



ARCHIVES FOUNDATION

YouSpeak Radio Episode 3 –

Audio Transcript

YouSpeak Introduction:

This is YouSpeak Radio. With generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund. A project by ONE Archives Foundation on Tongva Land.

[MUSIC]

Marbella:

Today, I'm being joined by Dr. Mimi Hoang, a psychologist, educator, author and activist specializing in the LGBTQ and Asian Pacific Islander communities. We will be discussing a lot about one's identity, more specifically when one identifies with the bi community. Bisexual people struggle a lot in life with feeling invisible and unnoticed, regardless of it being with family, friends, a professional setting. Dr. Mimi Hoang advocates for is for youth and people, and be, bi people in general to advocate for themselves and know that it's okay to be bi even when being in a heterosexual or gay relationship. I connected a lot with Dr. Mimi Hoang on the fact that she grew up in an immigrant household, um, being really curious about her sexuality.

Mimi:

Being a person of color and queer, it kind of prepared me. We talk about the negative side, like, "Wow, you know, you're a double minority or whatever," um, but I think actually, you know, being a person of color has helped me, um, because I could translate some of that, you know, kind of like, uh, coping, um, and learning, you know, from one identity to another.

Marbella:

Something I really took away from this interview is that no matter how unnoticed you feel at times, the most important thing is that you recognize yourself and who you are as a person, and to not let anybody change that about you.

Marbella:

My name is Marbella Zoliz-Maldonado. I use she/they pronouns. I am a rising senior at a Los Angeles high school, and I identify as bisexual.

Mimi:

I'm Dr. Mimi Hoang. I use she/her pronouns, and I'm really happy to be here today.

Marbella:

What drove you to being an activist for both of the communities you identify with being the LGBTQ community and the Asian Pacific Islander community?

Mimi:

So it really starts out with my personal identities. I am ethnically Chinese and Vietnamese, and I was born in Hanoi, Vietnam, and it was in the late seventies.

And so this is after, you know, the Vietnam War, and things were very tumultuous at that time for my family and the people living there. And so we ended up being refugees to seek political asylum here in the US.

I was, you know, just a young child. We had to really uproot ourselves and start all over again in a new country and learn a new language and a new culture, so that already kind of thrust me into a position of being aware of who I am and being different. Growing up, um, you know, being a refugee, an immigrant, an Asian American in the eighties and nineties and in California, we tried to survive, right? My parents worked a lot of jobs to make ends meet. I had younger siblings also that I was responsible for taking care of and just trying to, you know, go to school, get good grades and sort of live that American dream.

Now, when I, you know, became a teen, that's when I started noticing sort of different feelings that I had for boys and girls. I just really felt different, um, you know, from my friends who, you know, my female friends who were only talking about boys. But, I also got the sense that it was something that I shouldn't talk about, that it was very taboo.

I had very traditional immigrant Asian parents, and so I just got the message that, you know, being gay was something that wasn't good. It was frowned upon. I really kind of hid that, um, and didn't talk about it and, uh, almost kind of forgot about it to some extent until I got to college.

[MUSIC]

Mimi:

I moved away from home and went to a large university, UCLA. From there, I really got interested in social issues, and I was a women's studies minor, psychology major. That's what

then kind of led me to take some classes where I met some LGBT people, and I heard the word 'bisexual' for the very first time.

This was before, you know, social media. So, when I heard the word bisexual, I was like, "Oh, wait. Could that be me?" Because, you know, I didn't fully think I was gay only or straight only. And I just, you know, no one was talking about it. No one was talking about being bi or pan or fluid, for that matter. And so it kind of started to piqued my interest, but I was still really afraid to go there to explore it.

I'm this, you know, um, immigrant and first generation college student and really just trying to get good grades and, you know, um, do well.

I had a boyfriend at the time in college so I mean, everything was going pretty well. I, you know, got good grades. I was involved in student clubs and orgs and had leadership positions, but there was something that felt like, you know, I wasn't happy. I felt kind of down and I couldn't put my finger on it, and so I decided to see a therapist at the university counseling center. And that's where the therapist says, you know, as all therapists should, asked me at the first session, "What's your sexual orientation?"

I said, "I'm straight, though I kind of think about girls, but, you know, I'm straight." She just, you know, nodded and, you know, kind of took a note in her notepad, said, "Okay," you know, didn't push it. And then it came up again, and I said, "Yeah, I mean, I guess I do kind of feel attracted to, you know, girls. But, you know, I'm not really here to talk about that. I'm here to talk about my depression."

