

Japanese American Women in Business | Women of Fire Fireside Chat Transcript

Messay Derebe: I'm so excited to have so many of you here. We actually started this series last year, deep in the middle of the pandemic which unfortunately, we're all still living through. But to be able to do this program in person, in this beautiful space today is just — it feels so meaningful and so wonderful. My name is Messay Derebe, I'm the program director for the Enterprising Women of Color DMV Business Center, which is powered by Wacif. Our name is a handful and a mouthful. It's the Washington Area Community Investment Fund.

What we do at Wacif is, we support low and moderate income entrepreneurs in the D.C., Maryland, and Virginia area, and we basically help their dreams come true. We do that several ways. We provide capital, we provide training, and we provide community for entrepreneurs in the region. We started the Women of Color Entrepreneurs Center last year. It's work that the organization has been doing for 35 years. We're actually celebrating our 35th anniversary this year. Starting the center really helped us define how we want to support women of color entrepreneurs.

One of the things that we kept hearing is that when we talk about women of color entrepreneurs, despite the fact that they are the largest and the fastest growing population of entrepreneur in the US, there's so much a language of lack, right? It's all about the lack of capital. It's all about the lack of community. With the Fireside Chat, part of what we wanted to do was change the narrative a little bit and talk about all of the stories that needed to be celebrated. In our region alone, there are so many incredible women of color entrepreneurs breaking barriers, really going the distance and overcoming all of the lacks that we hear about.

We started this series as one of the ways that we wanted to change the narrative and celebrate the incredible women, the resilient women, the courageous women of color entrepreneurs that we know we have in our region. Tonight, I'm so excited to be here with these fabulous ladies, Reiko, and I'm sorry about the names.

Reiko Hirai: [chuckles] You got it right.

Messay: Hirai, who is the owner of D.C. Sake cō, the District's first local e-commerce site specializing exclusively in Japanese beverages, and Tomomi Miyajima, the founder of Tokiya Japan, a small business in D.C., specializing in

Japanese pottery art and kimonos. Thank you so much for joining us this evening.

Reiko: Thank you.

[applause]

Messay: Let's start tonight by, tell us about yourselves and your journey to entrepreneurship. Reiko, why don't we start with you?

Reiko: Sure. Hello, everyone. My name is Reiko Hirai, and I'm actually originally from Kyoto, Japan. I don't know how many of you have been to Japan, but it is a city with beautiful temples and pretty much what you imagine Japan is where I am from. Very conservative city with a very small communities. I came here, after I graduated from high school, I came to the United States. I told my dad I wanted to study abroad. He has worked in University of Kentucky, so he pretty much told me to go to Kentucky.

[laughter]

Reiko: Little did I know that it was a little countryside, and I thought not like New York, but I was okay.

[laughter]

Reiko: I pretty much enjoyed being in a beautiful, beautiful land. Then I didn't want to say that I went to United States just knowing the small city. I moved to Washington D.C., visited my friend. I said I'm going to be there just for one week, and the rest was the history. Fast forward, I started a first business in 2006. I still have the event production company that I work closely with Japanese businesses in town, like Cherry Blossom Festival, University of Japan, Japan Commerce Association, all that organizations. Then, in 2020, I started this sake business, which is still really, really a baby business for me, but it's been a great journey.

Messay: Wonderful. Thank you.

Tomomi Miyajima: Nice. My turn? Hi, everyone. Thank you so much for being here. It's wonderful to be here. Thank you. Thank you for everything, Christina. My journey, where could I start? I was born in a small village in Japan, very rural, remote, really in the middle of nowhere. I lost my parents when I was a baby. I was raised by my grandparents. The family had a traditional family business specializing *Mino-yaki* pottery.

It helps me a lot because we've been to so many events, during the Cherry Blossom Festival, I lost my voice. Thank you. This helps me. Sorry. I was saying that I wanted to become self-sufficient. As a child, I always felt that I have to be financially independent because I didn't want to be dependent on my grandparents. I became a school teacher after graduating from college in Japan because this was the, I think, one of only or just two of the most secure job for women in Japan. That it's like a lifetime job with open ended contract, with decent benefit. I was not so much into the education. I'm sorry. [chuckles]

To be a honest, I just needed the financial security. I wanted to be independent. That's how I got into the field of education. Then after like five years working with the children with disabilities and some challenges, I was assigned to those special education school. I have seen so many challenges that kids and parents face even in 21st century Japan. It was like a wake up call for me, like, "Oh, I thought I was an orphan, that I was already miserable, but wow, there are so many other issues in modern Japan." I thought I also wanted to see the other part of the world, not in my just tiny, small village.

