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Megan Packer: My name is Megan Parker from Pacific Lutheran University on April 30th, 2019, and I'm here with Donna Sasaki. Hi, Donna, would you mind starting off by introducing yourself and telling us a little bit about you?

Donna Sasaki: Okay, my name is Donna Sasaki. I live in Edgewood, Washington. I am a piano teacher and I've taught piano for over 40 years, and I have one son, a husband and one son, and I started coming to the temple when my son was about three years old. So, it would be about 1980.

MP: Wow.

DS: If I remember that long.

MP: Okay. So, you belong to the Tacoma Buddhist temple for about that long and have you ever belonged to any other Buddhist temples?

DS: Yes, because I grew up in Ontario, outside of Ontario, Oregon and there's an Idaho-Oregon Buddhist temple there. So, I grew up, I grew up with that Temple.

MP: Okay, and what brought you to the Tacoma Buddhist temple?

DS: Well, mainly I got married.

MP: Okay.

DS: My husband is from Orting, Washington. So, we got married and we settled in the Puyallup Edgewood area and his family has always been a member of the Tacoma Buddhist temple. So, we came here.

MP: Wow, cool. So, you said that you're a piano teacher?

DS: Yes.

MP: Do you participate in any art within the temple?

DS: I play the music for the services. Which I enjoy, thoroughly enjoy and then a member of the Fuji taiko group that we started. I think it's been about nine years now and most recently, kind of excited about this, Erik Hammerstrom and I have started a ukulele group, playing group. So, we practice just for 20 minutes after service, each Sunday. And we've got a range of people from young to old. So, we're really enjoying that.

MP: Wow, Fun. So, can you tell us a little bit about the taiko group?

DS: Well, let's see we started out probably with about seven or eight of us and we really have just kind of steadily just learned, not only how to play, but to play some of the very basic songs that you know that new taiko groups begin with and then steadily have been trying to add to our

repertoire and we basically just perform at our Temple and sometimes local festivals events a high school and Elementary School and not too far other than you know the Tacoma area, but we really didn't try that. And then now we're trying to learn a little bit more sophisticated music and trying to learn those so that we can perform them especially at our Obon Festival, our outdoor dancing Festival in August.

MP: Cool. And taiko is a type of drum.

DS: Oh, it is a drumming. Sorry! Yes, it is Japanese drumming and basically this, the taiko groups that began here. Basically Japanese-American taiko and they kind of took off on their own, you know sort of their own form or style. And so that's what we're trying to do too.

MP: Interesting, and how long have you been a part of the ukulele group? And are you leading the group?

DS: Oh, we started that in March.

MP: In March, oh so recent.

DS: You very recent. Yes, and Erik and I we just decided one, one Sunday that gee let's just start it. We've been talking about it for a couple of years. And hadn't gotten anything going so we decided let's just do that and we'll ask everyone to bring their Ukulele every Sunday and we'll just play for 20 minutes or so. So, we have a repertoire of three songs that were working on now and some of the people have classical guitar background some have some Ukulele background and some have no background. So, we're just, you know, just trying to play and enjoy the time together.

MP: Cool, and so beyond teaching piano. Do you participate in art outside of the temple?

DS: Let's see, well I am as a piano teacher, I am a member of two local music teachers' associations. Both of them have state and National organizations above that. So, we do have our meetings you know, every month and we do have a once, once a year, we teachers will perform for each other. So, I guess I do that, on occasion, if I'm ready to perform something.

MP: And are you teaching piano lessons like, like private lessons, or are you teaching at an institution?

DS: Private, private lessons. Yes, and actually I have, I'm semi-retired. I have three students and one is a senior so she will graduate this year and then the two other students I have are Juniors and they'll graduate next year. And then after that I will be fully retired.

MP: So, in the Tacoma Buddhist temple, how does art help you as an individual engage with the community outside of the temple?

DS: As I had mentioned before our taiko group definitely goes out of performs in the local area. And I think it brings, brings the face of Tacoma Buddhist temple to, to other groups in advance. And then we also had I think it was in 2013 that we did the Tacoma mural project. So in the back of our building which would, would always end up with some graffiti on it, or whatever, so we asked an artist to come in and do a mural on the back of our building and it has been really fun to see because people oftentimes don't even know our Temple is here, you know, it our, our

structure does not look like what you would think would be a Buddhist Temple and so I guess it just says 'hey we're here', you know and perhaps they'll be curious enough to want to come and join us and join our service at some point in time.

