

Chia-Chi Charlie Chang
Behind the Mask
April 13, 2021

Barr: Good afternoon. Today is April 13, 2021. My name is Gabrielle Barr. I'm the archivist for the Office of NIH and Stetten Museum. Today I have the opportunity of speaking to Ms. Chia-Chi "Charlie" Chang who is a staff photographer at NIH. You usually see her behind the camera, but today she has agreed to interview to relay some of her experiences documenting the way NIH has addressed COVID so it's a really, really interesting perspective. My first question is during the pandemic you covered many different types of events on campus from presidential visits to blood donation campaigns. Can you speak about some of the events, people, and other subject matter that you've documented since late February of 2020?

Chang: Sure. 2020 is a challenging year, but kind of meaningful for the science and medical world, and it's my honor to participate in those special events, kind of historical events at NIH. Back to March 2020, former President [Donald] Trump visited NIH, and then after about a week, we had a large gathering, a farewell event, for NHLBI's Dr. [Nakela] Cook and I remember [NIH Director] Dr. [Francis] Collins told us that what might be the last large gathering at the NIH campus, and then it became true.

Barr: Were people nervous at the event or they weren't really thinking so much about COVID?

Chang: Yeah. I mean people, just like normal event, say goodbye to Dr. Cook. And I remember there was still food provided and at that time, I'm a little bit concerned because I am aware of the virus, and it's many people, like 70 to 80 people, in the event.

Barr: Yeah, that's a lot of people.

Chang: Right. Then in June, I was assigned to take photos of Department of Laboratory Medicine. DLM is a large lab providing tests and translating tests for the NIH Clinical Center. I took pictures of those scientists and workers to work with the COVID samples, and that's the first time I feel like I'm really close to the virus. I was a little bit scared. In October, we had great news; we have one of our scientists, Dr. Harvey Alter, win the Nobel prize. I feel like it's great news after all those dark COVID-related things. And then in December, the Swedish embassy held a Nobel prize award ceremony at NIH. That's very special.

Barr: Yeah, was it cool to be in the same room as Dr. Alter taking those photos?

Chang: I'm sorry?

Barr: How did you feel being in the same room as a Nobel prize laureate?

Chang: I feel it's unreal, and it's unreal for me to actually be part of the ceremony, and so that will be a gold medal, Nobel medal prize.

Barr: Did you get there early to take a picture of the award, or did you document what the award looked like after he had received it?

Chang: I was there early when they tried to set up the stage, and so I photographed that certificate, award, and medal beforehand.

Barr: With COVID, do you get to be as close to the people that you are photographing as you would beforehand, or you have to really be far away from them now?

Chang: I try to get a little bit more distance. In the very beginning of the pandemic, I [was] really scared, and I tried to keep kind of far, but after we have some NIH guidelines with the masks and that kind of guideline, I got a little bit relaxed, probably a little bit closer to the subject but not as close as before without the pandemic.

Barr: How do you compensate to try to get some of the people's facial expressions, which you know are so important and gestures?

Chang: For facial expressions...I mean in an event probably they still got the expression—like [for] a smile, your eyes are kind of a curve—but for portraits people tend to don't know what to do. What's the expression under the mask? They just don't smile at all, but I try to encourage them [to] still smile.

Barr: After Dr. Alter's Nobel prize event, what are some other events that you've done in late December as well as the beginning parts of 2021?

Chang: In November, I did a 'Music in the Atrium' that's performed by Dr. Collins' band, and the NIH Clinical Center has regularly held those 'Music in the Atriums' and I had a chance to photograph that one of Dr. Collins' band. It was wonderful, and it kind of took me away from this whole uncertainty and unsafe circumstance. Then in December, we had that Moderna vaccine ready for people to get vaccinated, and we had a special event for Dr. Collins, [Anthony] Fauci, and health workers here who managed to get the first dose of the vaccination, and it's very exciting for me. I'm very excited and feel very wonderful to participate in this big event. And then in the early in January of this year 2021, Vice President Harris got her second dose here in NIH and after that second dose, she gave a speech—her mother used to work here in the NIH—and it's kind of wonderful. It feels like a wonderful connection.

Barr: Before she said that, I didn't know that.

Chang: I didn't know that either. And then the President Biden visited. It's very encouraging, and it's wonderful.

Barr: How did the pandemic affect how you operated? You started talking a little bit about it, but how did you have to adjust to NIH'S new guidelines?

Chang: Right. As I said, I feel kind of safe when we have the guidelines "wear mask," "keep social distance," but also, I always try to get my hand sanitizer handy. The one challenge is, as you know, my job is moving around and trying to find an angle, maybe sometimes climb up, sometimes get really down. It's like a cardio exercise so after an event I always got a wet mask. So yeah, that's kind of another challenge.

