**Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine**

Narrator: THU HUYEN

Interviewer: Michelle Le Pham

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**TRANSCRIPTION**

Track 01

MLP: Hello my name is Michelle Pham and I am participating in an interview for the Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UCI. Today I am interviewing Ms. Thu Huyen, present is her husband Bac Trai. So I’ll begin the interview now.

MLP: What is your full name and date of birth?

TH: Thu Huyen, 1942, October 10

MLP: Where were you born?

TH: The north of Vietnam in Nam Dinh.

MLP: Did you move around a lot? If so, why?

TH: I moved around a lot because I was trying to avoid the Communist, the Viet Minh.

MLP: At the time when the Viet Minh came, how older were you?

TH: I was about 7

MLP: Do you remember anything at the time?

TH: I remember a lot of moving, the Viet Minh were fighting the Nationalists. Both sides were fighting. I ran from the country side to the city.

PT: At that time it was actually the French versus the Viet Minh. The French retreated and the North and South were separated. Ngo Dinh Diem was called back to Vietnam to be president. From the 17th parallel and above was where the Communist regime. The Viet Minh were later called Viet Cong. The Nationalists that lived in the North had to escape towards the South. At the time Thu was young and moving a lot, she might have not known. From then, the Viet Cong invaded the South and the Nationalists escaped to the United States.
MLP:  Did you have older siblings? Were you close?

TH:  Yes I did and we were. We went everywhere together. My oldest brother became a priest but I had an older sister that stayed with us.

MLP:  How many siblings do you have?

TH:  I have eight siblings

MLP:  Are you the youngest one?

TH:  Nope, I was the third. When we were moving from the North to the South, I had six siblings.

MLP:  What were your parent’s names?

TH:  Pham Du? I’m not sure I always called them Mom and Dad

MLP:  When your parents came to the South what did they do for a living?

TH:  They were merchants, what my father did was a secret, my mom sold things. I was still too young to know.

MLP:  When you came to the South did you have any form of schooling?

TH:  Nope, I didn’t get to go to school at all, because we were always moving, within three years we moved to three cities.

MLP:  At the time you were moving did you understand anything, why you were moving?

TH:  No, I didn’t understand a single thing.

MLP:  Did you have any friends?

TH:  I didn’t have close friends because I was too young and we moved around a lot.

MLP:  When you grew up, a teenager, did you go to school yet?

TH:  When I was a teenager I was homeschooled, nothing much.

MLP:  When you were a teenager did you understand the situation?

TH:  Yes, I knew there was a war going on. I didn’t know what was good or bad. Living with the Nationalists seemed better, there was freedom. Living in a place with Communism was very hard.

MLP:  Before 1975, did you have a difficult life or was easy going?

TH:  It was normal because there was no Communism; it was before the South fell to the North. I was a merchant and my husband had his own business.

MLP:  When did you two meet?
PT: I meet Thu while she was selling things. At that time Vietnamese girls were expected to do anything and everything to take care of their family. Vietnamese boys at the age of 18, like me had to join the military for at least 2 years. During the war, I met the Thu in the street. I saw that she was working hard to support the family.

MLP: Can you tell more details about how you two met? What were you thinking?

PT: I saw a girl working hard to support her family. As a military man who has to go far, if he had kids, a woman who knows how to take care of family is a great plus. Military men in Vietnam at the time didn’t have to go to different countries, but had to go to cities far away to combat the Communists.

MLP: So when you saw the Thu did you think “Oh wow what an amazing lady, she’s so pretty”

PT: As a young boy, I felt that a woman had to be attractive; in addition she has to have religion. A girl who doesn’t have religion cannot raise a good family. Those were things I thought, I didn’t think of much else. I was too young.

MLP: What do you think of the Phuoc?

TH: I just thought he was okay, not handsome, not ugly. In Vietnam at the time it was very hard to go on dates. Even if you wanted you couldn’t because the family will always say something about it.

PT: In Vietnam, women should be starting their family in their 20s. If they were older and were without families, people will say something’s wrong with her. Usually by 18-20 they had a family. It was very rare to be older than 20 and not have a family.

