

A., Veronica, 12-09-22, part-1-of-2, interview

Elizabeth Sine: [00:00:02] This is an oral history interview for the Our Roots/Our Roots Project. My name is Elizabeth Sine, and I'm with Preston Allen. We're interviewing Veronica Avery. Today is December 9th, 2022. It is approximately 1:30 in the afternoon. And we're in San Luis Obispo, California.

Preston Allen: [00:00:35] Alright. [00:00:30] So I'll go ahead and get us started. And we're going to have you kind of go back in time and tell us a little about the place of birth and when.

Veronica Avery : [00:00:47] So my name is Veronica Avery, and I was born in Paso Robles, California, in 1976. And I was born in a hospital called [00:01:00] the War Memorial Hospital. And that is no longer standing. The closest hospital to Paso Robles now is Twin Cities in Templeton. So it's kind of funny when I tell people I'm from I was born in Paso Robles. They say, "Oh, you mean. Templeton." I say "No, there used to be a hospital here." And, you know, I think they closed in '77. So my family was living in [00:01:30] San Ardo, which is about 30 miles north of Paso Robles, and there's only 500 people that live there. So obviously we didn't have a hospital and that's where I came to light there.

Preston Allen: [00:01:47] I've never heard of that community.

Veronica Avery : [00:01:50] Santa Ardo? It's in South Monterey County.

Preston Allen: [00:01:54] So it's closer to the Monterey side than to the San Luis side is on that side.

Veronica Avery : [00:01:59] It is [00:02:00] close to the lakes, like Lake Nacimiento, San Antonio. It's just east of there. And Bradley actually is the southernmost town in the Monterey County. And then the next town over would be like San Miguel. And that's, you know, now San Luis Obispo County, close to like Camp Roberts.

Preston Allen: [00:02:23] Yeah, very good. Very good. So share with us a little bit about your family structure.

Veronica Avery : [00:02:29] So [00:02:30] my, my mother had two small children when she met my father. And he adopted my sister, Cruzita, and my brother, Roger. And they took our family name, Avery. And then I was born. So I grew up with a sister and a brother. Older. I'm the third. So my brother is the oldest. And [00:03:00] then my sister, Cruzita. So Roger's four years older than me. Cruzita's two years older than me. And then I was the baby. And then when I must have been about ten years old, my mother's best friend passed away, and she had a daughter named Rica. And Rica was my mother's goddaughter. So [00:03:30] Rica came to live with us. So I now had two older sisters and an older brother. And I believe she was...I must have been younger than ten, because...I should have got this part right...But, anyway, if Roger's four years older than me, then she must be six years older than me. And so she [00:04:00] was with us in, you know, the late elementary school, through high school. And then right after high school, she married her high school sweetheart, and they had children right away. So she lived with us for maybe five or six years. But she's still my sister. I don't call her my adopted sister. Or my sister and brother, I don't call them my half sister, half brother. But yeah, that's how [00:04:30] we grew up. My mother and father were both there. But my mother worked nights and my father worked days, so. The only time they slept together was on the weekends. So that...that was the structure. When I went away to college is when my parents divorced, and I knew they would be divorcing. But, you know, they kept our family [00:05:00] together for as long as, as they needed to, for us to have one roof over our head. And then my mom remarried and he had two children, and they are younger than me. So a girl and a boy, and -- I guess a woman and a man--so I now have three sisters and two brothers, but I still am my mom and dad's only child. So [00:05:30] yeah.

Preston Allen: [00:05:32] That's a big family.

Veronica Avery : [00:05:33] Yeah, my dad just had one, but adopted the my sister, my other sister and brother.

Preston Allen: [00:05:38] Yeah. What memorable, memorable relationships do you recall as you were growing up? Ones that have just kind of stuck with you, those relationships?

Veronica Avery : [00:05:50] Relationships.

Preston Allen: [00:05:51] That were memorable.

Veronica Avery : [00:05:54] Just like one? Or...

Preston Allen: [00:05:55] As many as you...