Barr: Was it hard to keep your mask on or did you perfect how to keep your mask on like a certain type of mask? You look like you have the tie mask.

Chang: The mask the Clinical Center provides, I think it's a wonderful mask. I can breathe very smoothly without any problem, but the only thing is that when I'm running around and moving around, [I breathe very heavily] so it's getting wet.

Barr: Means you're working! So can you please share what types of preparatory work that you do before you shoot an event or a person or something like that?

Chang: Yes. The normal preparation, I mean I'm not talking about pandemic, the normal preparation: I'll get of course my camera ready, lens ready, battery charged, memory card (that's very important, cannot forget about that), and also make sure I have the point of contact person. After the pandemic, I always make sure I have my hand sanitizer and mask, maybe extra masks.

Barr: Do you get to events like... how much earlier do you arrive in order to test out what the lighting is and, you know, angles and things like that?

Chang: If the location is where I'm very familiar with, I probably go to the location like 40 minutes ahead, but if I'm not so familiar with [it], probably one hour, one and a half hours ahead.

Barr: Oh wow! That's quite a bit.

Chang: Because I'm my personality, I'm a little bit of the nervous type so I want to make sure I'll be there and get everything ready, and there's no surprise.

Barr: Do you ever, you know—let's just say [at] Dr. Fauci's or even Dr. Alter's events, do you test out what would be good ways to photograph them before you start photographing for real or do you not have the time to do that with the pandemic?

Chang: For those big events like a VIP visit, usually we have that rundown, and we know where they will sit and where they will be on the stage so I usually have time to make sure where I should stand to capture the good angle, that kind of thing.

Barr: Oh, that's really good! Do you shoot certain types of photos with particular mediums in mind like would this look good on social media, would that be good for the website, or I want to shoot this angle and this kind of photo for a printed publication?

Chang: Usually the angle is probably not a big concern but for social media usually like Twitter or Facebook, they only want one picture or two so the picture probably needs to present a headline—like [at the] vaccination event, we need to see the needle and see the arm. That's the picture they want to show. But if it's for a newsletter or publication, they probably can present more than one picture, so I need to cover more from different perspectives to show the story.

Barr: Can you provide an idea of how many photos you would take at an event?

Chang: It really depends, and usually I just try to capture until I feel I got what I need, but I don't do that continuous shooting mode. I don't do that because I feel it's, "I'm not sure if I got the one I want or not." I just click maybe two clicks per angle or something.

Barr: In what ways do you try to capture the mood and tone of certain events with your photographs, and do you tailor your style at all depending on what kind of an event it is? Some of the events are very somber and serious, but some are more light-hearted. I know that you want to show the gravity, but you also don't want to show that we're always depressing or something like that. I'm sure it's like a lot of balance that you have to keep in mind with your photos.

Chang: Right, I always try to capture from my client's point of view and also from their perspective and when doing an event, I try to always be very focused. I don't know how to describe [it].

Barr: No, I think that's a good point. What are some things that you try to consider when you are photographing?

Chang: Yeah, of course, like lighting, composition, and the surroundings, the environment, and also, of course, people's facial expression. That's very important.

Barr: Yeah, definitely. Do you ever build—I mean your job is to kind of be invisible so that the people shine on the stage—but have you ever built a relationship? I'm sure you've captured certain people a lot this year. Do you get to know them?

Chang: Right, usually if it's an event or a kind of a VIP event, it's a little bit hard for me to build a relationship with them, but I probably build relationships with the coordinator. Usually during an event those people I photograph, I'm kind of invisible, but if it's a portrait, it's more easy for me to build a relationship with them. On the other hand, I'm very shy so unless I photograph the person several times, it's very hard for me to build a relationship with [them].

Barr: I'm sure that editing is a really big part of your job. Can you speak a little bit about what your editing process looks like?

Chang: Yes, so usually I try to adjust the lighting exposure first, and then I try to, if the picture is not news-related—like news I cannot alter the picture, it's not the true truth—if it's not news related, I'll try to make sure that the picture looks nice, and if there's something kind of bothering me in the picture, I will Photoshop that out. For example, if I photograph an event and there's a very obvious cable behind, I'll probably remove that cable, Photoshop that out, or if I have a water bottle on the table that is very eye-catching, I'll try to remove that.

Barr: How long does it take you? It must take a lot of time to do that?

Chang: Photographing things at the location to follow it is fun, but other things, it's kind of a headache and takes a long time, but after doing this for so long, I am kind of quick.