MP: So, in the last question, I asked how participating in art helps with expanding into the broader community, but how does art in the Tacoma Buddhist temple bring together or allow you to engage within your community at the Tacoma Buddhist temple?

DS: At the Tacoma Buddhist temple. Well in our services we sing what are called gatha's would be like hymns in a, in a Christian church and I've you play the music for that and it's a it's a wonderful time. I think just because we're all singing and most of it, most of it is in English now. Prior when I was growing up we have sing a lot of songs in Japanese. I did not know what any of it meant. So now our gatha's are more in English and we have a more diverse population, also. So, it brings everybody together as one and I just love the sound of everyone singing together

MP: Interesting. So, I just wanted to ask also, how does, like Beyond just art, how does the Tacoma Buddhist temple reach out to the Greater Community?

DS: A lot of social media these days. We do try to advertise our fundraising events. And we do have people who have come for 50 years to some of our fundraisers like Sukiyaki dinner and the Bazaare and our Obon. I think that Obon is especially attractive maybe because it's outdoors and people can hear the drumming they can hear the music can see the dancing and you know, it's just a great, great experience and people come and you can just sit on the lawn and, and enjoy the dancing. And anyway, it's, it's a great opportunity for us to show, show where we are and what we do and we also have a tour of the Temple because many people are then curious as to what our religion is about.

MP: So, what role does art in the Tacoma Buddhist temple play into your spirituality if any?

DS: I think this because I'm a musician. It's the music that does that and I have composed some of the gathas especially for children. And so, of course I enjoy listening to my, to people singing my music and so many of the children will come up to me and say 'oh that's my favorite song'. You know, they hope that I'll, that I'll play that one again, you know next Sunday or the following Sunday. So, it gives, just gives me joy, I believe to, to provide some of that music and just, just to listen to music.

MP: Great. So, have you seen any changes in art over time with, within the temple? Excuse me.

DS: I, I think that mainly that and I mentioned it before is that more of our music at least are the [00:10:15] songs that we sing are in English, as opposed to in Japanese. Yes. That's I think is the main, at least that's the main difference that I see from when I was growing up as a child.

MP: And is there any difference in the engagement of art? Are there more people participating now in like the creation of art or anything like that that you've noticed?

DS: Well, we did, we did redo our service book for our Dharma school in about 2008 and we had a committee that met for probably monthly for about four years to do that and, and part of it was to, to put English gatha's to the Japanese songs that we like to sing but you know the children

don't understand it. So, we have done that, and that was, that was a major project. And then I also did another song book. That one has only my compositions in it, but that, that was another thing. I feel like it's brought people together. And we also sung it at Northwest conventions that we've had and shared it with, shared it with other temples in the Northwest.

MP: Nice. So that was a perfect segue. I think to ask you a little bit about how you've been involved in the Dharma school and maybe you can tell us a little bit about what the Dharma school is and what it looks like, yeah.

DS: The Dharma School is like Sunday school program and we basically have had probably four classes at least since I've been here. One for preschool ages, and another one has more Elementary grades, the intermediate grades, and high school grade, and we have, try to have at least two or three teachers through each class and our Tacoma Buddhist temple has always been very supportive of our children's program so anything that the children need or the Dharma school program needs they're, they're right there to support, you know, and fund if necessary. And so, I've been a teacher for over 30 years and then I of that, of those years, I've been the Dharma school superintendent or just kind of oversee the whole thing for about 20, 25 years and I just stepped down recently and I've, but I am still teaching.

MP: Is there any one class that you teach more than the others, or do you teach all of the classes?

DS: No, I, let's see. I have probably taught basically the intermediate grades through about fifth grade to seventh grade.

Speaker 1: Interesting. So, going back to Art in the temple can you tell us about any specific people from the temple who have engaged with art within the community?