I wasn't ready to go there, and she just very gently, calmly and noted it again on her notepad. It came up a third time, and so I think that's when she really kind of went for it. And we started to talk about sexual orientation and, um, sort of got me warmed up and even talking about it, right? And through that, uh, she connected me to a mentor who was also a student, a grad student who was a little older, had already, you know, worked through her coming out. She was Latina, and so also a person of color and also an immigrant, you know, who came from a traditional family, and so I met my mentor and we started to chat and talk.

Over time, um, I finally realized who I was and was able to say, "I'm bisexual." That was in 1999.

[MUSIC]

Mimi:

Pretty soon after that, um, you know, since I was already a student leader in my university, I got asked to run a bisexual group, uh, there, uh, with another student.

Through running this student support/social group, I was really able to meet other students who were figuring things out or dealing with coming out, things like that, and learned more about issues around biphobia both from the straight world and the gay world and was able to connect and find community. I was already involved in a lot of Asian American student clubs and orgs at that time but, it was more kind of like a social thing rather than a political thing.

Later, when I started grad school, and moved to, uh, a different city, I started to experience a little bit more racism, microaggressions and things like that. That really started to kind of, you know, awaken my ethnic identity to a different level. I had always known, obviously, that I'm, you know, different ethnically. We would sometimes get people staring at us when we would go to different stores and things like that when when I was growing up. But nothing was ever said directly to me until, you know, I was in grad school.

That's when I really thought of myself as a queer Asian American woman and the intersectionality of that. I did eventually move back to L.A. and, really started to get involved with queer AAPI groups. I then helped to co-found, um, another bisexual group, a social group called "amBi," and, uh, that's a now a meeup group, and it has expanded to many different cities and states. That was in 2006. And then a couple of years after that, I helped to co-found another bisexual group, so my third one, called the "Los Angeles Bi+ Task Force," and that's a nonprofit where we promote education, advocacy and cultural enrichment for the Bi+ plus community in Greater Los Angeles. Um, I still am involved with that on the board, um, and I did volunteer at a number of other organizations that that's been the one, you know, that I've stayed with the longest.

[MUSIC]

Marbella:

I know you mentioned earlier that because of the fact that you grew up in a very traditional household it was kind of difficult for you to kind of explore your sexuality. I was personally very scared coming out to my family because I grew up within the very traditional norms, like, oh no, like you should be in a heterosexual relationship. How do you believe one's identity with not only gender but also like sex--, sex--, ah, sexual orientation, play into like family conflicts?

Mimi:

It's such a common struggle, you know, is what your parents reactions are going to be. I think it it kind of depends on where your parents got their messaging around, you know, non-heterosexual

orientations, right? Some parents are going to be a little bit more informed and aware, and others, you know, have none. Others have gay friends and things like that.

Because my parents grew up in a small village in Vietnam, and so they just really didn't have that exposure. The things that they knew about were really from TV and movies, and back in the day, you know, gay people were rarely ever in TV and movies. If they were, you know, they were kind of the joke, or kind of painted as the bad guy.

I really felt like there was a lot of educating, you know, that I had to kind of do. I think being bi specifically was also kind of a different layer because I don't think they had ever really heard about someone who was like bi. They'd heard about gay people, lesbian people, and even transgender people, but bi was something really different. They kind of lumped gay and bi together. They just sort of saw me as like gay-ish, and to them that was bad enough.

Now, other people that I've talked to, um, their parents may have a actually different opinion towards gay people and bi people. You know, they they might see them as like really different identities, and um, sometimes parents might view gay people as okay and bi people as not okay, um, unfortunately. You know, I think we live in a binary world, right?

Either you're gay or your straight, and they just don't understand bi or they think that bi is not really a thing like a legitimate orientation, that you're just confused and you're gonna, you know, end up one way or another, right?

I think there's just a lack of awareness. Um, now when there's other things like culture and religion, you know, that play into it, you know, that can also make it challenging. Um, you know, when parents have, you know, just internalized different ideas that are from their community, um, their churches and temples that have helped shaped their opinions.

[MUSIC]

Marbella:

Going back to, um, what you said earlier about there not being much representation about the LGBTQ community on television. Is that what kind of inspire inspired you to create “Bi on Life”?

Mimi:

I've always wanted to use my platform as both a psychologist and an educator. Developing these types of workshops and really life coaching is what I felt like would be my lane.

