

Let's Talk Oakland Chinatown (recorded July 23, 2020)

Audio Transcript

[intro music plays]

Akemi: My name is Akemi Chan-Imai I am the Program Manager for Oakland Asian Cultural Center (OACC). Our mission is to build vibrant communities through API arts and cultural programs to really foster intergenerational and cross-cultural understanding and dialogue and social justice. We're trying to launch a new project called "Open E.A.R.S. for Change." "E.A.R.S." stands for Engage. Activate. Rise up. Series. We're meaning for this be a long-term project that really aims to address anti-Blackness in API communities and really meaningfully confront issues of colorism and racism, and also really try to speak to address Black and Asian community relations in our local area. I'm very excited to be joined today with our moderator Jessica Li, who I met by way of OCA-East Bay. I'm really glad to have you on board. And we also have Trinh Binh from Good Good Eatz (GGE) with us and Alicia Wong owner of Fortune Cookie Factory (FCF) with us today. With that, I'd like to hand it off to you Jess. Take us away.

Jessica: Great, hi I'm Jessica Li, and I am currently the president of OCA-East Bay, and I'm really excited to be here with all of you to talk about these issues here in Oakland Chinatown, and also how it affects Asian American businesses and communities in the wider communities of Oakland. So, wanted to start by maybe having each of you introducing yourself.

Alicia: My name is Alicia. My family runs the Oakland FCF here in Chinatown Oakland. The factory has been around for over 62 years. We're one of the remaining factories that still uses the original machinery to make all our cookies by hand. We make fortune cookies for people in our community.

Trinh: I'm Trinh Binh, and I am one of the cofounders of GGE with Tommy Wong. [It's] an initiative that's an offspring from his Chinatown Improvement project. What we do is, we try to do good through food. That can encompass a lot of things, but the thread is always food.

Jessica: Is that your, your motto?

Trinh: Yeah, it's doing good through food, you know. It was kind of born out of that whole need to help Chinatown when the pandemic hit. And, Tommy came up with "Good Good" because I guess in Chinese that's a greeting that you say. I'm gonna butcher it so I'm not gonna say [it]. [laughs] But in translation, it's "good good," whether it's "hello" or "goodbye" or just a greeting [when] you see each other in the street, so that whole sense of community, and then we put the "eatz" together because of course we're food people and that's what we're working with. Its kind of evolved into this place of doing good through food.

Jessica: One of the first questions that I have for you is, can you talk a little bit about why it's so important for Asian businesses in Oakland to be in solidarity with Black Lives Matter (BLM) right now and working on anti-Blackness?

Trinh: I think it's important that everybody, every community is in alignment with the mission of justice. I think it's every more important, or I think in the Chinatown community and those merchants because, we're living in, we're moving into a whole new world. We're at a time of immense transition and change. It's undeniable, it's here and it's happening. I think what *we're* doing in terms of helping the

businesses transition is into the 21st century. By that we mean both technologically in the ways that we do business and using tools like social media and that kind of thing. But it also means we've gotta have a different approach to how we work with our community; really coming together and working across cultures, across neighborhoods and, you know, the audience has changed. In order to thrive and survive especially after, you know, since we are where we are right now, it's just that much more crucial that they open themselves up to learning about what's important to their audience, who are their customers. Their customer base is gonna start changing—it has already changed. You have to be able to speak that language and know your customers and the way that this new generation is buying and supporting businesses is through their values. That's doing business in the 21st century. And that's one aspect, the business aspect. But you know, the other aspect is really, it's humanity. Plain and simple. It's just humanity. We've gotta reach across and we've gotta cross pollinate and work together. We're just better. We're stronger. It's so cliché but we're better and stronger when we're more diverse and working together and exchanging our insights, our cultures and our everything.

Jessica: I'm just curious, can you talk a little bit about the demographics of the new audience that you're seeing?

Trinh: As I'm talking to volunteers, it's surprising to hear how many of them live in Chinatown, or in and near Chinatown. I was like, "oh!", I always, because I grew up in Oakland and just kind of assumed that Oakland Chinatown were folks that were living there forever, and [assumed] maybe it's more seniors or whatever, but no it's starting to shift. I never thought about this next generation moving, living in Chinatown to be honest, right? You know with all the development and everything that's happening, it's gonna be a natural progression of a younger demographic that's gonna be shifting within and around Chinatown. You're gonna be doing business in a different kind of way. And that's not to say that you're ignoring your current one, it's really a blend. It's about serving the community that's already there and learning how to serve a new community that's coming in.