MLP: If that’s the case, how old should a man be?

PT: Youngest is 25 years old, it’s better to be older than young in a man’s case.

MLP: So then how old were you two when you got married?

TH: I was 20-something, but I didn’t care. 23 years old

PT: I was 28 years old.

MLP: What year did you guys marry?

TH: 1966

MLP: Was there some type of fighting going on at that time pertaining to the war?

PT: The war resulted from the country being divided, but around 1963-1975 the war escalated

TH: After 1975, there was nothing left

MLP: So before that was it rather peaceful?

PT: The city was peaceful, but the country side was where the fighting took place the most. There were no large bombings in the city, just in the country side.
MLP: Why do you think there wasn’t as much fighting in city compared to the country?

PT: That is because the Communist liked fighting guerilla warfare. They like to fight and hide in the jungles. If they go into the city one can tell the difference. The military men from the South looked strong and happy, while the Communist fighters look stupid, and shifty. Secondly, in the city people don’t like the Communist, if a person knew a family had a connection they would tell the police so they can keep an eye on them. I’m sure there were Communist loyalists in the city, but they weren’t violent.

MLP: At the time did you two have your first child yet?

TH: We had our first child in 1967, near the end of the year.

MLP: Having your first child, how did you feel?

TH: I was working hard all the time. I didn’t think it was so bad. I had a child and caring for him was all that matters. I didn’t worry because we didn’t have to run at this time

MLP: Did you feel that not having to move and run from Communism at the time was a blessing?

TH: Oh yes.

MLP: Where did you live at this time?

TH: Lam Doc.

PT: It was a merchant place.

MLP: After you two were married did you see each other often? Phuoc was still in the military right? Did you see your kids?

PT: For me I was luckier than my brothers. I was assigned to that region; I didn’t have to go anywhere far. Every day I got to go home to see my family. There were a number of other that had to go far like the jungle, others lived in the city.

MLP: If that’s the case, were you happy to see Phuoc so often?

TH: Yes I was really happy, that way I knew he was relatively safe. Going far away was dangerous and he wouldn’t have gone home often.

MLP: Were you thankful?

TH: Yes I was I prayed to God to watch over him and bless us.

MLP: At that time did you have extended family members to help you.

TH: I took care of everything. Phuoc was in the military he couldn’t help

MLP: We are going to change time frames now. After the Communist takeover, what do you remember?
TH: I didn’t want to live with the Communist, I wanted to go. The already split Vietnam into north and sound and once they invaded I heard they were planning to split the South even further. Once I heard that I head to Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City. Everyone started to run and I ran too. We rented a vehicle to take us from Lam Doc to Ho Chi Minh City. There were 20 something people in that vehicle. It was so crowded, the Middle were crowding into the South. They were heading to Phan Rang and Phan Tiet. There were so many people; there were people in the street. Seeing so many people the government brought rice and water to feed everyone. I lived in the street for three weeks, I had three children already.

PT: From the North they fought from top to bottom. I was stationed in Nam Dong, people would escape from one city to another. People would commonly go to Phan Rang, Nha Trang, Phan Tiet. Finally they all ended up in Vung Tau. Vung Tau was a beach city where all the boats docked.

PT: A number ran back to Saigon. By March, opposing forces were already in Saigon; when there was no place to run, people headed to the beaches. There was no place inland to go so we had to run to the beaches. Only people with boats could escape further. People like me from the mountains didn’t have a boat escape further. Therefore it was so hard; we had to pay other people to take us on their boats. In the end we just ended up in middle of the ocean we didn’t know where else to go.

MLP: They day when South Vietnam fell, the day when you accepted what had happened, where were you?

PT: I was at Vung Tau

MLP: Was the fall broadcasted over the radio?

TH: It was talk around the neighborhoods.

PT: Unlike the people in America everyone socialized with each other. People talked to each other. If there was fighting in some city, people from that area would come down and tell us that there was fighting. When it was nearer, they would just go further south. Those with boats ran but honestly, we didn’t know where to run. We didn’t think of going to the United States. We just wanted to hide from the Communists.

MLP: When you knew in your heart that Vietnam was gone did it hurt?