I really like to work with people in understanding their personal struggles and helping them really meet their goals, you know, and uplift them, build their confidence, um, you know, help them understand who they are, um, and help them love who they are.

After going to the White House in 2013, I was really concerned about mental health for the bi+ community. That's when I started to do more trainings also, um, for other therapists and other helping professionals. Um, I felt like I could really make a difference within my industry.

That's been a really big passion of mine, is to train other therapists so that there isn't a microaggression within the therapy-client relationship. Now, through the LA Bi+ Task Force, we do put on a lot of other types of educational programs, and one of them is what we call "Bi-alogue."

Through that, we do these interviews with, you know, notable, well-known, leaders and activists, and we talk about different hot topics affecting our community.

[MUSIC]

Marbella:

What has been an experience where you felt like you couldn't express express your most authentic self, and how did you overcome it?

Mimi:

It was probably between the time that I came out to myself and the time I came out to my parents because there was actually a five year span.

When I came out to myself, I really felt great. My depression that I had in college lifted, because I had clarity and I was able to really be myself. And I started coming out to close friends, and started, you know, running the bi group at my university.

I met people. I built community. I felt great, and I felt like I was, um, making a difference. We were, you know, marching at Prides and doing panels and things like that in different places. But, you know, it always I always kind of knew, like, "Okay am I ready to tell my parents yet?" And I just wasn't ready.

I knew that it would be a big deal.

I just didn't feel ready. Now, as my leadership and activism grew, I then worried more and more that my parents would sort of accidentally find out.

Maybe someone would take a photo of me marching in Pride, and my parents would see that, and I was like, "Oh, no, I'm going to give them a heart attack," you know? So I thought to myself, I don't want them to find out in that way. If they're going to find out, I want them to find out from me.

Because I was, you know, doing a lot of community organizing, and I was helping people and mentoring people, I also felt like, you know, this is sort of like a roadblock for me to mentor other people.

If I really want to help others, I need to work on me, right?

As time, you know, drew on, I felt more confident. I found another therapist, later. And she was really great. She was queer herself. And I had my mentor who I still kept in touch with. She was like a big sister to me. And I had built my community, right? And so by that time, I felt much more grounded and ready. And I knew who I was. And I knew that I had chosen family.

When I came out to them, it was difficult. It wasn't easy, but I think because I had prepared for it, you know, my therapist helped me, my mentor helped me, and, uh, so I was I was ready.

I knew that they would have their own learning curve, right? I had already worked through stuff, but it took me a while, um, so I knew I had to give them time. I couldn't just expect them to like get it.

So when they were really upset, I just was like, "Okay, I knew this was going to happen." But, you know, I think some of this is just going to be educating them, you know, correcting like stereotypes that they had. They thought like, "Oh, you know, you're confused," or, you know, they also thought I was going to get HIV or AIDS.

I really just had to, like, give them information really calmly because it really wasn't a debate.

Your identity is not up for debate, so don't let it become an argument. You're basically just letting the person know who you are. They can have their feelings about it, but that does not change who you are.

I think that's what really helped me, you know, get through that.

[MUSIC]

Marbella:

Besides writing and producing and protesting as a form of activism, how do you express who you are?

Mimi:

There's so many ways.

Sometimes it's just those little things. It's what I call, like, everyday activism, right? When maybe I'm in a pretty hetero space or context, maybe I'll just bring up something queer, um, you know? And so that sort of allows me to feel like I'm not a silenced or, you know, like I can be my full self.

In a more gay kind of centric space, I might also bring up some bi stuff as well. Sometimes it can become very mono-sexist in a, in a gay space. Um, I think that me being married to a woman, my wife, automatically outs me in many ways.

It is something that sort of is harder to hide. People visibly see us, right?

There's kind of this, you know, non-verbal coming out. When, you know, my wife and I got married, we were and moved into our new home. We were setting up the cable right for our new house.

I was talking to, you know, the cable company and setting up a time when they could come, visit and set things up. And I said, "Oh, well, I won't be here, but, you know, my spouse will be." And then the person said, "Oh, what is your husband's name?" Right? Because it's, again, a very heteronormative world and they just assume that, "Oh, you know, here's a woman and, you know, if she's married, she must be married to a man." And so I said, "Actually, my wife, her name is..." Right? And so I'm like, "Wow, I guess I'm coming out to the cable company."

You have to make those decisions of like, what do I reveal? What do I disclose? When we were house hunting, we were writing letters of introduction, um, to the homes that we wanted to to buy.