DS: With in our Temple community, I certainly can. Yaeko Nakano is, was our resident organist from way back when, in fact she was, she was the musician until I came on the scene. And so, I would help, and I would play for the children service and she would play for the adult service and she was an organist. I am not. So, when I played the organ, I was just, really wasn't playing as an organist, but kind of, she definitely does. Then she did have to step down after, because she's in her 90s now and couldn't do that. So I wanted to mention her also Mechi Osaka was, she probably, I think she went back to college to get an art degree and a master's degree in art after she, she was in her late 40s and she's done some beautiful print, prints and multimedia art, and then she was also a Dharma school teacher. And I did want to share one picture with you at some point in time which shows that her class have done a, made a large poster and sent it into our National Federation of Dharma School teachers league, and it was a poster contest and they won, and [00:14:48] so it was featured, I can't remember if it was featured at a conference or something like that. But it's, it's a wonderful work of art. She incorporated a lot of art in her teaching. And then Frank Kawasaki he is a former, one of our Temple Presidents and he learned to do sumi-e. Ink, it's like a Japanese ink art and he's, had taught classes here. He taught classes outside of the Temple, he was a member of the Puget Sound sumi-e art organization and so he went to schools and he taught a lot, a lot out in community and he is passed away, has passed away. Then I wanted to mention. Oh. For services, we always have a flower arrangement on the altar area and Frank Mizukami he has passed away now, but he did, done it for many, many years probably at least 40 years every, every week. It would come up with a fresh floral arrangement. And then when he was, was ill and could not do it anymore then our Temple

member now, Les Hetsman, is been doing that and he's been doing a wonderful job and to me that flower arranging is quite an art as well and it's a beautiful display every Sunday. So, I did want to mention that. Another person, Keinji Stoll is also a member of our Temple. He's the one that helped arrange the outdoor mural project for us. He also designed the cover of my Dharma school, children's songbook. And, I think that's it, in terms of the artists that I can remember. I wanted to relate to.

MP: Tell us more about your service books.

DS: Okay, the Dharma school service book that we use every Sunday. We formed a Committee, Reverend Fukuma who was here at the temple at that time and he was kind of surprised that we didn't have more English gathas and so we formed a committee and he and retired Minister Reverend Yukawa worked on some more of the sutras, the chantings, and some of that and then Ted Tamaki and Mr. Miki both have a lot of Japanese background and so they did some of the Japanese translations into English for, for some of the songs. So, they worked as a subcommittee. Michiko Yukawa, she was like our leader of our committee she and Yaeko Nakano also worked on translations from Japanese to English and then Vickie Kim and I were more of the, slightly more computer savvy. So we worked on working with finale program that music notation program so that we can notate it and be able to put in the music, the lyrics, and then to publish it so of, of all the translations, I thought that the two translations that I love the most Mr. Miki and Ted Tamaki translated Shinran-Sama and which turned out beautifully and then Michiko Yukawa and Yaeko Nakano translated arigato, which means thank you. And the anyway, they translated it and it was hard to change the Japanese words and syllables to match with English words and try to fit that into music. So, there was a lot of, you know, work on that and they would bring it to our monthly meetings and then we would all try to figure out. Well, that's not quite right, you know, can we try to try this word and that word and so it was a collaboration. But anyway, so we were able to finish that and publish it and I believe it was about 2008 but it was about a four-year project. And then a couple years later, actually, I had decided that there are some, some things that I would like to have as a song or as a gatha that wasn't in the book and so I decided to write and compose some gatha's and so when I would go visit my parents who lived in Ontario, Oregon that's like an eight-hour drive. So in my head, I would work on some music and some lyrics and so I, the first three gatha's that I that I composed we're done in the car as we were driving to and from Eastern Oregon and back and so that was *Time For Dharma School*, *We Are One* and *The Golden Chain*. So, I did that, that's in the first Dharma school service book. Then the later, I don't know why, but I guess decided to create a few more gatha's. So I did some more and then we published them in in a songbook that we call *Gassho 'Round The World* and that one there are two gatha's in there that I did not write the lyrics to so *Gassho Around The World* is one that Michiko Yukawa wrote the lyrics and I and then I composed the music to it and which we sing quite often and the children liked it quite a bit and then Reverend Yukawa, wrote the lyrics for "*Okagesama de Arigato*", which is basically means because of you I am well. So, with a "*Okagesama de Arigato*" when we each of the Northwest temples hosts a Northwest convention every February. And so, when it was Tacoma's turn, we use that as our theme for the convention. And then for the Dharma school children that came to the convention, we taught them that song and we also put the sign language to it and then they learned it over the course of the convention and then at our closing service on Sunday, they sang that and ended the signing for it. And it turned out really well, it was very beautiful. They did a very nice job. So