PT: Of course.

TH: We knew but we didn’t know what else to do about it, we ran.

PT: At that time I was in the military, and the missus was a merchant, we had some money, we had a home. But when we ran, we had nothing. We had only the clothes on the backs. We just wanted to live. It was hard, we had no cars, we had to ask permission to leave, but at that time everyone was trying to leave, so how could we ask?

TH: Also at that time the cars had bombs. There were bombs on the main roads.
PT: A quarter or a fifth of the people was already dead on the street. The weather was horrible, it was raining and there were huge waves. When we got to Vung Tau there was a large shipping boat. It could hold five to six thousand people, but there was no engine inside. We climbed in and lived in there, there was nothing, not even a roof. It was raining, windy, people were getting sick. They told each other, that there was an American ship that was going to tow them away. We just heard it, so we insisted on climbing in. It was so tall, that it was like the third floor of this apartment. Inside people were hungry, thirsty, and cold. We waited days until the American ship came.

TH: Honey, you were only telling the big picture. When I came across one of those ships, it had about 10,000 people, old, young, everything. The children of my house had nothing with them, just their T-shirt and underwear. It was raining, cold, and windy, we were there for a few days, from April 30th. A small ship came by and started taking a number of people out into the ocean. We were just hoping that an American ship would take us away, if they didn’t, we would die. We weren’t thinking, we just wanted to run. Small ships would come and take us away, a thousand people here, a thousand people there. They would tell us that the boat didn’t have food or water, but we didn’t care. People were pushing and shoving, people fell from the top to the bottom, and into the ocean. So many people died. At that time I was carrying an 11 month baby on my back and I was 4 months pregnant with another. I was also taking care of three of my nieces and nephews. Their mother had already fainted on one of those boats and was taken away. I didn’t know where she was. The boat itself wasn’t so high off the water. I could have stuck my hand over the edge and touch the water’s surface. It was so crowded, to keep the kids from getting lost I outstretched my arms, while they walked inside. One slip of the foot they would have fallen into the water and died. There was God guiding us. I wasn’t afraid, I just kept moving when we got down to the bottom of the boat there were seven of us, including a my sister who was about 19-20 years old. Phuoc couldn’t come down with us, he was lost. He couldn’t come down with us.

PT: Soldiers like me were pushing and shoving to get onto the boat. We would use children to ensure a spot on the boat. I couldn’t get on because no one was listening to me, my wife and children were on the boat. People were trying to survive; they thought that getting on an American boat would enable them to survive, so people didn’t care. If people fell into the water, they fell into the water.

TH: Mister was still stuck on the larger shipping ship while I was boarding the smaller ships to take me out into the ocean. He wanted to give me my son, but they wouldn’t make room for me to go back on and take him. So from the third floor of the shipping ship, he tossed my son over board while I was standing at the bottom.

MLP: And you caught him?!

TH: Of course, if I didn’t he would have fell into the ocean and died. After I caught my son, I went to the hold of the ship because there wasn’t room on the top. Phuoc couldn’t come with us and that was the end. There were seven of my kids and myself down there. Fear finally hit me; our clothes were soaked with water. It was so dark and it was so humid, we were hungry. I thought I was going to die down there. I found a plastic bottle and went around asking for water. I asked the people on top to let my stay up there a bit and when it cool I would go back down. I
brought all my seven kids up, at night they pushed us down, I told them I wouldn’t go back down. I got into a fight with them.

PT: To be honest with you, the Vietnamese refugees were not as benevolent as Americans.

TH: Oh please don’t talk bad about anyone.