Barr: Do your clients at NIH ever give you their opinions on what they think of the photos that you took or what you could edit, or are they not that demanding? I know compared to brides they're probably not that demanding.

Chang: That's right. I used to be a wedding photographer, and that's even more like, "Make my arm look slimmer, my face smaller," or something, but at NIH, sometimes they might ask me if you have another picture [where] my stomach looks small; so if I don't, I'll try to make the stomach look smaller in Photoshop.

Barr: That's funny. You are on campus a lot during the pandemic so can you discuss what being on campus was like and some of your concerns as well as what did it feel like emotionally? I mean some of these things are major national events.

Chang: Right, I'm originally from Taiwan, and in Taiwan, we experienced the SARS, the virus SARS, back in 2003. At that time, I was already here in the States, but the Taiwanese Government got a very hard lesson from the SARS epidemic, so I was aware of COVID, a coronavirus. Back in December of 2019, my sister sent me a text: There's something happen in China. And I was kind of concerned, but that time I'm not super concerned because I didn't know it's going to be the virus [that] will be here. In February, I was super concerned, and at that time of course, there's no guidelines and nobody knows about this. I mean this will be so serious, but at that time, I'm very worried. After some guidelines, I feel secure, and I feel it's not a big problem to work here in campus and work on events.

Barr: That's right. What is it like? I mean you're probably very used to it after being at NIH for so many years, but what is it like to be in the same room as the president or the vice president?

Chang: I remember in 2017, no 2018, I was assigned to do the events of a Gates Foundation. They have an annual workshop with NIH, and I happened to be in the same elevator with Bill Gates.

Barr: Oh my goodness!

Chang: And also Dr. Collins and Dr. Fauci. At that time, I didn't think much. I just tried to capture photos as much as possible, but afterwards, I feel "Wow, I was so close." That's the first time I got a kind of a celebrity event, and I'm sorry what's your question?

Barr: Oh no. That's sort of it.

Chang: Then I got many other VIP visit events, and I feel unreal because I never think I can photograph those important people and being in the same space with them. It's very unreal but I feel very fortunate.

Barr: Did you feel at all like you wanted to show any type of sadness through your photos because there's a lot of that right now, but then there's also a lot of hope? So how did you express those contrasting emotions in your photographs?

Chang: I guess I didn't have a chance to really photograph that sadness during the pandemic. Usually I just documented the event.

Barr: So is that ever hard? Because some of the photos that I've seen that you've done personally are very artistic. So how do you balance your urge to be artistic and also your job to accurately document things?

Chang: That's a good question. Usually during the event, I usually try to capture what I must have, I cannot miss in the event, and after I feel like I got those photos, I get a little bit relaxed, and I get a little bit "I can do something else."

Gabrielle: Yeah, because I saw you had in one of the photos that you've done this mask on campus, like this old mask and the grass, and it was just such a contrast to all the other photos that you've taken.

Chang: Yeah, I like that picture, but it's not a great photo but I feel like you feel that kind of a scare in the beginning of the pandemic, like people just don't want to touch the mask and just throw [it] on the grass or the gloves.

Barr. Yeah, it's such a great photo.

Chang: You feel like a virus [is] on the gloves .

Barr: It was a great photo. What is an aspect of NIH'S response to the pandemic that you have not been able to capture yet, but you would like to crystallize in a photograph? What's an aspect of NIH'S response to the pandemic that you would like to capture in a photograph that you have not yet had the opportunity to do yet? I know you largely do events more than go around campus due to safety concerns, but if you could, like if there are no limitations, what is something that you would love to have the chance to show?

Chang: I haven't thought much about it so...

Barr: No problem. So what have been some personal and professional challenges for you that COVID has presented?

Chang: The professional challenge as I said I'm concerned a lot in the beginning of the pandemic and then we have that guideline and I feel more secure, but afterwards we have a lot of VIP visits. Usually those VIP visit events, it's kind of tense and also kind of stressful but at the same time it's a wonderful for opportunity as a photographer.

Barr: That's why they're stressful because they're gonna just be shown so widely or there are other reasons why they're stressful?

Chang: It's stressful because I feel like I cannot miss a moment or miss [an] important image I have to capture. I cannot make any mistakes so it's usually stressful, and usually I couldn't sleep well before the event. I usually have that nightmare like I forgot charging my battery, or I forgot to bring the memory card, or I went to wrong location.

Barr: They say that those kinds of dreams or nightmares are a sign that you do really good work.

Chang: Oh really! Oh yeah?

Barr: People that feel that way are usually perfectionists and do really great work.

Chang: I'll take that. But seriously, usually the day before the important event, I got nightmares but it's wonderful for photography.