anyway, In the *Gassho 'Round the World* songbook, has 12 of my compositions in there. And when we printed it one of our temple families, Minoru and Toyoko Nakagawara donated the funds to publish it and so that we could not only have copies for our own Temple services, but for all the Northwest temples as well, so yes, I do know that my songs are being sung in other Northwest temples. Then in other compositions when our Temple had their centennial celebration. Let's see, would be 2015 is the actual Centennial year. But we spent 2014 doing all the celebrating up to that point. So, I did composition on the "*Call this Centennial celebration*" which we sang at the service; Centennial service and I had children. Actually, I had children sing and adults sing you had two trumpets play and so it was a very celebratory sound as so I kind of thought that turned out pretty well. But I also have also composed something for our Oboe Festival. We have dances. The dancers dance from songs from various cities in Japan, you know that are like traditional dances from different regions of Japan. So I was asked if I would write something for Tacoma so we could have like "*Tacoma Ondo*" or "*Tacoma Dance*" and then Bobby and Junko Yastuo wrote lyrics to it and talks and talks about maybe the history of Tacoma and some of the sites that you will see if you come to Tacoma. And then Crystal Inge and I believe Karen Yoshitomi, put motions to the dance. So, each year. We do a dance that Tacoma Ondo as part of our celebration or Festival. Let's see and then I've done a couple other compositions for the conventions. One was called, "*Sing Namu Amida Butsu*". And then our last convention that Tacoma hosted was in 2017. And the theme for that was, "Wake up". And so, I wrote a composition called "*Wake up*". And then we had, I call it a mass choir, I just gave all the music out to the to the Northwest temples. And then those that would like to participate come and sing that particular song for either the opening or closing service of the convention.

MP: So, tell us some more about Sukiyaki in the Bazaare that the Tacoma Buddhist temple host.

DS: Okay. Those are two of our major fundraisers, of course. And the Sukiyaki dinner is still cooked in individual pans and I don't believe any local temples in the region have even, do that anymore. So, it's a big deal. It still takes a lot of work. But so far, we've been able to do that. And then what I what I found besides the fact that people will come year and year out to our Sukiyaki dinners and they come for, They'll say they'd come for 25 years or 40 years, but people always are amazed at the number of not only the number of people that are working but the fact that the age range is from the littlest little little ones who helped with the, set the tables. To our elderly ones that are still in either cooking or being a host or you know, greeting people as they come in. And so, it's quite a community and it takes it does take a lot of work. But we do try to engage all of our Dharma school students, you know, and it also, family members that don't necessarily come to the temple, but will come to help. We rely on a lot of those volunteer help as well. But I think it's very successful

MP: And can you tell us about the bazzare as well?

DS: The Bazaars are somewhat the same. I believe that we may be scaling down on that a little bit because our, we have several menu items and we find that we have fewer people who can still share the different menu items to the you know, to be cooked. And so, I think we're just going to probably have to scale back on that. Maybe it will be a takeout situation instead of a sit-down situation. But and I kind of will miss that because I am in charge of the servers or the people who wait on the tables and wait on tables and wait on our customers and I enjoy having them come, you know couple times a year because then I can see them all again. And there are so, there are

so willing to help and volunteer and hate to see that phase out but we may have to do that just because our numbers are lower and it's just a bit harder for us to keep up the events that we've been doing.

MP: So, can you tell us a little bit more about the Dharma school and what types of things are the main messages that you're giving to the students?

DS: Okay. Well, we have to of course gear it to the age of the student and I would have to say that we have had wonderful teachers who've been able to engage the students and activities and convey messages and you know that whether it's an art project or whether it is when we have all the children together and doing one project. It's been, it's been just wonderful and students will often say that they enjoy, first they say they can't they come to the temple and all our parents make kind of make them come to the temple every Sunday. But by the time they have graduated, in fact, I interviewed a couple of the seniors just this past Sunday and they do say that that they now really appreciate the messages that they you know, they heard from the Minister And the lessons that they have learned and in their classes and they're going to really miss coming back and end up meeting people that they would not normally see any time else. That is also still some Japanese culture, you know, that is that is Conveyed here as well. And so, I think that has drawn some people to our Temple as well. But just in general, I just feel like it's the teachers that have done just a marvelous job of teaching students and the students are you know, enjoy it and they come through, go through all the grade levels, and then we always highlight them at our, at our, at a May service and talk about them a little bit and wish them well as they go on to college and luckily for us we've gotten at least a few of our high school graduates, have gone on to college, have come back to become members which does not often happen. They, a lot of our students end up going somewhere else, you know, and we always hope that they will, if they're in a city that has a Buddhist Temple. We hope that they will go there. But in Tacoma a lot of times is students have moved into Seattle or Bellevue or other places, or other regions, or other states, and don't often make it back here. But so, we're always happy if any of them do come back to our Temple.