PT: I’m saying the truth. The heart of a Vietnamese person isn’t as golden as an American. When seeing a child or a woman in need, they don’t care. They just worry about themselves. Whereas an American is different, seeing someone less fortunate than them, they would sacrifice, and help. These are my true feelings that I’m putting into this recording so that future Vietnamese will know and learn, so that you children might learn from the selflessness of Americans. Those who were the social elite, were airlifted to these boats get to stay on top. While poor people like myself had to go in last. People who went before us had a roomy place to lie, while those who came after had to go down to the cellar. Not even a little water or bite to eat. On the American ships, they said that they didn’t have enough to feed everyone, but that didn’t mean we were going to starve. It just meant that we didn’t have enough to make everyone full. But the cooks were Vietnamese refugees that volunteered; they served their wife and children first. These are the truths I’m telling you. In my family we had a lot of children, but they would only give us one serving, where those with two or three people they gave extra rice, enough to save for later. They didn’t know how long the ship would be in the ocean; realistically it was the next day until it reached land. Afterwards they would toss the rice overboard, while over here so many people went hungry. These are the truths I wanted to tell about the ugliness of Vietnamese refugees.

MLP: Since I was little I thought Vietnamese refugees were all in this together holding hands to leave and oppressive country.

PT: There was nothing like that, when the Americans brought us to the United States, I had to learn the love and the kindness of the American people. Look, Vietnamese people came here under so many charities. We came here 30 something years, we are successful, with large homes, but when did we ever sponsor those who lived in other war torn countries here? We celebrate other things, but no so much humanitarian efforts. The Americans didn’t know who I was, but they brought me home, and gave my kids an education at the church, they taught me English, they helped me find a living. In two weeks I already found a job. They taught her how to take care children, and how to take them to the doctors. There were four families they were taking care of and they took care of every little thing, from my education, to finding a job, to my children’s education, and teaching us how to take them to the doctors, vaccinations, everything. Usually buying a home would take three years, but I had one in two. My sponsors even helped me put a down payment into my new home. But look at the Vietnamese here, 30 something years, but we never help those that are the victims of war still in Vietnam. Imagine how many people who still want to be sponsored here? If we did sponsored people, we wouldn’t have helped them this much. Even in our family when we sponsor people, the first month is fine, but by second and third month, we start arguing. At most we sponsor and just let them do what they want when they come here. I came here and endured many hardships. I didn’t speak English, and worked two or three jobs. I left in the morning and came home in the late evening. I was able to raise my litter of children and buy a home in two years. Everything I did was with the help of the American people. They helped in every detail; even now they call me to ask how I’m doing.
They ask about my children. But in return do we do things like that? I don’t think so because Vietnamese people are more selfish than Americans. That is the truth.

MLP: Reading in books I thought there was no difference; that Vietnamese people were like Americans.

PT: No, you are a Vietnamese person, I tell you so you know. I don’t want to lie to you; it is so you know the ugliness of Vietnamese people so you can avoid it. I want you to know the good of Vietnamese people so you can follow it. What is the good? The respect a Vietnamese child has for their parents. Sure Americans have respect for their parents, but it isn’t as strong. Even Vietnamese couples like me and my wife, we have no funny business like American couples do, sometimes there are disagreements, but it’s small. However, the heart of an American beats the Vietnamese person any day. For example, millionaires would donate millions to charities. Take Vietnamese doctors or lawyers, they make money too, but did you ever see one that gave a decent about to a church or charity? There isn’t one. I want to let you know so you can learn the good of Americans.

TH: They didn’t know who we were, but they welcomed us with open arms and walked us through everything to help us make a new future for ourselves. Step by step.

MLP: So would you say you are in debt to the American’s kindness?

PT: Of course.

MLP: So Thu, when did you come to the United States exactly?

TH: 1975

MLP: Did you go to any refugee camps?

PT: When we got on the smaller ships, we went to Thailand first, oh wait, I mean the Philippines. There we got in line for food and water, they provided everything. From there they provided a plane to take us to Guam.

MLP: Where is Guam?

TH: You don’t know child?

PT: A long time ago the island of Guam belonged to Japan, but the Americans took it as a US territory. From Guam they brought us to California.

MLP: When you went to the Philippines for the first time do you remember anything?

TH: From the ship to the island, they welcomed us. They made a camp for us to live and wait, but I didn’t know, I was lost, my family went with 20 something people, but I only had seven children, a maid, and another relative.
Track 02

MLP: So you lived in Guam for 2 months right? How did you see the other refugees like yourself?