I came to the US not knowing what the PhD study would [chuckles] entail, but anyway, I got into a graduate school, I pursued education, education policies focusing on reducing the inequalities. Then I got a job with the World Bank International Organization. I was in charge of education projects for the Middle East and North Africa, building schools for refugee children. My journey, the first part of my career was all about education, working with children with challenges, and I think at some point, I lost my mind.

[laughter]

Tomomi: I had some decent job and it's like the job got me travel all across the world. Very prominent. I really enjoyed working with the international organization, but further away as I travelled, I got to see so many countries. I go to travel all across the world, but then I felt like serving all these countries are so precious, rewarding, but I haven't given back to my own country or my own community who raised me. I always felt that there are issues in my country, in my village, those artists and craftsmen are losing their jobs. The traditional industry, the crafts making are shrinking because they cannot make a living out of it.

There is not much market. Domestic market is shrinking. I thought, for the first time, why don't I do something to give back to my own country and my own community? That was the motivation that I started this business, to connect the

Japanese artists and craftsmen with the audience here, from my village. Thank you. It was too long. Thank you.

Messay: No, that was perfect.

[applause]

Messay: Thank you. You both have actually touched on my next question, which was, what inspired you to pursue the path of small business? Was there maybe a moment where you knew this was the way to go for you? I think, Tomomi, you touched on it a little bit where you said, "I must have been crazy."

[laughter]

Messay: I think every entrepreneur has had that moment where you think, "I must be crazy. Why am I doing this?" Was there a moment for you when you knew this was the right path?

Reiko: When I came to the Washington D.C., I didn't have the working permit. In order to work in a foreign country, we have to have the work permit. I basically tried to look for the place where they would just hire me and then possibly support for the visa. There's a lot of vague grey zone around there, but during that time, actually I worked for the restaurant, I worked for a vintage clothing shop, I delivered Japanese newspaper.

[laughter]

Reiko: Yes. What else I did? I worked for many, many small businesses. The whole time, I was able to work for the small businesses who would support the visa. Pretty much, I self-trained myself working with those small business owners. Really, I learned from day one that small businesses, more freedom, but at the same time, we do everything.

[laughter]

Reiko: Then, fast forward in 2006, at that time I was selling wedding gown. Met wonderful brides, and was in Downtown D.C. I started to volunteer for Japan-America Society, which is another organization that's supporting tonight. They were doing this massive Japanese street festival during that time already. I was volunteering for that. What happened was the director that was running that festival decided to move on. They were looking for someone crazy enough to take over that directing the festival. They knew that I was really passionate about the street festival.

I was passionate because being able to be in that street festival that presents Japan, and then so many people were so interested in Japan. It was just such an energy ball for me. I wanted to be part of it, but I didn't think that I would be directing it. There was nobody who wanted to do it, so they basically asked me if I wanted to work for the Japan-America Society. Now, I had a choice to work for them, but working for many small businesses and I was doing many different things at that time, I didn't want to lock myself in.

[laughter]

Reiko: I didn't want to lock myself into the one organization, but I just wanted to do something that would passionate me. I said, "You know what, I'm going to start a business and I'm going to contract. Work as a contractor. That way I can just pick and choose whatever that I feel passionate about. Maybe two weeks after they offered me the job, I went ahead and opened the business [crosstalk]-

Messay: So fast. Wow.

Reiko: - hired me as a contractor. After that, opening the business in America was - I wouldn't say easy, but so much easy to just file. Continuing is much harder. From there, I took in many, many projects, but there was so many up and downs, up and downs. You really had to work hard to try to find the new contracts and things like that. That's pretty much how I ended up with starting the business.

Messay: That's great. We always hear that really scaling a business is so much harder than starting a business. That resonates, I think, with anybody that's ever tried to run a business before.

Messay: You should. What about you, Tomomi?

Tomomi: Sorry, what's the question? Sorry. I got so preoccupied that I didn't know that you delivered Japanese newspapers. I knew that she worked in the vintage clothing store and the wedding gowns.

