

Interviewer: Okay, so how were your childhood and memories in the Soviet Union?

Michael: Well, I think I had a pretty happy childhood, despite not having a lot of money and being kind of aware of, you know, the limits on food. And all of that wasn't as bad when I was growing up compared to, you know, my grandparents and my mother and all of that. I know that there was a lack of food and resources, generally, especially after all the wars and everything like that. There was a high focus on education. So like, even at a very early age, we were focusing on going to class and going to school and doing well. And that was preschool and first grade and writing, and I know that the big thing was like, you had to write with your right hand. So for me, I'm a lefty, I had to learn how to write with my right hand, just over like, a couple of years as very young kid not really understanding why, and copied a lot of communist poetry every day, like, kind of had to, you know, it was called the state, the state controlled everything, there was no religion, there was no churches, at least, as far as I knew, I didn't know I was Jewish, until I started, you know, the immigration process here, and was told not to really speak about any of that stuff, not really tell people that I'm leaving. And, of course, I had friends that were, culturally from Moldova, while I was sort of a Jewish, you know, sort of Eastern European person that like, my grandparents, and my mom and her sister, they moved around a lot for work. And they even like, were in places like, by Siberia, and things like that, and they did what they could, you know, to survive. And they were in Moldova, when I was born. My mom went to, like, one of the best programs, or the best program, it was the Moscow college, you know, it's one of the best colleges in Russia and she had a really hard time getting in there, because of anti semitism and things like that, and she's told me a lot about that. So she was, you know, starting her career and field of biology, and she's a scientist. And once she got her PhD, she had to, like, find work, and she was working in like, sort of these labs, and would leave me with my grandparents, and they would, you know, read to me, they would teach me things aside from school, so I got a really good education, I was always read to, I always had like books in front of me, I always had the opportunity to do art at home. And, you know, my grandma was an engineer, my grandfather was a hydroelectric engineer, and so there's a lot of like, this scholarly sort of mindset of logic and very, very education focused kind of upbringing, at the same time, I was a wild little kid, I ran around and played by myself, whereas here, I don't think a lot of five year olds are running around outside by themselves. And, you know, I was, you know, getting into little scraps with the neighborhood boys and, you know, climbing around on like, second, second story things. And you know, the place where we lived was almost like what you would call the projects in the United States, it was big, concrete buildings, and they're all like state run, and you got allotted a certain amount of space for family. And by the time that I was born, it was a little bit better, where you didn't have to share like, you know, a big apartment with another eight families, which, you know, something that my grandparents and my mother had to do a little bit and they lived through all that I didn't have to stand on the bread lines, for example, but we still had like government supplied ration sort of food. You know, like, I went to get bread by myself one time down the corner, and there was a very limited amount. So like, especially when I came here and saw the stores here in a place called Food Town, it was very jarring and a very crazy experience. And I still walk down the aisles sometimes, I'm kind of amazed at all the choices that you'd have like, instead of the two different breads, which was like, you know, a rye bread or like a baguette, and then it would run out very quickly. So like, I still experienced a lot