Jessica: Great, thank you. Alicia, I know that you sort of grew in Chinatown in terms of like your parents were the previous owners FCF and you are now stepping into that role where you're the owner of that. I'm curious if you could share a little bit about how you came up with the idea of doing fortune cookies that are specifically related to BLM movement.

Alicia: Ever since I started really helping with the factory and making cookies, fortune cookies became sort of like a form of expression; a way to convey ideas. For years, we've been making cookies for different occasions and themes. We have a rainbow-colored cookie that we designed for Pride, we have a cookie that we made for games, for basketball teams, just cookies inspired by ideas. So we knew we wanted to make a cookie for the BLM movement. The only question was just how and what we wanted it to look like. We went a lot into trying to experiment around seeing what kind of cookie can we make that can really convey an idea, make a statement. When you look at it, right off the bat, you know what that cookie is for. We designed a black cookie. We based off the colors from the BLM website. One of their biggest colors is black and gold so we made a black cookie. But we felt like that might be too plain, or it wasn't enough. We had to figure out a way to put the BLM logo directly on the cookie, because people won't know [the purpose of the cookie] until they open it. We didn't want that. We wanted them to look at it and see what [the purpose] was. We experimented around. We bought some tools. We invested in an electric cutter that can create really elaborate and highly precise stencils. We bought a professional set that helps you airbrush designs onto foods, and we had to teach ourselves essentially

how to use those tools, play around. There were a lot of mistakes, a lot of trials, and eventually we got to a way to make the stencils that work efficiently and effectively and we created a cookie with a really bright BLM logo on it. So that's how the cookies came to be and we're really happy with how they turned out.

Jessica: Yeah, they're beautiful. I had the pleasure of seeing some of them and seeing them be made. I think it says a lot about you and your business in terms of you invested in all this equipment to really be able to create these cookies. What's some of the reactions and feedback that you've gotten from customers who place these orders?

Alicia: Yeah, we got really positive response. We were kind of shocked, because I see fortune cookies every day, so it's my life. I wasn't expecting for it to make such a big impact in someone else's life. The first day when they were released, we got phone calls from people who said they saw [our] cookies and they cried a bit in happiness because they felt like they were heard. One lovely lady wrote us a letter. She said, "It feels so good to feel heard and loved." That was like, one of the most emotional moments I had working here. Knowing that our cookies were able to affect someone so much. It just made it so more worth fighting for and working towards. That's what we wanted them to feel. We wanted to show our support through the amount of work and thought that we put into the cookies. And it worked. They turned out great.

Jessica: That's so awesome. And I know you're also donating proceeds from the cookies, right? So can you tell us the organizations that you're donating your proceeds to?

Alicia: Yeah, so we're donating to the NAACP and the Innocence Project. I went through lists and lists and lists of different nonprofit organizations that support Black lives. And we had two criteria, because we're a tiny business; we won't be able to donate millions and millions of dollars. So we wanted to make sure that whatever money that we put into these organizations that they're gonna be used to the maximum effect. We looked for organizations that had financial transparency. If they put their financial reports directly on their website. And then from those that do, we looked at their financial reports and saw how much are going to supporting the company, how much are going directly into the people that they're trying to help. We wanted to make sure that at least a majority, over 60% of the donations that they're receiving, are going directly to helping people. So that was our second criteria. The NAACP and the Innocence Project met those criteria and they are both very reputable and very important organizations, so we thought that they would be the best groups to donate money towards.

Jessica: I grew up in an immigrant household where my parents owned a commercial steam cleaning business for kitchens. I know that if I had been part of the business and I told my mom, "Hey we're gonna create this new product and invest all this money into it, and by the way we're not gonna keep the proceeds." She would've been like, "What? Why would you do that?", right? I'm curious to hear a little bit, if it's ok Alicia, what was it like to have that conversation with your parents and also with your employees?