TH: We didn’t meet with other people but we lived the same way thanks to the Americans, they had food every day, we were never left wanting. Every day we got into one line and waited for food, kind of like a buffet. We could either eat in the cafeteria or take it back to our quarters. They fed us like that two or three times a day, morning, afternoon, night. Slowly we began to forget our hardships and heartache, and began to wonder what our futures were going to be like. We didn’t know who was going to sponsor us.

MLP: Was eating American food the first time good or bad?

TH: It wasn’t great, but it wasn’t bad, we ate because we were hungry it was very valuable to us. The living situation was fine we were slowly moving on past everything.

PT: We didn’t have enough money to go out and buy the food.

MLP: At that time did you think about your husband at all?

TH: I found him in Guam! I was lost in the Philippines, while in Guam I found my husband in about three days. See I told you, God takes care of everything. I also found everyone that went in the first place. My father was lost, but we found him in a week. We didn’t know if he lived or died. It went all around Vietnam and into Guam, we just thought he died. They told us that there was one other ship out there. My mother and younger siblings who went on the smaller boats before us were already in Guam.

MLP: Were you happy that you two were reunited?

PT: Of course, why wouldn’t we?

MLP: During the time when you were lost what happened to you?

PT: The American ship took women and children first. Men were not allowed that’s why I went on another boat.

MLP: So the boat you were on were only men?

PT: There were a lot of men, no women. Most of them were soldiers, teenager soldiers. There were very few with family because those who fought in Hue or Nha Trang, they couldn’t reunite with their families after the fall. That is why it was very heartbreaking for them. The difficulties for these men were first, they had to leave the country without seeing anyone of their relatives, and they couldn’t even see their children. Their hearts were breaking. People like me, had family, that is why I was better off.

MLP: Where did they take you after?
PT: They took me in the same route as the missus.

MLP: When you saw your wife’s face for the first time after fleeing the country, how did you feel?

PT: When I arrived in the Philippines, I tried to find her, but it was too dark. As soon as I ate I tried to look for her again. They were giving away free clothes, but I didn’t get any because I was too sad. I just went to find a pair of slippers so my feet wouldn’t hurt. I didn’t need anything else. Afterwards I boarded a plane and it took me to Guam, there I tried to find her but it was too dark. In Guam the camp was so huge, they had tents and every day I would go from tent to tent trying to find her. Finally I found her in the last tent.

TH: The camp was huge; it used to be a forest that they took down. There were thousands of people there.

PT: Americans were very good. They gave us all individual tents for each family.

MLP: Now that you found each other, were you two able to live together in a single tent?

PT: Families were allowed to live together, and families were allowed to leave as one unit.

MLP: So then you went on a plane to California right?

TH: We stayed in Guam for two months and then we arrived in Camp Pendleton.

MLP: Did you know why they brought you to camp Pendleton, did they say anything to you?

TH: They told us that those who were sponsored. Those who didn’t have sponsors had to stay behind. They made sure that the sponsors were good people, no thieves or crooks. Once they cleared everything we were allowed to go. Our family had priority because I was pregnant and there were a lot of children. They didn’t want us to stay there for too long and they didn’t have the facility for me to give birth. The plane held about 500 people.

PT: It was the B 347

TH: It was a non-stop plane from Guam to Camp Pendleton. I stayed there for a few months and someone sponsored us.

MLP: So you came from Camp Pendleton, CA to Pennsylvania? Did you know who sponsored you?

TH: It was a Catholic Church, St. Andrew’s in Pennsylvania.

MLP: How did you feel when you got off the plan in Pennsylvania?

TH: I felt like it was the first step into a new life.
MLP: Did you accept that your old life was long gone?

TH: Uh-huh, I did, I saw this as my new homeland.

MLP: As for you, a soldier who fought for the Republic of Vietnam did you feel the same way or were you sad?

PT: To be honest with you, I was sad because, first, anyone who has to leave their homeland would miss it. Secondly, in Vietnam there was land so that we could plan our future, whether it was coffee or crops. If one day I retired from the military I could easily find a living using the land. I already had it, but I had to leave it because I had to come to America. All I had was my ripped pants, they offered me new ones, but I was too sad to accept. From then on I didn’t think about being rich, working in the military I made a decent amount, but I don’t have anything left. I want a life to raise my children well. I had everything and now I just want my children to grow up happy, strong, and healthy. I don’t need to think about anything else.

