeast Tacoma, it's not pretty diverse. So I knew where I want to be. It was really awesome growing up here in Tacoma, specifically in the Hilltop area, just because there were also many, many refugees, kids growing up. So I was able to relate to them. I was able to connect with them, you know, and speak, you know, because growing up I also speak multiple languages, you know, born in the refugee

camps here, learning how to speak English, Chinese, a little bit of Thai, and then my native language in Cambodian, although I didn't practice much any other languages. So I start to lose those.

Chace: So mainly just Cambodian and English now. But it was pretty awesome, like going to elementary school and seeing other brown kids, knowing that they don't speak English really well like you, so you gravitate toward them. So that was kind of cool. And, you know, to have ESL back then, English as a Second Language, English as a second language, not ELL as we now know. Back then English as a second language was, it was nice because I had a Vietnamese teacher who was able to help and was very, very nice and a very parental figure to me just because she understands to traverse between the English world and then, you know, the Asian culture as well. So that was, that was good to be able to see somebody as an adult figure to be able to help me learn and speak English really well and provide support.

Chace: And then the odd part was that I went to Sherman Elementary School, which is in the north end of Tacoma, North Stevens, 46th, 45th, and Stevens, or something like that. But the good part was that there were a few immigrant kids there. So we bonded, we went to high school together, or we finished high school together, which was really cool. Like, we were all grew up here in Tacoma, so we went to the elementary school, middle school, and high school, and was just kind of really, really cool to see some of the similar familiar faces throughout. You know, my under not undergrad <laugh>, my grade school years and then, you know, the, the amazing thing is that back in the nineties also, like MLK was pretty diverse.

Chace: So there were like Asian restaurants and Asian stores. I mean, there's still Asian restaurants, pho restaurants up there on, on the Hilltop. But what I remember most is that the Asian stores, grocery store was so close by that we walk because we didn't drive, you know, we didn't have the resources of owning a car. We didn't know how to use the bus system. So luckily, like I say, I was a pretty easy short walk, even though it's uphill, but it was still nice for like, my to walk to the grocery store with my mom. I remember that and, that was pretty cool. I remember the one thing that I always, growing up in America was different. So especially in the early days, I remember not having a taste for much of American food, it was bland, it was kind of gross to me.

Chace: There was no flavor. So the only thing that I kind of gravitate to when I was in elementary school was when there's chicken nuggets days and tuna sandwich days. That was it. I didn't know what Sloppy Joe's were. Pizza was disgusting. It was like this square cold pizza, and then there was like, you know, those hard shell tacos back in the days and just various things that I'm just like, I don't know how to eat these things. So it was really, really challenging, like going, felt like I was basically starving myself, you know? So can't wait to come home to eat. You know what, I'm used to like rice and Asian ramens and my mom's cooking, so it was,

hard, like I would say the first two years going to school and it's, you know, when I was lunchtime, I'm just like, I just had to force myself to eat because I was hungry.

Chace: But at the time, you know, just like these foods, you know, weren't really tasteful. And I'm sure a lot of, you know, immigrant kids feel the same way. Like American food, were forced to eat it, so we kind of have to, or else were starving, but, you know, we eat what we could, so it wasn't that great. So I remember that. I don't know how much food has changed since then. Hopefully there's, there's some sort of ethnic foods into the menus nowadays. I would in elementary school, I remember elementary school, they sent out like every month that's sent out a menu list of like what's in there. So I would only circle what I know is tasteful and really enjoy those days. But other than that, I'm just like, yeah. When it comes to pizzas and sloppy joe's and it was just really, really difficult.

Chace: Yeah. And, you know, and then not knowing English was very difficult too. Like not knowing how to ask the teachers for permission to use the bathroom, not knowing what you know the kids are doing or what the homework is. So you're just kind of like sitting twiddling your thumbs, and just staring at the board as though you knew what the teachers were talking. I remember playing heads up seven up once, because I didn't know the rule. I didn't know what I was doing. So I, you know, the rule is like touch one thumb and then, but I didn't, so I touched like almost every student's thumbs, and so they all stood up trying to figure out who touched my thumbs. And apparently there were too many students stood up. So that confused, that ended the game early and I was never being picked on to play again. So, I was like, okay, well that's fine. I didn't understand. So, yeah, so there was a lot of like, not knowing what's going on. And so, and it kind of forced me to also like, kind of stick to what I know, stick to the people that understand me. So, so that was growing up in the early days as an immigrant.

dindria: Right on. Thank you for sharing that. It takes me back to those times as well. Yeah, and it really is apparent how much we are socialized into a culture. Right. And then the idea that we are being more than one culture at a time mm-hmm.
And so being bicultural, for instance. Right, thank you so much for sharing your story. Absolutely, and, and you're sharing it with all of Tacoma so that we're going to listen to the Tacoma born person here. Awesome. And, we will enjoy learning from you. Thank you.

Chace: Thank you so much. Thank you for having me. All right.