Veronica Avery : [00:05:56] Oh, okay. Well, you know, we grew up in the country. And [00:06:00]so, one that comes to mind is my friend Wendy Nichols. She was a horse rider, a competitive horse rider, and she had a lot of horses. And so, you know, back in the day, on the weekends, I would just go to her house and her parents would drive us over to where the horse stalls were, and we would just go down by the river and ride horses all day. We'd pack a lunch, a brown bag [00:06:30] lunch, and nobody knew where we were and they really didn't, you know, worry too much about us. And I just remember, as soon as we turned around to go back, man, those horses would just take off. They were so fast. But, you know, I think about my daughter running around, like, on those horses. Like, yeah, it was a little bit kind of dangerous, but it was it was so much fun. You know, I had a few [00:07:00] friends like that that had horses, but yeah, Wendy was.. She always wanted me to come along with her. So that was nice. And I did have a friend who was a librarian, Joyce Lombardi. She was really sweet. And I loved books, and so I would spend a lot of time at the the library. So in San Ardo, all we had was....There was a market...two markets. [00:07:30] It was Marcelle's, that was right across from where we used to live. And then there was Miller's Market, which was down the alley, and then there was the San Ardo liquor store-slash-gas station. And then across the street from that was the Santa Ardo Cafe. And then there was a Episcopal church and a Catholic church and the school and the library.

Preston Allen: [00:07:59] Wow.

Veronica Avery : [00:07:59] And that [00:08:00] was it. So the library was, was my place. And and Joyce was very, very sweet. I remember one time we made candy together and we were trying to pull the taffy and pull the taffy, but we never pulled it enough. And the taffy came out really hard, but we still ate it. It was delicious. But yeah, she was just really sweet and giving like that. She opened up her home to me. She lived way out [00:08:30] by the oil fields, so she would come and pick me up and kind of teach me cooking and baking. So that was nice. Yeah. I guess, another pretty big memory is, you know, growing up in the kind of agricultural area, we were in 4-H and

FFA, and the 4-H Club was actually just, you know, you learn so much about how to manage finances [00:09:00] and how to raise animals and taking them to the fair. That was always really fun, you know, because you got to meet all the country kids from here and there. And my sister and I, we would buy our sheep in the...in February, and then come May was the Salinas Valley Fair, and you know, we'd have to auction off our animals. And I remember the very first sheep that we bought....They were so tiny. [00:09:30] And I remember the leader, the the sheep leader saying, "Oh, I don't know if these are going to be able to make weight." And they probably didn't. But we knew some of the people who were doing the weigh in, and they helped us out a little bit. And yeah, there was a lady that my mom would go to church with and they would always bid on our sheep. And so, so that was really nice...And, and you know, my mom was the sewing leader. And so there would [00:10:00] be kids that come in, and she would...you know, take, take the kids and they would have their projects. And one really fun project was called The Lamb Lead. And so you would make your wool outfit and then you would make an outfit for the lamb, and they would be matching. (Laughter.) So yeah, that was really fun. I was really proud that my mom had those skills. And she, you know, even though she worked nights [00:10:30] and she worked really hard. But she would be there for whoever, whoever needed it on the weekends. And so, so yeah, that was really fun. 4-H taught me a lot. And my mom also was the cooking leader for a while. And so, you know, she, my mom was always such a great cook. Or, still is. And...it's on the top of my mind, so I'm going to talk about it. My mom and I are making [00:11:00] tamales tomorrow, and so that's a really big memory. The custom, you know of, of making the specialty foods. And so around the holidays there was...we would make tamales, and I remember one time, my mom, we were trying to go to sixth grade science camp. And so my mom, you know, practically broke her back making all these tamales. And...all of us [00:11:30] kids, we were going around taking all the orders and everything from everyone in town. And my mom...You know, she had a little bit of help, but tamales is...it's a big deal. And so she made all these tamales. And I remember the teacher telling my mother, you know, because we had our fundraisers. But then, the parents were required to give, whatever, 50 bucks or 100 bucks. And I remember my mom put up such a stink and was like, [00:12:00] "How dare you ask me? You know, I, I.." And she bought all of these ingredients and put all this work in, and they still wanted her to pay the...You know, it was just...they didn't realize how poor we were. We were really poor. There was, you know, three and then four kids. And my mom worked at a asbestos plant that, you know, gave us the health insurance we needed. [00:12:30] But,