of, you know, lack of choices for food and nutrition. And I remember like, not wanting to eat and preschool and them kind of like, making me sit at the table and waiting for me to finish the food and I just wouldn't do it. And I was always very obstinate, even then. You, you know, like, the big thing was like, culturally, you would do what you were told. And there was separation from Me, for example, I went to a Russian speaking school while my friend who was born in Moldova, and like his family, was from there for, you know, generations. He spoke both Russian and Moldova and, and I didn't speak Moldovan at all. So there was always like this apparent difference in me and other people and kind of there was fears that I think I didn't really recognize where they came from, from my family about like, you know, showing who you really were, and kind of being open about who you were, and not that I really even knew or had anything to base it on. Because when I came here, I realized, okay, there's religion. And, you know, it's different from how I grew up where everything was, like education based. And like, you know, reading and writing wasn't like about, no, there's no Bible. And in my mind, we had a lot of these folktales, which I grew up on, but religion wasn't really mentioned. It's more like, mysticism and magic, but that was in like, kids stories and things like that. I mean, but I was a happy kid. And like, you know, I got to play and I got to run around and pretty much do like, you know, what kids do anywhere. I think it was a little bit more relaxed. In the sense that, like, kids were a little bit more on their own. And it sounds like, yes, you had your grandparents upstairs, but you were kind of running around by yourself doing whatever you wanted. And you were not supposed to go off too far by yourself. But like, I was told not to ride the elevator, for example. Because you know, somebody could trap you in there, and bad things can happen. And those were stories that I was told, but you don't really understand why and what can happen. And you know, as I grew up, I understood why because I was a little kid. I didn't know I was Jewish, but other people did. You know, there was a lot of crime and violence that I didn't really see, there was a lot of alcoholism was a big thing in Eastern Europe and still is, and, you know, you'd want to watch out for people like that, that were, you know, my mom told me stories about her working in the lab and the janitor, there like, you couldn't get them to work unless you gave him this like rubbing alcohol solution that he would eventually mix down to drink on his own. And it was pretty crazy. Yeah, like people would find ways, you know, to kind of escape reality there. And it was probably a lot of, you know, depression and being poor. That was a big thing. Like everybody was pretty much poor and didn't have enough. I remember not being able to get a bicycle. Like even though we went, my mom and I went to the store, like constantly to see if I can get, you know, a little kids bicycle and took, I don't know, 40 times, I was going, and her looking and trying just to find this, like a simple thing. Like toys were very limited, clothes were very limited.

Interviewer: So you would definitely say that, like poverty was a general experience.

Michael: Yes, it was. I mean, I didn't really know any rich people or didn't even know that there were rich people, everybody was sort of, you know, like living by whatever means they could. My grandmother and her grandma, my great grandmother, were big into sewing and making their own clothes and kind of had to do that. And, like, I just remember one time, like, my mom got me a coat and I went and played in the puddle outside and she was terrified, because that was my only coat. Like, things like that were very prevalent. But I was happy, you know, like, you know, I had the love of my family and I didn't really know that there was other stuff that I was

missing and it was enough where like, you know, I was entertained enough and given enough stimuli and whatever to you know, be a little kid growing up and learning things. And again, we had a lot of books in the house, we had a lot of like, stamp collections to look at like little things that you know, you would see as a kid, and you're really interested. And that's kind of how my art interests developed. As you know, I've looked at art books and books with the folktales that had illustrations in them. And I would draw, and I would get, like a magazine in the mail where you'd make your own and like fully, rip out a page, you would fold it and you have a little book of art or a story. The only religious stories I remember reading are these little Bible stories that you can kind of make on your own when you're a kid, like rip it out of the newspaper, a little comic book section, but it was more like a biblical allegory or something like that. I can go on with many details, I really don't know

Interviewer: I mean, well, we probably will touch base on a lot of these in the other questions. So even though your grandparents were war heroes and your mother got a graduate education, your family left, could you elaborate on the reasons?