Alicia: My parents generally give me a lot of room to make cookies now, because they've seen me do it so much. Initially they were against it, but after a while they kind of just leave me alone. So I really understand the part where the parents being averse to getting involved. My parents were also a bit afraid initially because they've seen how politically charged, how emotional it was, and they were afraid of backlash, they were afraid of getting stigmatized, of other people mistaking our intentions and

getting backlash. They were really afraid and to be honest, I was a little bit scared too because things are really emotional. But we were really careful; we wanted to make sure we do things right. We thought this was too important. We can't just stand aside now. There's going to be a time where you have to stop sitting down and look at things like, "That's their problem, and this is my business. That's their business." We have to stop doing that. What better is it than now when we need it more than ever? I decided to push ahead [and] make the cookies. I didn't tell my parents exactly what they were for because I didn't want to freak them out too much. After the cookies were released and we got letters and people calling us [saying] how happy they were and the good we were doing, that's when I told my parents. I sat them down and I said, "Hey mom, you see this letter? This person wrote to us about our cookies." I think it was the first time she realized that, "Woah, our cookies have an impact on people! What the heck? I didn't know that." I don't think she even knew it was a possible thing for one person to make such an effect on another person's life. She was kind of speechless. I think showing her the results of it, I think it kind of changed her mind. It changed everyone's mind in how they look at this. Instead of it being a matter where it's like "That's a scary matter. I don't wanna go near it. Let's not go near it. If you get yourself involved, you're just a busybody." Now it's like, wow, you have the power. I have the power to do something positive and that's a *good* thing. That's something I can share and almost kind of brag about to my friends like, "Hey, my factory did something really good." That's what we're hoping to do; to basically change the minds of older generations who are kind of stuck on the fence and not wanting to get involved.

Jessica: I'm curious Trinh, from your perspective, how do you think we might be able to shift the perceptions of individuals who haven't bought into the culture of anti-Blackness? How do we do that within our own communities so that we can show that we are in solidarity with Black lives?

Trinh: I think the simplest and the only way to change minds is through action. Just exactly like what Alicia said. Instead of talking about it, we just have to do it. And when you see what comes out of it and the results of it, then they can see: "Oh!" That's how they can put that together. Otherwise, it's really hard to have these kinds of conversations because it's all—I mean where do you even begin? It's through these sorts of activities, that's when you can showcase, and that's when you can build a bridge, and that's when you can sort of see what being an ally is. The idea of it is like, I come from a restaurant family. You can break bread with your worst enemy and if you can agree that the food is good, that's the common ground. Then you can start the dialogue. It's a conversation at the table. It's *always* at the table; it's over a drink, it's over some food, it's over a meal. You gotta find that common thread that people care about and bring them together, and through those kinds of activities you can start that conversation and learn. What's probably true for most of our parents is that if they can have a positive relationship with someone of another culture, if they have exposure to those experiences that are positive, it reinforces our humanity. The more of that you can do, that's the beginning of the conversation. For example, having a pick-it-up event, seeing people of color in the neighborhood helping out, you know, or doing other things that bring those folks together to really truly interact, that's when you start seeing this cross caring about each other. What has to happen is it's through action. It's not gonna happen overnight. Like Alicia says, we're at a time where our generation's saying "We're not shutting up anymore. This has got to be said. We can't just stand by." I think everyone feels that.

Jessica: Is GGE planning any events or anything coming up in the next couple of months that we might be able to support?

Trinh: We're just working to continue to support the businesses here especially the restaurants, the food businesses. We're in talks right now of some sort of street closures so that we can build more of a plaza life because obviously life is changing and we need the space to do the things we used to do. So [we're] just shifting into that arena. We actually have a really fun project that will involve artists and the community. Just follow us on GGE. [laughs] It's a collaboration that we're bringing artists with the community to do a fun little thing.

Jessica: Alicia, just curious, how can people, our listeners, support the FCF at this time? What can we do, especially given that you're giving away the proceeds of the BLM cookies, but we also know that your business has been affected by COVID. What are some things that we can do as customers to support your factory?

Alicia: We're still struggling to stay open. We've been trying to keep all our employees on board. Most of them are the sole breadwinners because their partners lost their jobs because most of the restaurants have had to shut down or downsize. So they're right now the sole breadwinners in their family, and it's really important for us to continue being able to give them at least 4-5 days of work per week instead of shutting down to 1-2 days. We're still making cookies, we're still designing new cookies for the fall, so if people want to order cookies, there's no minimum order. You wanna order one cookies, you wanna order two cookies, you wanna send them to some friends in another state and show them, "Hey, I'm thinking about you, I love you. We can't see each other yet, but here's a fortune cookie." We still wanna do stuff like that. If people want to just place a small order, that will really help us. We love making cookies and we want to keep spreading joy and happiness. So yeah.