Barr: How does it compare? You know do you say it's more stressful? What is your operation like when you were photographing the scientists working with COVID, or those at the [symptomatic] car testing [line] anniversary, or I don't know, the millionth screening, or those kinds of events that are more internal NIH?

Chang: Right. For those events, internal and NIH, we have something in mind, what we need to get, but it's not like a need to get down minute by minute. If you miss it like for a VIP event, you cannot say, "Oh please, let's do it again or something." That's the difference. But for internal photo shoots, I can always say, "Oh, can you move a little bit?" or something. I can direct. For VIP events, I cannot direct.

Barr: When you're at a VIP event, how many other photographers are there from big media corporations, and what is it like trying to vie for space with them?

Chang: Usually those are a whole camera crew like for the former President Trump's visit. It's a lot of camera crew people, but then because of the pandemic, we tried to limit it. Still there's probably five at least, five, six, seven, yeah, I lose count, but there's quite a few people in the media group.

Barr: What have been some personal challenges as well as opportunities for you that COVID has presented?

Chang: Personal challenge... I try to cook more at home, and I was not a good cook, and that's a challenge for me, but the benefit of this COVID, I think my cooking skills improved a lot.

Barr That's good. You've gotten practice.

Chang: Yes.

Barr: Have you taken a lot of personal photographs of your individual pandemic experience, and if so, how are they different from those that you take professionally?

Chang: Oh yes. I think it's embarrassing to say the subject I took most during the pandemic personally is the food or vegetable photos. Yeah, I told you I cook a lot and during the pandemic, so I try to photograph what I cook. And also, I plant some vegetables in my backyard garden. Also I'm a member of a NIH Garden Club, so I have a small plot in NIH, so I plant some vegetables and I try to photograph it.

Barr: Do you have any other hobbies that have helped you get through the pandemic?

Chang: Cooking and gardening took most of my time, but gardening is very relaxing, and it's a meditation for me.

Barr: You know the pandemic unfortunately has brought up a lot of negativity towards Asian Americans. Have you experienced any negative reactions at NIH due to your heritage?

Chang: I feel so grateful to work here at NIH. People here are so friendly, and I think also we have a lot of researchers or scientists from all over the world and with all kind of accents like me. I have a heavy accent, and people have no problem with that, and I feel people understand what I'm talking about. Sometimes outside NIH, people [have a hard time understanding] my accent. I understand that, but here, I feel so comfortable, and I love working here.

Barr: That's really good. This is a fun question, and it might be the hardest one. What is your favorite photo that you've taken so far of NIH'S COVID response and why?

Chang: Yeah, I remember.

Barr: You can show it if you have it readily available.

Chang: I'll pull it up. Hold on one sec.

Barr: Okay good.

Chang: Can you see?

Barr: Yeah.

Chang: Okay, so that was during the President [Joe] Biden visit, and we were waiting in the lab of the VRC, the Vaccine Research Center. I am part of the camera crew, and as you can see those are media people like paparazzi, and with the scientists over there, I feel like it's a very fun picture to take.

Barr: Yes. Oh that is really fun.

Chang: I will name the title of the picture maybe "Dr. [Barney] Graham with Paparazzi" or "A Scientist with the Paparazzi."

Barr: It is really funny. You probably never would have expected that in a million years. It's very funny. It's such a great photo. It's like you get to see the stage part in the lab and then behind the scenes. It's a great photo that you took.

Chang: Thank you. It's not great on lighting because I was trying to do it quickly. I mean it's unprepared, but I think the subject is interesting.

Barr: What is it like to contend with the lighting because some of the labs are really bright and other lighting you don't have much control over. How do you deal with that? Some spaces are kind of dark so how do you deal with that?

Chang: For this particular picture, I showed Graham and paparazzi. If I have more time, I will put a flash on those camera persons, so lighten it up a little bit more, but yeah, I always have a flash in case I need more light.

Barr: Well, that's really nice. I think you can stop sharing [the photo] and I'll just ask you if there is anything else that you would want to share as an NIH employee but also as a person who's living through

this pandemic?

Chang: Yeah. As an NIH employee like I said, I'm really thankful to be working here, and I feel proud. As for the pandemic, I think it give us a chance to slow down a little bit. We were so busy and now we have a chance to think a little bit more and maybe focus, not just focus on one thing, maybe also pay attention on people around us. Yeah, that kind of thing.

Barr: Well, thank you very much, and I wish you all the continued success with your work, and I hope that you and your family continue to stay safe. I hope I get to finally meet you one day in person when the pandemic is over.

Chang: Yeah. Thank you so much for doing this interview, and it's my honor.