I had to make a decision like, do I also reveal, you know, that we're a, you know, same gender couple? Right? And so those were also, you know, um, interesting decisions that you have to make as a queer person.

Marbella:

How did you begin to find the courage to advocate for yourself and not only yourself, but also your communities?

Mimi:

Being authentic is something that's important to me. Growing up, maybe I was in some ways already, you know, sort of familiar with that experience, and so I was not afraid of it.

Being a person of color, you know, you can't hide that. You visibly, you look different. I had to deal with microaggressions and racism. Being a person of color and queer, it kind of prepared me.

We talk about the negative side, like, "Wow, you know, you're a double minority or whatever," um, but I think actually, you know, being a person of color has helped me because I could translate some of that, coping and learning, you know, from one identity to another. Um, and I think also as a person of color, I realized that it's so important to have community.

Don't do it alone. Try to find strength in numbers. Try to find like minded people.

That just sort of automatically was in my mind when I came out as bi and and started these groups.

I saw how validating and healing it was when people came to the groups. You know, when I was a part of amBi, um, there were people who drove hours to come to our groups and our events because it was that important to them to meet other people like them.

You could see it was like a weight was lifted off their shoulders because they were in this space where they didn't have to explain themselves. The more that we want to change in this world, the more that we really have to rally people.

You just can't do it alone. The fight is hard and the fight is long. Everything I've done, I've always done with the crew, you know, with the team.

Having that kind of more collectivist strict upbringing and then also being able to see it, see the benefits of what happens when a person finds community.

Marbella:

How would you encourage, um, younger people to find community when they can't seem to create it? Or how would you encourage people to create their own community?

Mimi:

It's not easy to create your own community. I think if there is one nearby, then that's great, right? Because then you can just join the community.

There's also online communities. Even if there isn't a group right in your area, you could search for one on many different platforms. But if there isn't one near you, and you really want an in-person local community, then you might have to start it. Don't be afraid to be the first because sometimes it just has to be you.

In many ways being first generation to go to college, and I was actually also the first to move away from home. I broke a lot of those sort of expectations.

Usually what I would do is kind of put out a call like, "Hey, who wants to start this thing with me?" That, I think, also sends the message that you need people to help. It's a communal thing. Try to pick maybe a time, a place, you know, for a meeting. You know, that's kind of where it starts.

It could be, you know, a coffee shop, you know, library, community center.

Talk to everybody and see, um, you know, what the goals are, what the needs are. Is this a social group? Is this a political group? You know, is it going to be a nonprofit, um, and then create a mission statement? Even if it's a social group, it's still needs a mission statement because you want to have a sense of direction, right? What is your mission? What is your goal?

People sometimes might feel frustrated if maybe it doesn't get off the ground right away, and these kind of things take patience, um, and take consistency. The more consistent you are, the better, because people will eventually come back. Some people have called, uh, bi activism like herding cats. Right, cats are always like walking in different directions, and you're trying to corral them.

You're going to need to be patient, and, you know, eventually you'll be able to gather your group.

Marbella:

In your opinion, what are some of the biggest challenges, um, bi people face today?

Mimi:

There's a number of different issues.

There's still a lot of erasure; that sort of sense of people trying to mislabel us as gay or straight.

You dismissing us, saying we're not done coming out or this is not real, so the erasure piece, I think, is still out there, and I think it's super damaging.

When you say you're something and then another person says, "No, you're not that," right? It just it really plays a doozy on on on your head. I think there's still is this sense of needing just to educate people that bisexuality is real. We exist, and we will remain bisexual, um, you know, over time.

There's also just negativity, you know?

Bi negativity, biphobia, the sense that, you know, there's something wrong with you, um, that being bi is somehow bad or worse than being gay, you know, there's a lot of like stereotypes around promiscuity, being unfaithful, not being able to love someone or settle down. It makes people question like, "Oh, is this like an okay thing to be?"

Being bisexual is normal. There's nothing unhealthy, abnormal. You have nothing you have to fix.

You can love people, you can have relationships, you can have fulfilling relationships, and it can be hard when people are in, you know, long term relationships. Sometimes people feel kind of invisible when they're with someone that they love, and it's long term and it's serious. Sometimes for that Bi+ person, they start to feel a little bit like, "Well, weird, what do I do with my bi or pan identity now?"

All of those things kind of leads to the different mental health issues.