Michael: my mother would explain it like this: that I would eventually be mandated to go into service, into the army. My cousin was born at that point. And I guess they were thinking that we weren't safe as, Jewish boys. And like, generally, they knew that there was a cultural difference between me and everybody else. And they knew that like, even though I didn't stand out, maybe, you know, I'd pass for whatever, like, I don't know, like any kind of Caucasian I could probably pass for, but people could tell, people knew, and it's a very different type of racism, there were a lot of anti semitism, which I didn't really understand that point. Now I do, but they have gone through it. To get an education, they had to, like, you know, you had to compete to get into school, just like here, you would go to interviews, you take these tests in front of professors, and she could tell that, you know, by her last name, that, you know, the professor would be biased towards her, and they will give her certain grades. And, you know, she had a very hard time doing that. I didn't really live through that personally. But I was warned and like, kind of like, I was aware that there was something so we left. My grandfather at that point, was developing early onset Alzheimer's, so he did not want to leave. I know that my grandmother, I'm not really sure how she felt, but my uncle's brother had already moved to the States, and he would come back and try to convince us to come and he knew that it was better here. And, you know, the fear of us going into the army or, you know, dealing with sort of, not adult life, but, you know, the stuff that they would put men through, kind of stuff when they grew up, were very, they were very fearful of this because they knew, like, you know, what that could be like, lots of violence, and especially when you put that with, you know, sort of like an army kind of structure where they are kind of violently, you know, putting you in a certain place. She didn't want me to get hurt, basically. And, you know, my uncle's brother coming and telling us, like, listen, it's getting worse and worse. And I know that the collapse of the Soviet Union and pretty much that's happening around that time when I came here, so there were a lot of changes. And they saw that, you know, that we weren't going to be safe and they didn't feel safe either anymore. And we're like, less safe since there were two young kids growing up now. So, I think my mother was probably the one who decided for this part of the family, but my aunt and my uncle were already moving here. You kind of had to, kind of had to be sponsored. So like, my uncle's

brother, whose not my blood- that's why I don't really call him my uncle, but he sponsored us to come here and we came here as Jewish refugees. They had to go to Moscow and answer questions, the immigration board and so on and so forth. And I was, it was out of fear for maybe their own safety and our safety and what the future would look like for us. And I know that a friend of the families, when we move here, I'm sure you hear about like the like, stop the asian hate, here right now what's happening with like, just an older Asian man walking down the street in San Francisco got punched in the head, like things like that happening. So like, we knew situations like that, so like, she was trying to avoid that happening to me and sort of giving me a safer environment to grow up in. And there wasn't that much food, there wasn't that much resources and a huge lack of stability, I would say.

Interviewer: So you would say it wasn't one thing, rather than many things contributing to you coming here?

Michael: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I think it was, it was just, it was just a survival, I think, mechanism as to, you know, we don't feel safe here and don't feel like our kids are safe here, so we need to leave. And they, like, they did not know what the future would hold. Everything was changing, you know, the USSR is falling apart, which I'm not really sure how it could have played into the decision, but I know that they didn't know what the future would be like. And they thought, you know, well, the United States, you know, having a family member living there coming to tell us what it was like and saying that you'd be better off in the states and safer. And there's more opportunities, more food and more clothing, like stuff like that. And it was, it was not a decision made lightly. But also is not a decision made based on actual, like, things that we knew about, you know, the states, we didn't know that much. In fact, like, we brought, like, some ridiculous things that we never should have brought, you know, like in terms of packing. And, I mean, we heard stories of people not having enough money to buy a broom to sweep their apartment in the United States. So you have to bring like, you know, sewing material, and my grandma did sew here and fix, you know, some of my clothes. And so it was really, I was, you know, saying like, for a better life is sort of, you know, cliché, but it was more of like, fear of what the life could be, like, continuing to live there, you know, as, as Jewish people and

Interviewer: A kind of "better life" can mean so many different things, so that's what it means for you.

Michael: But they, they didn't have certain expectations, they kind of went into it blind just, kind of, out of here.

Interviewer: Could you elaborate on the cultural challenges you confronted when arriving in the United States?