MP: Wonderful. So, tell us about like what an average day looks like in an adult service and then in the Dharma School services.

DS: Okay, so typically at Tacoma Buddhist temple we'll start at 10 a.m. And it actually has always generally started with a Dharma School service for children, but the adults have found that they enjoy listening to the messages the minister would give to the children. So, all the adults for the most part come at 10 a.m. And they sit through the Dharma School service and it within that service there's some chanting, generally and there's always a message by either the minister Reverend Miyaji or sometimes a minister's assistant if he's, if for some reason the minister's gone is speaking at another Temple and then there also will be a gatha or song that we sing. And so, once we finished that portion of the service which takes about 30 to 40 minutes, then the children are excused and then they go to class while the adults stay for the second portion of the service for the adults. They will do another chanting and then the minister will give another message. And that sort of finishes off their, their service day. The children will go to classes and we always take attendance because we we don't give what we call perfect attendance awards, but we give excellent attendance awards so they come to like 90% of the



Sunday's that we require then they will receive a certificate and a pin from the Buddhist Churches of America. So typically, my class is actually from, see, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, actually this year is a little bit different and we can have as few as one or two students or as many as six or seven, just kind of depends on, you know, the attendance that day. And it's been it's been a lot of fun. We usually, the, our minister Reverend Miyaji tries to talk about a particular theme so like in the month of March, was compassion. So, we might do some some, either a project or we'll have discussion about that, that particular theme and so anyway was so we will do that. And we have a team of teachers, two of us that do most of the teaching and sometimes of third that will do some if either of the two of us aren't there. So, so, we'll have a generally speaking, will have a discussion, a project, and then snack of course at the end and it's it is always a kind of an enjoyable thing. I believe that the high school group most of the time we'll be doing discussions and I would say that our youngest two groups will probably do more, a little bit more in the way of projects, or art projects, but they you know, they will display the things that they've done and it's really quite wonderful to see what they've been working on. For our, for our age group, they can handle learning a little bit more about our founder, Shinran Shonin. So, we'll generally speaking covered the, his life. We'll also cover the life of Shakyamuni Buddha who was the historical Buddha and you know, try to learn a little bit more about that as well and other, other Buddhist teachings, teachings impermanence for sure. That would, that we'll cover as well. So anyway, so it when I was working on compositions for my gathas, I do have one that's on the life of Shin called "*Life or Shinran*" and Shinran had him, he was given a name at birth but he was also changed his name as he went through some of his different stages in his life. And so, I was always fascinating to me. So, I wrote a song called "*Life of Shinran*" and I put in all of those different names that he had given himself. And there's an explanation about those names as well. So, that was one of the one of the things that I wanted to put into a gatha. I've written the, "*Gassho 'Round the World*" book that contains 12 gathas and I really haven't written many gatha's after that. I think my creativity sort of stopped there. The, '*Gassho 'Round the World* gotha that Michiko Yukawa wrote talks about saying thank you in different languages. And so, the sign saying thank you. She said she wrote in the lyrics and one of the things that everyone can understand even if you don't understand particular language, is to put your hands together. And for our for our religion, that means putting your hands together in guasha and being, becoming one with the Buddha or thinking of the Buddha. And so, she wrote that in the lyrics of that song and it's just been wonderful. The children, children and adults, especially enjoy that one as well. And then one of the livelier songs that I wrote was called, "*We Are One*" and I think a lot of the high school students really like that one. It's very upbeat. I wrote all the piano accompaniments to be a little bit more interesting for the pianist to play as well. So, it's not just two chords to play but really has some different rhythms and stuff in there. So, they all say that that's their favorite one. And that is one of the ones that we are singing with our ukulele group as well. And then a couple of the other gatha's that I wrote; "*Amida's Guiding Light*" and "*Path of Nembutsu*". I have written instrumental lines along with it. So, I'll have two flute people that are children actually high schoolers that will play along with adding on occasion as well. So, there's some other instruments involved and it's been it's really beautiful to hear that as well. I think that's all I can say about my gatha's.