Messay: The question was if there was a moment where you knew you were an entrepreneur. That you were ready to start your own business. Was there a turning point for you?

Tomomi: My family, as I mentioned, we have been having the family business since 1768. My brother is a seventh-generation kuno master. We produce *Mino-yaki* pottery, but it's not always about the ceramic. They have changed the context, but they always have some sort of small business. I think it runs in my

blood, but I've seen it, how unstable it is. There's so much things above your control. As a child, I always wanted to have some sort of security and stability. When it came to my career choice, I always pursued something like public servant or something more stable rather than running a business because I knew how hard it would be.

After a while working as a teacher or as an international diplomat, I started feeling a bit [chuckles]. My daughter asked the other day, "Mommy, how come you quit the World Bank?"

[laughter]

Tomomi: Then I said, no thinking, but naturally I said, "I wanted to be my own boss." I wanted to

[applause]

Tomomi: Thank you. Thank you. Regardless of the size of the business, I just wanted to live my life to the fullest, to own it. You can still have a fabulous job even if you belong to an institution, but it's a different feel. That, I think, was deep inside of me the whole time. I was just scared to embark on that journey for so many years, but then when the pandemic hit, I thought, "You can't really plan things." You never know what's going to happen. There are so many different crises and emergencies. You can't control everything happening in this world, so it's like now or never. That's how I felt. If I don't do this now, I'm not going to do it ever. That was the turning point, or-- Thank you.

Messay: Yes. I think it's always great for other people to hear about that moment, that leap that a lot of entrepreneurs have to make, that moment where you just say, "You know what, I don't have all the answers, I'm not going to have all the data that's going to tell me this is going to be wildly successful, but I'm going to stop being scared and do it anyway." Part of the concept of why we do these Fireside Chats is that it's so great for other entrepreneurs to hear that. That you can be running a business and still scared. [chuckles] I think often actually all of us that have run businesses are constantly scared. I'm so glad that you felt comfortable sharing that.

You both mentioned your experiences of coming to the US, and as someone who is also an immigrant and relates to that experience. How much of your Japanese culture, the immigrant experience, how does that fit into your entrepreneurial journey and how did you navigate being an entrepreneur and an immigrant and a woman of color?

Reiko: When I left Japan, Japan is just

Tomomi: Homogeneous?

Reiko: No, it's more like a one...

Tomomi: Monologic.

Messay: Monolithic?

Reiko: Yes. We are all Japanese. We don't have much of a diversity. This thought about, I am Japanese, it wasn't really there until maybe I came here. I think it was when I was working for the vintage clothing shop in Georgetown, it was a small shop and it was a very vibrant shop. A lot of people came through the door looking for the vintage clothing and then so many people, when they found out that I was from Japan, they were like, "Oh, you're from Japan?" Like, "Oh, that's so cool."

[laughter]

Reiko: Like, "Oh, I love Japanese people's fashion."

[laughter]

Reiko: They taught me how cool my culture was. It was like that and then realized that, "Oh, I am Japanese." For me, it came in the reverse side. Even when I was in Kentucky, I think Kentucky, I had too much fun.

[laughter]

Reiko: I did notice that people were looking at me different, but it really didn't sink that way. I think it was really from that point, I really start to know that I am Japanese and maybe more start to appreciate being different. In terms of sake business, I think I made a big circle, like Tomomi, I think, in terms of going back to promoting the beverage from my own country. Sake was the last choice of the beverage when I was in Japan. I was in high school, but –

[laughter]

Reiko: – it was the last choice of beverage. I was going for the beer, I was going for the cocktails, but now I really do appreciate sake so much more.

Tomomi: Well, I migrated to the US 22 years ago, the summer of 2000. First, I lived in California for my graduate study. It's a big city, it's L.A. Then, for my previous job for the UN, I moved to Washington D.C. I've only lived in those two

big cities, East Coast, West Coast. You are like cosmopolitan. Like you are the global citizen. I think I was blessed to be surrounded with so good friends. Personally, I didn't really experience like severe form of discrimination, but something subtle. Yes, it exist. I sense it sometimes, but still, I think that didn't stop me. That actually gave me more energy or more drive to go on.

As Reiko said, we were actually so lucky that our Japanese pop culture, subculture, the anime and all this cool, cute kawaii fashion, sushi, of course, they are really extreme. Sake. Yes, of course.