Michael: So I had a very easy time learning English, I did do ESL for a little bit. But I just watched cartoons and kind of learned English really fast, especially like, the level of English you need as a seven year old is relatively low. But I would say, you know, the struggles assimilating at that time, were more for my mother and my grandparents who actually, you know, had to take assimilation tests to get citizenship, and they had to learn all these things that like, even

Americans don't really know about- American history- and I would watch them, go to class and learn English. And I remember, you know, making friends was very interesting here. Like I had some friends that were also from Eastern Europe, and I would be friends with them. And then I would be friends with some American kids. But at that point, it was easier just running around and riding bikes and stuff like that. The food thing was a big cultural shock. Like, you know, the lunches at school were, you know, completely new to me, the way that people, the way that the other kids behaved and what they had was also very new to me. Like having a Gameboy was just beyond, like my imagination. And I remember when I was a little kid, and in the Soviet Union, a friend of mine had a micro machine. It was a little toy car and it was just like, the craziest thing like what you guys had here. You know, just a lot of abundance. And we really weren't used to that and, you know, we'd get our, like, furniture from the side of the road and it was fine. And we lived like that, and we had a TV with an antenna on and you'd have to, like, move the thing around, but like I was still happy as a kid and you know, there was a little bit of a, you know, difference in terms of what was important. Okay, I remember getting shoes, sneakers, here. And we had no idea what girls sneakers or boys sneakers were, and I got picked on a little bit for that. And I always had hand me down clothes, but it never really bothered me. And, you know, my mom made sure I had, you know, enough to play with or, you know, enough books to read and enough art materials. And there was a lot of help from the Jewish community, which was another thing. As I started going to temple and like, my mom felt very strongly about paying back the Jewish community, like as refugees, and like being a part of it in some way. And she actually used to go into temple as a networking tool. And even though she cleaned houses, and like I was with her when she did that, and helped her do that, like, as a little kid, she wanted to, you know, of course, get into her field and having a PhD, she like, you know, had a hard time. Kind of translating that into education, like experience here, whereas, like, if you have a PhD here, it's a very high level thing, but then if you have one from another country, nobody wants to hire you, and you don't know, like how to speak to people, culturally, not only like, English wise, but like, when people would ask you, how are you doing? You know, people want to hear "good", you know, like, kind of a one word answer. And we would answer like, honestly, and, you know, things like, that would just be like, very culturally different. And, you know, I had a lot of, you know, friends when I was a kid, and it was all like fun, until you kind of get into like, middle school, and, you know, you see what people have and clothes that are not like yours, and, you know, people having things and kind of like, there wasn't much, I don't remember much bullying based on like, you know, things that you had, but there was, like, things that people did and could afford that I had no idea about. And it took me a while to really grasp, you know, the differences in culture and like, what was important to other people, was not as important to us and still, like, very much the same, you know, like, things and having things and, like right now, I'm in the process of like, decluttering, my mom's house and seeing all the things that we held on to out of fear of not having enough to just survive on. And it seems silly now. And it seems almost like a hoarding mentality, but it was more of a survival mentality. And there was a lot of these little things that happened. And my mom had never driven a car, for example. So like, you know, her getting her license and getting a car from the junkyard and fixing it up. And all these things, like they're all very new to us. And fast food was new to us, and I didn't really understand it. And, you know, people were very, very much in that culture already that we're here. And it took a lot of getting used to, but again, like I was, I was a kid and there wasn't that much that

was important to me like that, you know, I kind of assimilated pretty well. But as like a family unit, it was a lot harder. I would say, especially like having grandparents who are like, you know, after 70, they're learning all these new things. You know, my mom in her 30s learning how to drive and I was, I was very much a part of the family unit and very much a part of like, their issues and understanding, like seeing, like, them struggle more than myself. And this cultural stuff came later for me rather than when I was younger, which was an easier time I would say.

Interviewer: So, what memories do you have from your high school years?

