

Deep Roots

"The McDonald's I worked at is still there, at Northeast 122nd and Glisan," Jeung says. In the beginning he barely spoke any English, and unemployment was so bad in the early '80s that it was extremely hard to get even a fast food job.

"Every single day I would go to McDonald's and ask for a job," Jeung recalls of his humble beginnings. "I was very persistent, because I needed to support myself and had no other way to do it. The manager there finally hired me, even with no position. He basically made up work for me to do, because he saw how badly I needed it and felt sorry for me." From there, he worked his way up through the kitchen to a swing manager position.

Some people who were born in this country with more of a sense of entitlement might be embarrassed by the fact that their first job was at McDonald's and might make an effort to obliterate it from their résumés. But Jeung isn't embarrassed; he's proud of how far he's come, through no other agency than his own hard work and integrity. He even has a businessman's respect for the efficiency of the oft-maligned world of fast food.

"Fast food is super organized," he says. "There's a lot to learn from it. You value the money you make because you work so hard for it. It's so un-PC, you know, here in Portland, to support corporations, but they know what they're doing."

After McDonald's, and while still attending high school, Jeung worked as a recruiter for a berry farm. "You got paid by the head," he recalls. "I mean, for a high school kid whose last job was working at McDonald's, to now be earning \$200 a day in cash...you know? But it was really hard work. You got up at 3 a.m., the bus driver picked you up and you worked until 4 p.m. And the job didn't end with recruiting. You had to make sure people picked the right berry, or you got yelled at by the guy who owned the farm. And some of these workers were elderly refugees from Southeast Asia who couldn't carry heavy loads. It's a very physically intensive job." He pauses. "It helps me look at all jobs in a positive light today."



Jeung with guests at Chameleon's Halloween 2003 party.

I'm Going to be an Actor! (Maybe.)

After graduating from high school, Jeung worked at a clothing store in the mall. "It was the coolest thing to work in the mall," he says. "I'm pretty persistent, and I excelled as a salesman. The store I worked at was cheap but hip. They sold the hip clothes, like Michael Jackson zipper pants. It was called Chess King." (The corporation that owned Chess King, Merry-Go-Round Enterprises, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 1994, and all stores were closed the following year.) Jeung worked in the mall for one year, then decided he wanted to be an actor and transferred to Los Angeles.

"I became a waiter and got an agent within three months, a pretty reputable agent. But it wasn't exactly easy being an Asian person looking for an acting job in L.A. in the '80s. You pretty much had to know karate. So I did a lot of extra work. I'm really glad I did it, knowing there aren't that many Asian actors around."

At this point, Jeung breaks off to reminisce about one of his first acting gigs: a high school production of *West Side Story*. "I played a Shark, of course," he smiles. "A Puerto Rican gang member. It was very high quality for a high school production."

The school of which he speaks is Portland's own David Douglas High on Southeast 135th Avenue and Stark Street. "Lindsay Wagner, the Bionic Woman, went to my school," Jeung says proudly. "So did Sam Elliott, the famous cowboy actor."

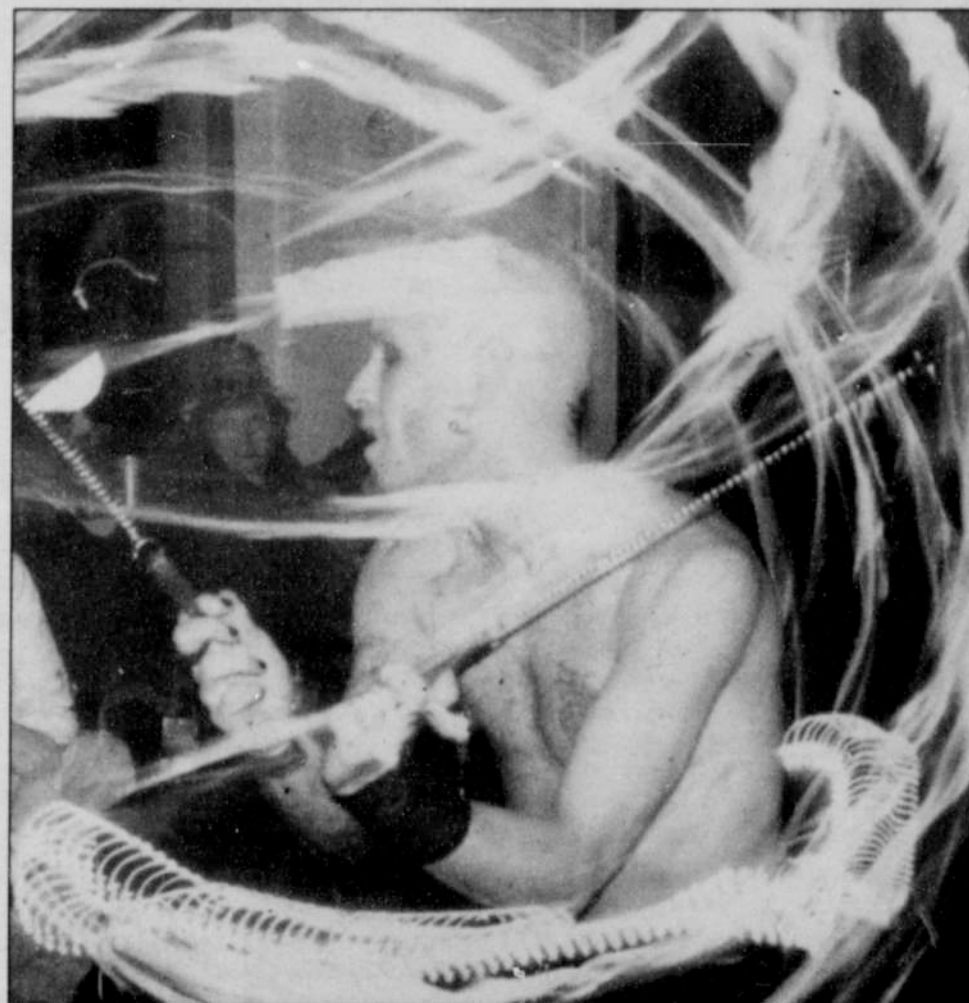
Like many before him, however, Jeung's acting adventure in L.A. didn't pan out, and he returned to Portland after a year, destitute but not defeated. With the help of his older sister, he opened a Thai restaurant in the Gateway area of Northeast Portland.

"It was very hard to have my older sister as a business partner," Jeung confesses. "She was older than me, but I had more business experience. It's a cultural thing. In the Asian culture I come from, the older sibling has the authority. So we clashed."

After a year he bought out her half of the business and did five more years alone. "By then I was burned out. I'd been working lunch and dinner most days for most of that time, and I needed a break."

He sold the restaurant but kept the building. That was 13 1/2 years ago. "It's still a restaurant today, a breakfast place now called the Gateway Breakfast House," Jeung says. "I helped name it."

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"Peaches" the firedancer performs at a Chameleon Halloween bash.



Jeung dines on a Hungarian dish—chicken with paprika sauce—in September 2006 in Budapest.

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