[laughter] **[00:22:30]**

Tomomi: I think it's usually very much welcomed, and we were received in a very positive manner, so I'm only grateful. I'm proud of my roots. Then, I always felt that I should not be using it as an excuse if I cannot perform. I mean, my English was horrible when I landed in the US. I really struggled, but each time I felt that I was so behind in school and at work and I felt like I'm so lower than all other American people or other like--

Reiko: English speaking.

Tomomi: Yes. Other ethnicities, maybe. I don't know. I try not to make it as excuse to stop me. I'm only grateful that the community here is so warm and they embrace the diversity, but I think it's a very important element, like being sort by immigrant women of color. May I say that?

Messay: Yes.

Tomomi: I still feel excited.

[applause]

Messay: I think having that community for all of us to support each other and to also create a network, because I think a lot of the times when you're running a business, it can be so isolating and it can feel are really lonely. It feels like you're in it by yourself because you usually are. You're doing everything for your business. So, having a community of other entrepreneurs that you can reach out to, to get advice from, or to get referrals from is always really helpful.

Let's talk about your specific businesses. Tomomi, I know that the foremost pottery that your organization does, your business does, dates back to the early seventh century. How have you managed to update this art form for a 21st century market?

Tomomi: Oh, good question. Thank you so much. The *Mino-yaki* pottery making, as you said, has started since the seventh century. It has like 1,300 years of history. You'd be surprised when you see the works from like 10th century, for instance, or 16th century. It's so cool and it's like a timeless classic. What I display on the table over there... this didn't happen recently. This has been there since the 16th century.

We still mimic, copy the design from those predecessors, and still, it doesn't fade. I don't need to recreate things because it's already cool, but it's more difficult for us to preserve the tradition because it's so easy to get lost. There's so much information, there's so much distractions, but just stick to our roots, something authentic like it was already there. I don't need to destroy it. Then, our art is, most of the pieces that I sell in my store are handcrafted by our artisans and craftsmanship so they always add some new touches but without losing the base. Without losing the roots. I don't need to force them to do something wacky tacky new things just to be interesting.

Messay: They're absolutely beautiful.

Tomomi: Thank you.

Messay: I can see that. Then, for Reiko, I read that the sake industry was smaller in the US. What do you think the future of the industry looks like? Does that look different in a city like D.C. compared to other cities in the US?

Reiko: The sake business is actually very much growing in United States. It's actually one of the-- It used to be number one export country for sake, but now it's number two, but the sake that's available here in D.C., for me, still is very, very small. I'm actually delivering. Well, I used to deliver, until a few months ago, myself. I'm dragging and dropping the sake at each residence and there's so many houses that I don't even knock on the door. Did I knock on your door?

[laughter]

Reiko: I think the sake business has so much potential, it's just that the trend is there, but in very limited –

Messay: Market.

Reiko: – market. Yes, thank you. Market. My mission is really, to bring the sake to the D.C.'s everyday dining culture because sake really goes with so many different foods, it doesn't really have to be enjoyed only by sushi and sashimi, it could go with potato chips, cheese, whatever. It's something that you just have

to open the eyes of the people. That's really my mission. I think with the-- The thought trail fade off. Anyway, it's definitely a growing market and I have a lot to do.

Sake, at this point right now, I feel wine, maybe 40 something years ago, people only knew red or white. Now, you know chardonnay. Sake actually, also is not just hot or cold, it actually has so many different things and there's a lot that I would love for you guys to experience.

Messay: We're certainly going to experience that in a little bit. I did want to ask you, speaking of taking leaps, you started your business during the pandemic, and you made the decision to run it as an e-commerce business. Tell us a little bit about that.

Reiko: As I said, I have an event business, event or more like a project management business. I've done a lot of-- From maybe 2007, the Japanese government started to put much more effort in promoting the sake into the United States. Accordingly, as an event business, I was starting to do a lot of sake promotion events. Then I saw so many sake brewers will travel from Japan, spend a lot of money and then do all these tasting.

Then I saw that the market was growing, not market, the people were directly very, very interested in sake, but maybe around 2015, when it was really hitting hard in terms of promotion, there was no place that they would say, "Oh, where can I get this?" There was no place for people to go and purchase. Maybe they might have one at that liquor store, maybe one at that liquor store, but we just really didn't know where. I started to have this idea of maybe having the brick and stone store. 2015, e-commerce wasn't really that big yet.