you know, it was we were barely living above the poverty line. And my dad, he is a mechanic but wasn't a very good business person. And so, he just didn't charge enough. He was like a nonprofit almost. And but I remember he, he worked....It was right across from [00:13:00] our house. There is this big shop. And so that was the nice thing was that, you know, we never really had to have babysitters too much, you know, because dad was right there across the street. And he would he'd be out there from dawn to dusk. Yeah. Working.

Preston Allen: [00:13:21] Good. Good. Wow. So what about gender roles? And how did that play out in your childhood, and what you saw, and what [00:13:30] you learned from that experience?

Veronica Avery : [00:13:31] Gender roles....Well, you know, the three of us kids and, and then four....We all took turns doing the dishes. And, you know, it wasn't like just the girls did. But you know, my mom has always been like a fierce Mama bear, you know. She was always the one to discipline us. You know, so [00:14:00] you think about, like, you know, those kind of roles, you know, she, she....Not that she's masculine. My mom, she was such a knockout. She was so funny, too. I just....One of my memories....One of my very first memories is, was at the grocery store. And she would wear these pantyhose with a dress and these really high heels. And everybody would always (gasps), you know, because my mom was so pretty. And I just remember [00:14:30] I would always hold on to her leg. I was stuck to my mom, you know, because she was hardly there during the day. She would sleep a lot. And then, you know, she would make it to all of our games and things like that. But, you know, we'd have to be really quiet during the day, because she, she was sleeping. And then she would leave...I think it was like a swing shift or something....She would leave, I think about 6 or 7:00 at night, but....Not sure where I was [00:15:00] going with that....But, gender roles...You know, I, I would say my dad was very quiet. So there, there is a part of, you know, my Black identity that I never really got to know, because he was so quiet. But, you know, the Mexican side....My mom was born and raised in Mexico. And every year at Christmas we would get into [00:15:30] the van. So we had this like 18 van with a bed in the back and we'd pile the kids in there, and my mom...and then we'd drive for two and one half days to get down to where my mom's from. And that was definitely, like, all my uncles were very, very macho....very, you know, the woman cooked and, and like very, very kind of fierce men. Very masculine. And I don't know, maybe my mom got it from there,

that she [00:16:00] kind of had to take over as that, since my dad was kind of hands off with us. So...

Preston Allen: [00:16:11] So where did you find your, your community that helped shape your identity?

Veronica Avery : [00:16:29] Well... [00:16:30] I don't think I ever did growing up. I had to kind of borrow.... You know, my dad and I were the only.... There was one other Black family in San Ardo. And they lived way out in the oil fields. But, you know, the, the Mexican side, definitely, I would identify with. But I never looked Mexican, you know. So [00:17:00], if I would speak Spanish, people looked at me like I was an alien, you know, even though that was my my mother tongue.... When my mother met my father, she actually didn't speak English, and they just spoke the language of love, apparently (chuckles). So, she learned eventually. But, you know, not until I was in school was I speaking English regularly. So, you know, the town was very white and Mexican, and, and that was it. So, so I had to [00:17:30] really kind of just like, fit in and take on this kind of generic American identity. And yeah, I, I guess I just didn't see myself you know, as who I really was, because I had to, you know, try and be like everybody else. So there was no spotlight on, you know, the [00:18:00], the African side.

Preston Allen: [00:18:02] Yeah.

Veronica Avery : [00:18:03] Yeah. And, and I remember once or twice going to visit my Avery family in Tennessee. And that was it. And my grandparents they passed away young. They were in their fifties. My Avery grandparents. But, you know, like I said, every year we would go down to Mexico and that was kind of, you know.... That part of my identity, you know, I feel very [00:18:30] connected to and, you know, cooking all the foods and knowing how to, you know, speak the language and that.

Preston Allen: [00:18:38] Okay.