Michael: I would say that they're pretty much like you know, traditional high school memories, you know, like you. So when I came here, I repeated the first grade because I didn't know English, I skipped fourth, because I was not in the right age group. So by the time I went to fifth grade, I had went from third to fifth grade. And that was a big, kind of a big shock for me, maybe like, I didn't even realize it. But you know, these kids had completely different experiences than a third grader had. And that one year made a huge difference and kind of messed me up with learning grammar and nouns and verbs and things like that. I mean, I went to college, and I have no issue writing now. But, sort of like that gap between preteen and teenage, like that, I really felt that before high school, and then there was like, you know, the cliques and skaters and the, you know, the punk rockers and whoever, that became more of a thing. But I was in such a small high school with like, 100 Something people for a class that it was not, not too crazy, I would say like, like, not stuff you see in movies with like, a whole lot of bullying. And we had a huge variety, because I'm from Highland Park, and we had a huge variety of cultures, you know, around us all the time. So like, it wasn't just white people, it wasn't just, you know, Jewish people. And, of course, I didn't go to, you know, a religious school. Although I did get my Bar Mitzvah and like, all that stuff. I went to Sunday school, and I still went to temple until I was 14. And then I kind of stopped. You know, I got into skating, I remember trying every kind of, like type of clothing and like I was, you know, like, the skater clothing. I was like, goth for a little bit, punk rock for a little bit. But like, I seem to, you know, get along with pretty much everybody. I would say, you know, the whole education, like, the focus on education from my family really, like showed when I wasn't doing great in fifth grade and sixth grade with, you know, some of the math stuff, and my mom was really afraid I was falling behind. So like, they sent you to a doctor and they say, like, do you have like, you know, ADHD, ADD all this stuff. And they tried to prescribe the medication and so on and so forth. And I made it through, you know, that little stage and it was a little difficult, but then in high school, I just, you know, made friends and, you know, you go to each other's houses and hang out and do the regular high school thing. We didn't have a lot of money, so maybe I didn't experience like everything that other people did. But you know, otherwise, I made some really good friends that I'm like, still friends with till this day, and I'm not really sure what specifically you're looking for. But you know, there was, yeah. You know, getting into college was, become an important thing. And I decided like what I was gonna do, and I really wasn't, I really needed structure. And I was not really into anything other than art, like, you know, continuously. Yeah, so a big thing was like, being able to take the SATs and doing that kind of stuff was really difficult for me. I'm pretty dyslexic where like any standardized testing and filling out any kind of you know, like bubble sheets like really messed

with me and I I don't know how to like I don't know like how far I should go into like the party scene in high school, and how that affected things

Interviewer: I mean, if it affected you in any way, I mean, yeah.

Michael: like, pots legal now but that was a big connection for kids my age at that time. It was like, you know, going and getting high and stuff like that and making friends like that, like the cultural gaps didn't really matter. And like that, that kind of opened up my eyes to a lot of stuff is like having that. I don't even know where to start, but like, kids would sort of, you know, bond using these little, little silly things like smoking weed with each other and drinking, too. And like you make good friends. And sometimes you leave high school and you realize, oh, they're just my friends because of, you know, that party scene or whatever it was, and, yeah. But, uh, yeah, safetys were a big thing, I got into Mason Gross a year early, like I was going to portfolio days, which, like, you go to a college and have like an open, like, portfolio review where people from all over the United States that represent different schools would come and look at your art. And we really couldn't afford to have me go somewhere expensive. I got into Pratt, for example. And it was, that was too much money. So my mom basically planned, like, Okay, I'm gonna buy a house in Highland Park, and he'll be able to afford to go to Rutgers, which I got into, and the big thing was like, the standardized testing, which I like, managed to kind of buckle down and, like, I got a tutor. And through that, I was able to get a pretty good score and get into Rutgers.

Interviewer: Yeah, how did your life change after your mother started to work for the state?

Michael: Um, so there was, in high school, there was a big gap where she was working for a pharmaceutical company, and it wasn't like bad money, or anything like that. And we started to have, you know, a little bit more financial freedom, I guess as a family. And, I would say the state's thing happened only after she lost her job, I don't know if you know anything about it, but there was like a, you know, whole crash of the market and all that stuff happened, so she lost her job. Um, it was really more security that she gained, I don't think it really, it didn't really register for me, you know, her working for the state, versus somewhere else. I don't think that was as important, at the time. Like now, I understand she got a lot more security, and um, you know after not having a job for a little while, and really being worried about it. And, you know, people like losing their jobs all over the place. Kind of like what's happening now. Um, so, yeah that was more of just a little period of transition for the family, kind've not being able to afford things and worrying about money, things like that.