I actually went around and looked for the property, and with a little money in my pocket, I went around and then I saw the rent, and I started calculating how many bottles I would sell. I said, "I know D.C. love sake, but not that much yet." I had that idea, I preserved it, and then fast forward, Amazon started to become big, and this and that, but still, I had a pretty busy event company that I was running and it was too crazy for me to think even to have another business. At the same time, more brewers were coming into town, more people signed for.

I see, every time I do the tasting, it was like, "Oh, my God, this is so good. Where can I get it?" This became like FAQ. It just really started to bother me that it's like, "Oh, my gosh, can somebody just please open a sake shop?" Okay, already. It's like, if you open it, I'll be promoting, and it's just going to roll. I just know that it's going to roll, but it was just not happening. One day I just sit down and then put

all the numbers together. How much? In order to get an alcohol retail license, what do I need to do? How much I need to spend. If I don't sell a single bottle a whole year, what kind of money that I am going to be losing.

I had that spreadsheet of number and I saw the number and I said, "Well, if I don't have any sale, and this is the money that I'm going to lose, I'm going to take a chance. From that time, I started to apply for the alcohol license and then my plan was, in 2020, in February, I was going to have my alcohol retail license. I worked for the Cherry Blossom Festival, also in the projects. I'm going to promote it through the Cherry Blossom. I had a whole plan, but around February, sometimes government takes a little longer... Then to March, you remember March, 2020.

Messay: Yes. Unfortunately.

Reiko: Then everything shut down. Also did my license process shut down. In June that year, I got a notice saying like, "Congratulation. You have an alcohol license." I was like, "Hold."

[laughter]

Reiko: "I'm going to make this website right now." It just so happened. I came from more of an event side. Really, my thinking of creating this business was to make the commerce to flow. I loved sake. I had a PhD in drinking, but [chuckles] not at e-commerce. That really made me-- It just so happened accidentally, but from there on, it's nonstop learning about e-commerce and delivery, the stories ordering process and all these things, but it was really worth it because I really get to open a new door and meet brand new kind of people and learning more about how much people enjoy about Japan and things like that.

Messay: Amazing. Because you took that leap, we'll be able to learn more about sake, of course. I'm going to ask one more question and then I want to open it up to the audience for questions as well. I know you have a brick and mortar store. Tell us a little bit about how the pandemic affected your business model.

Tomomi: Yes. Thank you for your question. I think I'm still debating with myself all the time whether I should keep the brick and mortar store or not. To move on to other form of selling, like online or some other platforms, because it's so hard to keep it running. You pay the rent, you hire someone, you train your staff, you pay the authorities, and then you keep the place always neat and clean and welcoming. It's so much work. You can sell anything and anywhere here in this world. I always question myself like, "Why am I doing this?"

[laughter]

Tomomi: It's so labor-intensive and not always financially rewarding, but what's rewarding the most by having the brick and mortar store, the physical location, is that you get to see the people. I get to see my real customers. Their place. I have the live interaction. We have a nice conversation. We get to know each other. I'm not saying e-commerce is any less. That's not my intention.

Messay: Of course. Yes.

Tomomi: It's useful and it's convenient. It's just that I started enjoying this interaction with my customers face-to-face. Of course, it has been difficult because with the pandemic, we needed to shut down. I had only limited hours operation. Some months, we were forced to close the door. Most of 2020 we were not allowed to do business because we're not essential workers. It has been quite difficult. Then, I've seen so many other small businesses around me, in my neighborhood, they've gone. After they run out of the support from the government, they're gone. They just couldn't sustain. They just couldn't survive.

It's really hard. I didn't know that you do the number crunching. We've been friends and I thought that you knew well enough, but I didn't know that you actually calculated risk and cost. Oh, my.

[laughter]

Tomomi: I'm discovering this by the way. I did the same. I did some month, and then a scenario, a few scenarios, like assumptions. What if this pandemic continues and then I'm not allowed to open source? Of course, the way I wanted didn't always work as we calculated in our head, but I think, "Just give it a shot and then I'll just quit." Because every crisis comes with an opportunity or two, I wanted to believe. While all others are dropping out, if I could survive, I could be the winner.