Veronica Avery : [00:18:40] But I remember... I do remember when I started at UCSB, I took a Black studies class and I remember taking a Chicano studies class and learning more about, like, my history. [00:19:00] And I remember, when I was younger, like, they showed that movie "Roots" in school, and I remember kids like making fun of me after that. And I just, like, didn't want to have anything to do with that part of, like, my identity

and my history. And so when I took that Black Studies class, it was such an eye opener. And I really started listening to Bob Marley's lyrics and, you know, getting, getting more proud of who I was and [00:19:30], and how my ancestors had really fought to bring me to this point. You know, a miracle to even be alive as a Black person, as you know, Latina as well, you know. So, so yeah. That was the beginning. And you know, I never joined any like sororities or anything like that. I [00:20:00] really became just....You know, I learned to surf early in my college career. And so I kind of just, you know, I had friends and everything like that. I just I didn't join too many of the clubs or....I was approached I remember, by a Black sorority and they wanted me to join. And it just wasn't really my thing to, to do that. Yeah. [00:20:30]

Preston Allen: [00:20:33] All right. Well, let's move into your education.

Veronica Avery : [00:20:36] Okay.

Preston Allen: [00:20:36] And talk a little about your different stages of schooling to start, and college.

Veronica Avery : [00:20:43] So, I went to school at San Ardo Elementary. And it was kindergarten all the way to eighth grade. Yeah. And so most of the 12 people I started with in kindergarten I graduated with in eighth grade, [00:21:00] maybe like, by the time we got there, there was probably seven or eight of us, like originals, you know. And then because we were in Monterey County, technically south Monterey County, I had to move to King City High School. Not move, but I had to, you know, commute there. And I believe the first year my brother would drive us. [00:21:30] And it was so embarrassing because we had these, like muscle cars because my dad was a mechanic. So we had a '69 and a '71 Mustang, and they were so loud. And some of the kids thought that we were pretty cool, right? But we were just like, so embarrassed. We just wanted one of those little, like, economy cars that was quiet and, like, blended in. But no. Yeah. So we...Roger would drive us. And then when [00:22:00] he graduated, it was just one year that he was still in school because I was four, four years behind him. But three years academically. I was, I was born in November. And so my parents put me in school when I was four. And so I ended up, you know, starting college when I was 17. So I was always a little bit kind of younger than everybody. And then when my sister graduated, I still didn't have my license. And so I took the bus [00:22:30] and became really good

friends with a girl that lived out in Lockwood, which is out by Lake San Antone [Lake San Antonio]. And so they would pick up the Lockwood people first, then come through San Ardo. And that's kind of, she was like my, my best friend. And we were in volleyball and track together. And so, so yeah. So we went through, you know, the [00:23:00] first three years and I did those two sports and, you know, I always did really well in school. And I was in the honors and college prep courses. So I wasn't bored, that's for sure. And kept, kept my scores good, so I could continue with my, my sports.

Veronica Avery : [00:23:21] And then in my senior year of high school, it was, I was just starting [00:23:30] to kind of open up to the idea of dating. And I was a very late bloomer. So this was a lot of, I mean, there was pregnant girls and stuff by the time we got to our, our senior year of high school. But yeah, you know, I was, there was I remember this one guy, and his name was Frank Guzman, and he was really handsome. And, you know, we kind of started flirting with each other and there was these bully boys that [00:24:00] had always kind of bullied me. And, you know, it was never, you know, I would, I would hear it behind my back and this, and I remember we were in choir, and we had these, like, choir books that had all the the lyrics or whatever to the songs. And, you know, they would pass them around. So, you know, it wasn't like you had your own. So they, they would pass them around, and they would write [00:24:30] people's names. And then for each letter of your name, they would write like a word, you know. Well, one day one of the books got to me, and for Frank it said Frank... so F, for "Frank," R, "Really"... "Frank Really Adores Nigger Cunts." And that was the straw that broke [00:25:00] the camel's back. And I just said, I just burst into tears, because I knew it was about me. And, you know, for him to even think about liking me... And, you know, by the time now that I'm in high school, there was maybe four people in my class of 100 people that were identified as African American. So, so that was really hard. And I went home that [00:25:30] day and I told my mom, I'm never going back to that school again. It, it was a lot of, you know, what do you call it? Like just a lot of feeling like I never fit in. And, you know, I would hear a lot of things behind my back. But this was just, just being in a in a racist little town, King City. And not everybody thought [00:26:00] it was that. But for me, you know, San Ardo was always safe because people knew my dad and they respected my dad. You know, he's fixing everybody's cars. And so I had a level of protection there, even though, you know, people would say some pretty crappy stuff growing up, it never really hit me how mean spirited it was. And then once I got into high school, my sister was actually going to