It can lead to depression, suicidality, when you're feeling ostracized, you know, cut out, um, you know, abused. And there's a really a very serious risk of being abused, even within your romantic relationship.

With being bi, pan, fluid or queer, is that you might have a partner who's of a different orientation than you, right? You might be with a straight or a gay partner, and that straight or gay partner may or may not really fully accept you or respect you, um, and they may abuse you as a result. Um, so there's very unfortunate, you know, a higher risk of having intimate partner violence within your relationship. So that's something I think is it's a really serious thing.

Love should not be hurtful and abusive. If a partner loves you, um, they should love you for your entire identity, not just one part of you, but your whole identity.

[MUSIC]

Marbella:

You mentioned about how sometimes being in a long term relationship, you kind of feel a sense of, like, forgetting part of your identity, or you feel like you're just invisible.

Say, a partner or somebody, like, relatively near close to you is like, "Oh, I guess they turned you straight now, or "I guess they turned you gay now." How would you feel is an appropriate way to respond to that negativity?

Mimi:

It's just that simple. Being bi's about that internal potential to be attracted to more than one gender.

Just because I have a partner right now who happens to be of a certain gender doesn't mean that somehow that capacity in me goes away. I mean, if you're straight and let's say you have a partner, does it mean you no longer feel any attraction to anybody else in the world?

No, right?

That's the same exact thing when you're bi+, even though you're in a relationship, you just still might develop a crush, you know, on a on someone else, and it could be someone else of a different gender.

People, I think, focus on your behavior, but it's not about that. It's attraction, not action. It's your potential, your capacity. Um, so I would just remind people, "No, still bi."

Sometimes I also think of it like being ambidextrous. You can write with both hands. Just because right now I'm holding a pencil with my right hand, does that mean that I couldn't write with my left?

Marbella:

I really like that. Um, what advice would you like to give to people scared to express their most authentic selves and version of themselves?

Mimi:

I think that it can be hard when you're in that space where you're scared. Really see and know that there is nothing wrong with you. That your authentic self is normal. It's natural, and it's real, and it's beautiful.

Bisexual is beautiful. It is such a wonderful, multifaceted way to love.

We need to see the the good in that, the beauty in that. I think too much we we see the negative in that, but why can't that be good to be able to love more than one gender? I think that's amazing.

It really starts from within, telling yourself that, believing that. And then I would say, look for community.

Maybe right now it doesn't seem like there's anyone around who understands or would support you, but you might be surprised. Try to start with someone who you feel would be more understanding and open minded.

Try to come out to someone that feels more safe. Don't go for the big, you know, sort of nugget first.

You got to try to find, you know, your footing. And if there's a community group around or, you know, a bi affirmative therapist that you could work with, that could also help you find community.

Therapy is great, but in the end, you want to graduate from therapy to be able to have people around you who you could talk to every day. You know, deeply, and be yourself.

And have hope. Things do get better.

Marbella:

I really connected a lot with you, especially when you were talking a lot about, like growing up in an immigrant household with traditional norms. It's really difficult, especially being like a woman of color, and then with the ex, with the extra like minority of being like bisexual.

It's a huge fear of being accepted not only by like near family and friends, but also like in a professional setting. You could be easily outed or dismissed, and I feel like it could be really hurtful at times.

Mimi:

I've been there, and you know, I'm glad that my experiences can help and inspire.

We really need to learn to embrace ourselves and accept ourselves and then find the people who love and support us. Through that, you know, you can really grow and feel more confident, um, and, you know start groups and change the world.

Marbella:

It was really nice talking to you. I really took a lot of the words you said on a personal level. It was really meaningful to talk to somebody that I could really relate to, because usually when I talk to people they don't really understand it. It felt really empowering to hear that somebody like older than me has felt the same things I felt or I'm feeling.

Mimi:

Aww, I am so glad. This is why I'm happy to do this. I think you're the youngest interviewer I've ever had. Youth are going to change the world. Look at you. I read a little bit of your background that you're, you know, the LGBT club president. You're a leader, um, a community organizer, and it's wonderful to have a bisexual person, at the helm there and, you know, a woman of color. It makes me happy as someone who is, you know, older, you know, be able to impart some of my experiences and hopefully help.

Marbella:

Thank you.

Youspeak Outro:

This is Youspeak Radio. We are Caleigh Campbell, Diego Gonzalez, Madeline Lee, Grae Mordhorst, Elliot Starr-Schneider, Marbella Zoliz-Maldonado with generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, a project by ONE Archives Foundation on Tongva Land.