Interviewer: What would you say caused you to be interested in art?

Michael: It's my lack of interest in other things, sort of. Like, I am interested in other things, pretty much everything, but only to a certain degree and then I get pretty bored with it. So, I was always drawing and painting in school. Like, I always had an art tutor because there was not much of an art program in high school. In fact, they built us a new art room, and the art room got taken by another, you know, another part of the highschool. So there's not much resources and my art teacher recommended this tutor that went to Mason Gross and he taught me a lot about

art. Like, not being so serious- you don't have to, you know, do, sort of just plain, where you're painting trees and nature, you're not just doing vases with flowers, you're not just doing like horses or portraits or animals. Like we would listen to new music and he would show me new movies while we made things- I made claymation movies. You know, painted with oil for the first time, we did sculptures and it just really gave me a broader range and a much better feeling about, you know, what it was that I was doing. It wasn't about, like it wasn't education driven, how would I put this? It wasn't a strict educational thing anymore, it was more like that I could explore my ideas and kind of explore my interests through art. But I think my art interest started when I was a kid, because I couldn't focus on other things and I wasn't really fully committed to anything else.

Interviewer: I know we talked about how it was kind of easy for you to learn the language, since you were so young, but would you say that art has been an outlet for which you could communicate?

Michael: I don't know, I have a hard time, I think, still relating culturally to a lot of American ideas. So, when I went to college I didn't really know what to expect, at the beginning I had a really hard time with the requirements. So Rutgers is a state school and I had to do a lot of english, science, all that stuff. And, it kind of set me back, so I would be doing fine in my art classes but then I would actually come to Middlesex in the summers to do the classes here that were hard at Rutgers, like the sciences and the math. Cause I didn't have to, A. commute from campuses at Rutgers, which was very very difficult, and you know, I would say like, towards the end of my education, towards the end of my four years, I was getting good, I was getting really good at painting. I still have this issue where people are looking for something specific in the art and I'm very, I wouldn't say I'm an abstract painter, but that's how people see it. And, I don't, like I think there are some of my friends that I relate to through art, but it's still kind of an issue for me. Kind've been able to explain my art and kind of being on the same page about the motivation of making it, the whole culture of capitalism and selling and promoting yourself, like I'm very bad with that still. And, yeah, I would have to really, maybe think about how to phrase that stuff a little better.

Interviewer: Do you think that people have preconceived notions about people who migrate to the United States, and how might you disagree with those stereotypes?

Michael: Well, I think everybody has, you know, there's the whole idea of nature vs nurture and I think everybody's experiences make them predisposed towards seeing different people in different ways, like, in a different way. So I think we all have some racism, and I don't want to say that in too much of a negative way. But we all have, because of how we grew up, because of the people around us, because of the information we saw, like even through the media, we all have these predispositions towards like, very specific opinions about certain people. But it's up to us, you know, as individuals, to decide whether we're gonna like, fall into these prejudices or, you know, kind of understand them and understand ourselves and where these things come from. So, you know, for me it's just about like catching yourself and understanding that people aren't that different. And, you know, you get a lot of, you see that from people a lot, but it really