MLP: So you two have accepted that it is a sacrifice for your children?

TH: It’s my job to make sure that they grow up in this country in peace and harmony. I want them to be good people. I don’t need to be wealthy, just good people.

PT: You see my TV and how old it is? My children make money and they offered to buy me a new one, but I said no. This still works so I just keep it. When I came to the United States people had colored TV I had a black and white. Now they have really thin TVs, but I have this thick heavy one. My children have the money to buy one, but I insist that they don’t. I don’t care about material goods. I just care about my children growing and surviving in the United States. I’ve told my children, people helped me, now as my children you have to return this.

TH: This is for your future, making this country like the old country. In the end you are a citizen of this country and you have to do what it takes to make this country good.

PT: Back then I found a job in Pennsylvania, while my wife stayed home and took care of the children. In California there was no job for me.

MLP: What did you in Pennsylvania?

PT: I made prosthetics for the handicapped. I never had enough money working multiple jobs. What I did wasn’t in my subset of skills, that’s why the pay was so low. I had to receive welfare from the state. That’s why I tell my children that before I depended on the state to survive, that’s why we have to pay taxes now to return the favor. So that people like me could use the money. My children make decent money that’s why they have to pay thousands of dollars in taxes.

MLP: Oh I understand. I used to feel bad that my parent had to pay taxes.

TH: It’s not a problem, it’s to help people.
PT: The state helped me, that’s how I became the person I am today. The state does take a lot though. I have eight children and they all make a decent amount of money, so they take God knows how much. But because of that my children have an education. It’s a cycle, we pay taxes to help those who need it, that why we shouldn’t look down on those who receive welfare. They receive it now, but their children will pay it back.

MLP: My parents used to complain how much they paid in taxes and I agreed with them, now that you put it that way I understand now.

PT: You see in this picture my youngest one? He graduated from college, he depended on taxes. Now he has a job and pays taxes, maybe someone like him will benefit from his money. In Vietnam the Communist today only knows how to live for themselves and help their kin. They don’t know how to help the poor. The poor aren’t educated and if they aren’t educated how do they pay taxes? So after time the government will go down, they can’t go up. For example, like in the United States, the president’s family used to be on welfare and now he’s the president of the United States. Everyone here has a chance to become better. In Vietnam, there is no chance, the poor stay poor. There are two different kinds of people in Vietnam the Communist and Republic. In the Republic, the poor could have still been educated, not as well as the US but still.

MLP: Why did you two come to California?

PT: It’s because over there it was really cold and the missus tends to have aches and pains. Therefore it was because was her health. Also in California, children who go to college receive greater financial aid than over there. I had a lot of kids, so going to school was easier here.

MLP: When you were in Pennsylvania it snowed, what did you think of it the first time you saw it?

TH: Oh, it was so cold! When I arrived in Pennsylvania it was October 1975. November, Thanksgiving rolled around, my sponsors gave us an entire roasted turkey. They told us to invite friends for Thanksgiving. They gave us all the fixings for Thanksgiving. They loved us so much! I invited another Vietnamese family without a mother; apparently she passed away during the escape. The turkey was so big we couldn’t eat it all. It took us an entire week to finish it. It was my first time seeing one.

MLP: What was it like eating your first turkey?

TH: It wasn’t as good as a Vietnamese chicken, but it was good because the effort and love that went into it. They loved us like family. They took me to the doctors, to the dentist; they took really good care of me. They loved us so much. I felt so emotional; I didn’t understand how they could care about us so much when they didn’t know who we were. I cried. My husband and I used to fill a cup with water and splash it outside to watch it turn into ice. It was so cold. I would look at the doors and roof after it rained and see icicles forming. It looked like ice cream. I was so worried about the future that I didn’t worry about my health, I got sick and my body
ached so much because of the cold. I would cover my back in heat patches. My husband worked so far away he would take the train, then the bus, and trolley before he got to work. By the 1980s I saw how the people in California lived in the warm weather and how they could go shopping so freely. There were also a lot of Vietnamese people, here there weren’t a lot. When I saw one I would hug them and cry. I finally told my husband that we should go.