Jessica: I wanted to ask if you could share a couple of your unique creations. Because I feel like I've been to other fortune cookie factories around the country, and I feel like your factory specifically gets really creative in what you make. It's not like the fortune cookies that you get at restaurants.

Alicia: There's so many. I have a whole wall of cookies I designed. Initially, we started with just plain old cookies [with] some chocolate we dipped them in and maybe throw a few sprinkles, and it just slowly evolved over time. We're always looking for the next crazy thing we can make. We have a chrome silver shiny fortune cookie that we designed for the Apollo moon landing anniversary. We have a special set of cookies that have Bulgarian rose petals, like actual rose petals infused into the chocolate. Most recently, I am making a Tiffany blue chocolate fortune cookie made with pure spirulina powder. [laughs] It's gonna have a beautiful Tiffany blue color to the chocolate. We've also made one that the chocolate was covered in 24 carat gold leaf. It's my artistic expression. So yeah, we're trying to make the next catalog for the fall with rose gold colors and lots of gold, and we're really excited about that.

Jessica: You just describing them just made me really hungry.

Alicia: [laughs]

Trinh: Can I just interject and say they are the best cookies ever? Once we started working with them and I was telling all my friends, they were just like, "Oh my god, this is the most beautiful [cookie]." It is really art Alicia. It's just so beautiful. It's so beautiful to look at. I was so happy because it's fun for me as a visual person too, a creative, to work with products that are beautiful like that. My friends, like for Mother's Day, they were buying it all up for themselves and they love it. And they are so delicious.

Alicia: They're really like a product of love and labor because they're all [made] one at a time and I don't know if we ever be able to scale it up because we can't mass produce them like a machine. We can only—I can only do several hundred a day without falling apart. So yeah, they're really a labor of love and I'm just so happy to know that your family and your friends love them too.

Trinh: Oh, they do. I tell everybody about them, and yeah, you have new customers for sure. There's so much potential for what you can do with it, so I'm glad you guys have done a lot with that and investing in the laser [cutter] and really finding new ways to play around with that. That's what it is; you've got to innovate, you've got to try new things as a business you know. You've gotta keep growing, finding other avenues and it's fun, and I think your customers appreciate that. Again, it's one of those things. You can't just be comfortable with what's happening. You gotta always grow and evolve and find ways, and when you do that, your audience feels it, and they can get excited for you. It's like what's next? What's coming? [laughs] It's a constant relationship that you have to build with your audience as well as new ones that are coming. It's a constant—that's why social media is so crucial; it's where you can tell your story and gauge and really build your community online. The model that we at GGE try to do is always like a win-win-win model. You're expressing your support and you're making beautiful products that someone else can purchase that supports you and another [entity]. It's just a really regenerative model which is really what we're about. It's how do we do things where everybody wins? It's like the Fund-A-Lunch program that we did. We incorporated you guys in it because it makes sense. You give lunch *and* dessert, so some cookies go with your lunch. That way, everybody wins. Donors are happy, restaurants and businesses are happy, and the recipients are happy. That's part of rethinking too what some of the merchants or the businesses in Chinatown could think about. When you do those kinds of things and you act on good will, it does really come back as I'm sure Alicia you probably experienced.

Jessica: Alright, so Alicia, what is your website so that our listeners know where to go specifically to order these beautiful and delicious cookies?

Alicia: Three words: Oakland. Fortune. Factory. Dot com. [laughs]

Jessica: Thank you. I think I'm gonna definitely order some cookies tonight and send them off to our listeners around the country and I hope our listeners will do the same. Thank you for being in conversation with us. I'm gonna turn it back over to Akemi to close us out.

Akemi: Thank you so much everyone for participating. I learned so much and am just super excited to hear these stories that you all just shared. Thank you for joining us and really helping us set our best foot forward in terms of our new program initiative at OACC. If you have more updates, we're trying to like push our more community announcements and such through the OACC newsletter so definitely send us content that you want us to push for you two. Thank you for all you do.

[outro music plays]