doesn't bother me because I know it's not like an on purpose thing and I know it's, there's a lot of racism and people like, really feed into that. And we see that, like, especially today that it's kind of coming back and booming, now more than before. It seemed like it was a little bit less prevalent when I was growing up, especially being in a high school and a college where there were so many different, you know, cultures and races, and age groups. And you know, peoples' kinds of backgrounds were so different, and everybody seemed to get along. There was always this, you know, behind the scenes thing that people thought about but I don't know, it more like, people thought I was Russian so, it's very different from being an eastern european jewish person. And, people tend to generalize. You know, I never let it bother me as much as I could've and you know, I have a lot of theories about culture and why these things are happening. But, you know, for me, I think a lot of it is media driven and money driven. And, the media sort of pushes certain motives of certain groups that are, that have something to gain monetarily, they have something to gain in terms of power and control and so if you understand that stuff, you know, you can either take a lot of offense to how people are or you can understand that it's not really a choice as much as what you do with knowing that. We have stuff that was pushed onto us throughout our lives and it's up to us to say, "does this make sense?", "does this make sense to hate another group?" or you know, be a certain way to certain people. I mean, that's something I could really really talk about for a long time, I really don't know.

Interviewer: Yeah, what would you say has been the most rewarding part about coming to the United States?

Michael: I always think that, like, I am blessed for being able to know the Russian language and understand the culture that my grandparents, my mother came from. To sort of be part of two cultures and I think it gives me a very, a lot more understanding than people coming from one culture, or one place. I feel very blessed having that knowledge and that experience and having that kind of use in my life to treat people a certain way and kind of understand a little bit more without even knowing that much about them, just two languages is a big deal I would say. The more people have, like, from other cultures, as part of their personality, or you know, their sort of, their nurture versus the nature thing, is like the more that you have in your life, I think, the more rich your experiences are and the more you can have new experiences and not push things away that are maybe foreign to you.

Interviewer: What advice would you give to young people that immigrate to the United States and may have a difficult time fitting in?

Michael: Again, I would say, yeah, taking things personally is a waste of time. Trying to find approval from your peers is great, in a sense. Because you can make friends and you can make connections. You can, you know, find your own kind of tribe. But, it's really not that important. I think, focusing and figuring out your strengths and weaknesses and sort of using your strengths to your benefit, and not so much worrying about what your weaknesses might be, or letting those sort of develop slowly, maybe not as fast as you would like, but knowing that what you want and how you understand things will change and not really holding things too much to heart, that, like I said, coming here and people asking you like "oh, how's your day going?" and you explain to them. Culturally, that's not what they want to hear. So like, if I was to be offended

by that, you know, constantly feel like, “Oh, I don't fit in” or “I don't have friends” or this or that. It's more about you being comfortable with yourself and you know, you're not gonna get what you think you will get from the approval of other people. So worrying about that is kind of like banging your head against the wall. So find what you love and sort of get really good at something that you like, and that should propel you to where you think you want to be.

Interviewer: Okay, last question, how do you think all of the struggles and hardships in your life shaped you into the person that you are today?

Michael: Well, there are definitely negative aspects about me that I would like to change as my sort of obstinance towards many things, but at the same time, I didn't, like starting out, when I was a kid, I dont think ive changed that much, personality wise. Because I still remember how I thought and what I wanted. I wanted to be skilled, I remember seeing these artists in books and they had these amazing skills that I could never imagine having, like drawing-wise, painting-wise. I really didn't know If i would ever reach this level. I think the hardships kind of informed me, not giving up, or seeing them as hurdles, I just, like I said, you have your strengths and you have your weaknesses. If you just try to focus on what you can do with your strengths and use them as much as possible, you'll eventually see your weaknesses become your strengths also. So like I never felt discouraged ever so I think it was much harder to deal with, you know the cultural gaps, the money, you know, the fears that we brought with us, of not having enough food. You know, like not having a safe place to sort of live and feel comfortable, which I still don't feel completely assimilated or comfortable here, but, you know, through those being much harder to deal with than the actual, you know, progress of art. I'm painting at a level that i didn't think I would ever get to, you know, it doesn't even really matter who else recognizes it but I am somewhere where I only dreamt of being, in terms of my skill and I see that in my paintings and I think like, well if I had it any easier maybe I wouldn't be, you know, as good as I am now. I wouldnt understand the art that's out there. I wouldn't get as much out of it as I do.