PT: But we were already set, in two years I’ve already made a niche for myself. I stayed for five years before we moved. Finding a home back then wasn’t easy either, my children were already going to school. If we packed up and moved, it would almost be like losing everything all over again.

MLP: In the end, you agreed to move here? Where did you live when you came to California?

PT: Garden Grove, Orange County.

MLP: Now that you are raising your children, did you ever tell them how much you sacrificed for them?

PT: I tell them, but very briefly. They don’t have to know all the sacrifices I’ve made for them, I bore them and it’s my responsibility. Also I don’t want them to hate the Communist. This is because if you have hate in your heart, it makes you unhappy and your life isn’t as harmonious with other people. I want them to have an American mentality, even though they are the enemy I don’t want them to think of them as the enemy. I want them to see people with love. Sure those people are bad, but you have to love those people even more. It is because some higher power up there gave us the ability to do good deeds and we are lucky. Those that aren’t so lucky have a mind that is evil and bad, so that is why you pray and love them in hopes that they have a good mind like us. Therefore I don’t want them to hate the Communist. I had my issues with them so that’s why when I came here I never went back. I’ve been here for thirty something years and I’ve never gone back.

MLP: Is it because you don’t want to or that you can’t?

PT: I want to but, I don’t want to see what Vietnam has become. It’s my homeland I miss it, I still have family there. I just don’t accept the philosophy, so that’s why I won’t come back. But I won’t tell my children, because you poison their minds when you do that. I want them to have a good happy mind. For example if your parent tells you that there is a bad lady, every time you see her you think of bad thoughts. You are no longer happy with her, but if he didn’t say anything you would be fine with her. You are the lucky ones because you have a loving heart within you, they are the unlucky ones because they don’t know how to love. Those are the people you need to love, not hate.

MLP: So when you came over here and saw Little Saigon, and the population of Vietnamese people did you see this as a final home?

TH: You could say that, I was very happy that there were other Vietnamese people, but honestly it can’t replace the original.
It’s blander. Even though you were poor, in Vietnam people would greet each other in the morning or New Years. People would go from house to house, or when you left you could ask your neighbors to watch your house for you. In America we couldn’t do that, you would just say “Hello” and that was it. That’s what I don’t like about Americans, but you see Vietnamese people have good things and bad things. For example, if someone was sick we call the emergency, but in Vietnam if someone had a car, they helped by taking them to the hospital. Or they would share medication; in America no one is willing to share medication.

People knew each other, relatives lived close by. Today people are scattered and no one trusts anyone. We are talking about Vietnam back then, now it’s just like the United States. It’s because there is such a great mixture of people living together, we don’t know who is bad or who is good. When I left my house to run errands, I didn’t have to lock the doors then, I just told my neighbors that I’m going out, watch the house for me. You can’t do that now, you are afraid of robberies.

We could depend on neighbors to keep an eye on our children; it’s not like that here in America.

So now this question is, the both of you living in the United States do you see yourselves as Americans or Vietnamese?

I’m always Vietnamese, but I live as an American, let’s just say that.

I’ll never turn my back on my Vietnamese roots and my children are Vietnamese. But growing up here, we grew up with an American mentality and growing up in the United States I teach my kids to be like Americans. For example this is my second home, but my children were born here. I tell them don’t forget their roots, they are Vietnamese. If the country needs it they must help, but they mustn’t forget the US either. If I were to pass away they wouldn’t go back to Vietnam, they’d stay here.

Then do you see yourselves as a line connecting your children with Vietnam?

It’s a possibility, because I’m always going to be Vietnamese. So if for some reason they don’t accept us anymore and force us to leave. We have to go back to Vietnam.

Seeing that you lived here for so long and that your children were born here. We don’t know what war is and we picked up a few bad habits. What is it would you like to change about our generation?

You were born in America, you have to be like an American; just don’t forget your roots.