Cuesta [Cuesta College] and I would visit her on the weekends. And I remember coming down here and just thinking, "Man, [00:26:30] people are so different down here." And you know, I told my mom, I just said, "I'm never going back to that school again and I'm happy to do home school or I would like to go to San Luis High." So we fixed everything up so that I could transfer. And right away I transferred.

Veronica Avery : [00:26:53] And so that was different because I'm now [00:27:00] moving from this town of 500 people under my mother's very strict thumb to being a college girl, basically living with, with my sister and her college roommates and being in my last year of high school. So it was pretty wild. We had a lot of parties and things like that. So, but honestly, I feel like if I hadn't gotten it out of my system, I probably would have flunked out of... And by this time I had [00:27:30] already gotten accepted to UCSB. I already knew I was going there and my mom was just so afraid that I was going to miss out on my chance. I kind of fell into, you know, an interesting crowd and started smoking cigarettes, which is crazy, you know, because I didn't even like it. But it's, you know, what other people are doing. My dad, you know, smokes and always has. So, maybe part [00:28:00] of it was just seeing that and thinking, okay, this is normal. But so yeah. So then I was at San Luis High for about half a year and then I spent the summer with my sister still here in San Luis. And then in the fall I started at UCSB and I lived in the dorms my first year and the second year I [00:28:30] lived in Isla Vista, the little college town attached to the school. And then, and then I moved to Goleta my last two years. Right away I applied to... So I got my Bachelor's of Arts in Psychology, and I did okay. I wasn't like a straight-A student, that's for sure. But I passed, and I got my degree in four years, four years [00:29:00] and a quarter. And then I got accepted to the California School of Professional Psychology, in the forensics program, and I decided to wait. I wanted to wait a year. And during that year of waiting, I took a job. Well, okay. After school I lived....Oh, [00:29:30] I lived in Louisiana for a little bit. That was interesting. My auntie's brother owned a grocery store down there, and so my brother was working in the, in the butcher shop. And you know, I worked in the cash register. I lived down there for two months and it was like so backwards down there, I just said I got to get out. I had, yeah, it was an experience. I came back and, oh, I felt so [00:30:00] embraced by California again, even though, you know, it was what it was back then.

Veronica Avery : [00:30:05] Well, so. You know, went there and then came back, and then I started taking these, like surf trips. Really exotic surf trips. And my first overseas surf trip on my own was to Indonesia and to Bali. And I flew Japan Airlines on the way. We stopped in Narita, in [00:30:30] Japan, near Tokyo, and it was a really long layover and as soon as I stepped off the bus, this woman in full kimono, two women in full kimono. They asked me if I wanted to go to a tea party, or a tea ceremony, and I said "Absolutely." And I was, I was just so taken, like, by the culture. It was, like, just so neat. And so, as soon as I got to Indonesia, you know, I was surfing, and I met these, this group. And they were on holiday, but [00:31:00] they were assistant language teachers in Japan and it was called the JET program. And they said, Yeah, you should check it out. All you need is your bachelor's degree. So I said, okay. So when I got home from that trip... Oh. Also I met three guys from Japan when, after Bali I took a fast boat to Lombok, which is a little island right next to it. And I met these three Japanese guys and one of them spoke just enough English where we could kind of carry on and I kept [00:31:30] in touch with all of them via, this was before social media. So this was 1999. There was probably MySpace, but I was never on that one. And so we kept in touch via email and I told them that I was interested in this program and I decided to apply. And at the same time was, you know, the, the second time that I have applied to CSPP, the California School of Professional Psychology in San Diego, and the second time [00:32:00] I applied, I didn't get in. But I did get into this JET program and I was like, "Let's go." So I ended up in Okinawa for two years and I was just surfing a bunch and teaching out there. And in Japan when you work, there's a mandatory amount of money that they take out of every check for your pension. So when you finish, you get this little purse with, you know. So I just traveled for a full [00:32:30] year and I ended up in Thailand and I learned Thai massage, traditional Thai massage. And I really, really loved the, like, the foot reflexology, and all the different connections with, you know, how you can work on one area and it affects another area. Meridians and that. So and then also while I was in Japan, I was having a lot of back pain, and I saw [00:33:00] somebody who did, it was kind of, he was kind of like the cross between like a physical therapist and a chiropractor and, and acupressurist. And he fixed my back without even touching me. You know, he just he basically spent enough time with me to figure out what I was doing wrong and taught me how to do it better. And I really I, I'll never forget that man.