I was hanging on to myself. Mentally, always having a one-on-one face-to-face meeting with myself, and always questioning my judgment. I'm not saying I'm confident or I'm always scared. I'm not fearless, but still I keep going. That's the only way that we can survive.

Messay: Yes. That is a wonderful, wonderful note to end on for this portion. I think, of course, we have to celebrate every single small business that has made it so far, through the pandemic, but we don't just celebrate them, we also have to support them with our dollars because that's what really matters. I do want to

open it up to the audience for maybe one or two questions. Anybody who has a burning question they must ask.

Audience Member 1: I just recently started my own business, so I hear and listen to all of you. Different is I came here when I was very young age, was 12 years old. Being a self entrepreneur is one thing I always wanted because I always fired my boss. It's like two week notice, hand it to them. They said, "Okay." They hand it to me. Sometimes I don't go home and tell my parents that because they will scold me. I was like, "Yes. Apparently, I'm very crafty because I think outside the box." Thank you for being a trailblazer, and thank you for your dedication to promote culture in the USA. I know it can be a nerve-racking process. I am too, but you inspire me.

Reiko: Thank you.

Audience Member 1: Thank you.

Tomomi: Thank you.

Messay: Thank you for those comments.

[applause]

Messay: Any other questions? Yes.

Audience Member 2: Thank you so much for your stories. It was really great to hear, really inspiring. I just feel like I want to collaborate right now.

[laughter]

Audience Member 2: I was just thinking, my business probably has been service-based, and I was thinking, what can I do? What can anybody do to help promote this? I know it's a brick and mortar store, it's e-commerce, it's just word of mouth, I'm sure. Is there opportunities we can listen out for or think about and just be able to connect with?

Reiko: [Japanese language]

[laughter]

Reiko: For being an e-commerce business, obviously I'm still learning. Tomomi touched a little bit about having a brick and stone store. I do believe, I worked for the wedding gowns and I worked for the vintage clothing shop. I loved being in the store, I loved selling stuff that I really are passionate about. Right now,

what we're doing is to create the community. D.C. Sake cō, CO, actually stands for connection, collaboration, and community.

It's not company, that's why I put the little cō and that little bar on the top so that people can read it D.C. Sake cō. One way that I am trying really hard right now is to collaborate with the local restaurants, the chefs. It doesn't have to be Japanese, I love to do soul food and sake, I love to do Cinco de Mayo and sake, I love to do many meals with the sake. I think the sake, I think being in Washington D.C., that's one of the biggest benefit of being able to collaborate with the different cuisines and different cultures. Right now, I'm not doing a very good job. My boss is sitting in the corner right there.

[laughter]

Reiko: She's actually helping me with the newsletters and stuff, PR and stuff, too. My mission, my goal is to try to collaborate with different restaurants so that even if I don't have the brick and stone store, I get to meet people like this, and I get to talk about the sake, and then possibly create a community of the sake loving people. I would love for you to spread the words out, and then if you know any restaurant chef that are willing to collaborate with the sake, I would love to work with them and they bring in new communities that they have and that I have.

[background conversation]

Messay: Okay.

Reiko: Sorry.

[laughter]

Reiko: I trust you.

Tomomi: What you could do to help [crosstalk]-

Messay: Yes, how can we support you?

Tomomi: Thank you. Thank you. Oh, thank you so much. If you could show my father direct support for. I mean it because my artists, they have to make a living. They saw I'm desperate. Sorry for being so direct, but I also organize some workshops and events like this ceremony and kimono fashion show. You've got to try out all the Japanese culture themed events inside and outside the store. I deliver those events to other venues also.

Also, I collaborate with the universities. We create materials together. We also interview artists and we translate the content, we make some videos. A lot happening. If you could join my community, sign up to my news data, I will send you the invitation to those events and also send you the updates from the artists. Thank you.

Messay: Wonderful. Thank you so much, ladies. Thank you for sharing your stories with us. This has been truly inspiring. Wacif is here to support wonderful women, brilliant entrepreneurs like these women that have joined us this evening. If you're an entrepreneur, if you're thinking about entrepreneurship, if you have a growing business, please, reach out to us. Now, let's go and enjoy the sake. Thank you.

[applause]

Reiko: Thank you so much.

Tomomi: Thank you.

[background conversations]