If the culture is different, say if you lived in America and you practice Vietnamese culture, you make the kid very confused. They wouldn’t be able to tell what’s good or what’s bad. It has to be a way in which they take the best of both cultures and avoid the bad. For example, when visiting Vietnamese elders they know how to greet them. For an American saying “hello” is good enough. When wishing someone a “Happy New Year” or “Merry Christmas” those sayings
are enough. But within a Vietnamese community we have these long winded sayings, wishing wealth, success, longevity, very rarely do we wish person happiness. However in life, no matter how much money or success you have, without happiness it might as well be nothing. Take us for example, we are poor, but we are happy. That’s why I tell my children that money is a luxury, it makes living easier. The importance is having enough and being happy with each other and that is good. That is the mentality of Vietnamese and American. So if you were born here and want to be more like a Vietnamese person, it’s very difficult. That’s why you just go on ahead and live like an American. Just remember when you meet a Vietnamese person you pay them with respects like you should. Another example, in Vietnam as a man I am head of the house, my interests are put first, my wife second. Here in America, its ladies first!

TH: The best thing is having two that are equal. 50/50, so that everything is harmonious. You can’t have I’m 60 and you are 40. It is better this way; if it’s uneven, two people would end up fighting all the time.

PT: You see back then in Vietnam after a long day of work, I would come home sit at the table and eat, afterwards I just walk away. I wouldn’t need to help clean the table or dishes. In America I see my children come home from work, they are tired, but they see that their wives are tired and help out. They would even bathe their children, in Vietnam I wouldn’t have.

MLP: So is it that men don’t really take care of the children?

TH: No, men wouldn’t take care of the children; it’s more of the women’s job.

MLP: It is not to say that Vietnamese men don’t love their children through right?

TH: They do love their children, but in a different way.

PT: They love their children and take care of them, but not in a domestic sense. That is they don’t feed them or bathe them. Fathers took care of their children by saying that they have to go to school at a certain time and have to be home at a certain time. They went to work to bring home money so the wife can take care of them. Also if the child did wrong, the father would correct them and teach them.

TH: The father was more of the authority figure and disciplinarian, and the mother would cuddle and pamper the children.

MLP: So you need the love of a mother and a father?

PT: The mother’s love is like when the child cries she would comfort them, remind them to eat, and wear warm clothes. A father’s love often would think of bigger things, finding ways to bring money home, correct homework, make sure they have a future. Mother’s tend to be easy, fathers punish

MLP: My parents are the actual opposites. Mom is the disciplinarian and my father was the one who cuddled me.
TH: That’s funny, but as long as you have two types of love. Can you imagine having two disciplinarians, you’d go crazy.

PT: Well, you are an only child raising you was easy. Here I have eight children, seven boys; they are not easy to teach.

MLP: With so many boys did they fight?

PT: No, they are fairly gentle (proceeded to show me a family portrait)

MLP: So we are going to wrap up, I want to ask you a final question, what are your final thoughts for future generations?

TH: My final thoughts for my children, and the future generations is that we have to work to build up our community for our future. If we are Vietnamese we must remember that we are Vietnamese, your parents, grandparents are Vietnamese, and you always have to remember the words of your ancestors. You have to understand how you ended up in the United States, your parents had to leave because of the war, they sacrificed everything for you by escaping, thereby giving you a better future. We came to this land of freedom and we have an obligation to build a better, stronger community.

MLP: Now I want your final thoughts for future generations Phuoc

PT: For the younger generations living in the United States, those that are born here. Your parents had to leave everything behind, their livelihoods to come to this country. Therefore do not forget the sacrifice, and love of your parents. You have to do good things, get and education and become someone who has the ability to build a better and stronger community in the United States.

TH: You have to build a country who doesn’t forget about the little people, who is willing to help those in need. By doing those things, only then can we be truly become a successful community in the United States.

PT: When you become successful remember and pay back your parents for all they’ve done, it’s not about monetary value. You have to build a better future and better life for yourself. Every parent who loves their child wants that, if you are able to do that then you’ve already paid them back immensely with so much happiness and joy.

MLP: On behalf of myself, UCI, and VAOHP, I would like to thank you for your time and effort. Thank you for opening my mind and of others.