Veronica Avery : [00:33:24] And I thought, you know, what am I doing? I'm, you know, working in a prison [00:33:30] for the rest of my life, you know, for this forensic psychology and working with the criminally...you know mental, mental illness... And I said, you know, maybe this is not my calling. And then I ended up in Thailand and I was like, wow, this is really cool. So when I come back, I told my mom, I said, Mom, I'm going to be a massage therapist. And she's like, uh, you know, you know, she didn't flat out tell me I couldn't, but she's she [00:34:00] told me I really needed to think about that, you know, because now I had student loan debt and that, and so I started looking at different massage schools in Hawai'i and I found a master's program in traditional Chinese medicine so I could study more massage, I could study acupuncture, herbal medicine, and all that. And so that's, that was 2004 [00:34:30] or 2005, I decided to move to Hawai'i. I bought a one way ticket. I had two surfboards and a backpack. And I had a massage mat because Thai massage is done on the, on the floor. And it's a lot of stretching and things like that. And so while I was there, I worked for a year and applied to the school. And then the second year that I lived in Hawai'i was when I started my master's program in traditional Chinese medicine. [00:35:00] So I was there for a year. I decided that I was really homesick, and it was my, my nephew, Allen, and we were spending a Christmas together and he's like, you know, "Tia, why can't I see you more often? Why don't you come home more often?" And it just, I was like, "Yeah, why don't I come home more often? Let me get out, you know, give me get, get off of this rock." I was like if I, if I really want to, I can come back. But the California's number [00:35:30] of hours needed for licensing is different from Hawai'i. So Hawai'i, you can get it in a three year program, and you would need an extra year here.

Veronica Avery : [00:35:41] So I said, well, let me...you know. So I looked at three different schools, one in San Francisco, one in Santa Barbara, and one in Santa Cruz. And I was kind of seeing this guy at the time, and he, and he lived in San Francisco. And I swear, the day I looked at the school, it was like the sun was shining. And I [00:36:00] was like, oh, it's a sign. And I go down to Santa Cruz, and all the students were gone because they were on holiday for some reason. And, and it was raining upside down. It was, it was such a stormy day. And then I looked at the one in Santa Barbara, same thing. It was a holiday. So it was, it was like a ghost town. And I just, you know, I kind of said I was done with Santa Barbara at that point. I did my, you know, lived there for five years. And it was, it was really awesome. I, I enjoyed it. But so, so [00:36:30] I transferred to the American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine in San

Francisco. And it was really cool because there was like a Chinatown there and it was very, like, you know, ethnically diverse in the student population and the teachers... But I did not flourish in the city. I went from living on a little tiny island to the middle of the city, and I'm just not a city person. But you know I'm glad I did it. I was there for six months. I [00:37:00] experienced San Francisco. It's really cool city, but I always felt unsafe and, you know, had my car broken into and, you know, coming from a town of 500 people, you know, driving around for 20 minutes looking for parking, I was like, this is such a waste of my life. So... So then I transferred.

Elizabeth Sine: [00:37:19]