Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: ALEX LUU
Interviewer: Jonathan Shin
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JS: Today is Sunday May 25th, 2014. I am interviewing Alex Luu and my name is Jonathan Shin with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project. We are at the Sierra Madre Library. Could you just start off with stating your name?

AL: Yeah, my name is Alex Luu.

JS: Where were you born?

AL: Saigon, Vietnam

JS: Date of birth?

AL: April 10th, 1966

JS: What are your parents’ names?

AL: Hong Luu and Lin Luu

JS: Could you describe them?

AL: You mean in terms of age and stuff?

JS: Anyway you want.

AL: Lets see, my dad’s pretty, you know, like most Asian fathers. Umm pretty strict guy. Pretty kind of authoritative, but also like a nice guy. You know, like a helpful person. My mom - she’s kind of quiet. But she’s more vocal than my dad. Umm what else - Yeah she’s a pretty cool lady.

JS: Would you say they were traditional Vietnamese?

AL: Well we’re actually Chinese-Vietnamese. So I think to a great extent they’re traditional, but then at the same time, they also have very non “Asian typical traits.” And a perfect example of
that is, I actually majored in film and theatre in college, and that’s something that you rarely see like any API do, especially back I went to college, you know?

JS: Which college did you go to?

AL: I went to UCLA. So in that respect, they’re actually kind of non-traditional. Because they never really, as far as I can remember, never wanted me to do science or focus on medicine and stuff like a lot of my friends when I was growing up, like a lot of Asian and Asian-American friend.

JS: They were perfectly fine with you pursuing…?

AL: Yeah they were. I mean they didn’t really understand it completely, but they never said, “oh you can’t do this, you can’t do that”, which is what a lot of my friends have to deal with. On a side note, it’s still like that now actually.

JS: So other than Saigon, where else have you lived in Vietnam?

AL: Pretty much there, I was born there.

JS: Just Saigon?

AL: Yeah until I left, yeah.

JS: Do you know the date you left?

AL: We left the day that Saigon fell. April 30th, 1975. And if you know anything about that date - I mean its pretty crazy. It was pretty intense, you know?

JS: How old were you when that happened?

AL: I was like 8 and a half, roughly.

JS: So you remember…?

AL: Oh I remember everything. Absolutely.

JS: Could you describe a little bit about the experience of that period?
AL: Sure. So a little background information, we kind of already knew that it was getting bad because we’d see news reports on the TV. And I still remember watching the news and it said that the president of Vietnam had already taken off, you know, like he had left already - and we were all like “Oh, that’s interesting.” So I think leading up to it we kind of knew it was going to be pretty bad. So I guess I was lucky enough that my mom at the time was a nurse. She’s no longer a nurse now, but she was a nurse back in Vietnam. And she actually worked for an American company, and so because of her somewhat ties to the Americans it was imperative that our immediate family leave. And so I guess we were fortunate enough to have that “connection.”

But on the day that we left, a couple of days leading up to it, it was still just as horrific and intense and just crazy as any other folks who left. So the days leading up to it, we were actually at the airport, and we had to… well the American soldiers actually dug these, somewhat shallow ditches that you have to literally like - and I was a kid and I had to do this so you have to kind of imagine what it would look like. So I actually have to crouch down in these ditches. And it was all dirt and bodies right next to you - they were basically like sardines, right? And so a couple of nights we were actually in the ditches because we were afraid that if bombs would land on us if we’re outside. So all the soldiers had actually evacuated us from the buildings and we stayed in the ditches for a couple of nights. And then, April 30th, which is the day it fell, helicopters came down. You might have seen very famous photos of helicopters coming in. And so you literally ran for your life. So at the day of us escaping, I mean, you run man. My dad had one suitcase and my mom had another one and it was me and my sister and we just ran for the helicopter. And its not like its across the street. I mean its like, so lets say we’re here and the helicopter’s maybe almost like – at least when I was a kid, it seemed like a block or so away. I mean you can’t land
right next to the people, so you just ran for your life. People fell, and some didn’t make it and we went on the last helicopter.

JS: On the last one?

AL: Yeah it was crazy. Because there were people that were holding onto the helicopter. Because they were only able to fit a certain amount of folks, they were already squishing all of us in. I mean I remember people grabbing onto the helicopter as it was lifting off. So if you can imagine, there’s gunfire, there’s bombs everywhere and the Vietcong are closing in. We heard them already with their guns and everything. And I saw dads and kids and moms and children literally holding on to the helicopter. And it was one of those two-helicopter called Hueys. You have a big hull that opens up, and so if you can kind of visualize, as the hull was closing and it was already lifting up to the sky, people were still hanging onto the hull. And I remember soldiers had to pry their fingers loose, and they fell. So it was crazy - it was intense.

JS: Do you remember anything growing up in Saigon, Vietnam?

AL: Oh yeah, sure.

JS: Could you tell me about some of those childhood memories?

AL: I loved being able to just play outside. We’re in the city and although as a kid you’re not that aware that there’s a war going on. I mean you and you’re not. But most kids sort of know that, but they still want to play outside. So that was really fun, just playing outside. I had this thing where umm, I ended up actually making a short film on it when I went through film school. We didn’t have a lot of money, so I would catch – it was the thing to do in Vietnam when you’re a kid back in Vietnam if you’re not really rich. And so you would have your friends, and you would catch crickets. You would catch crickets and then you’d put them in a jar and you put like a plastic cover over it, poke a couple of holes so it would have some air, and you put a cricket in
each one. If you put two in, they’ll fight and kill each other. So you put them in jars and you had incense to which you’d tie a couple of hairs from your head and you poke the incense through the little hole in the plastic film on top of the jar…and you’d play with them. If you kind of touch their nose, they’ll make that cricket sound, they’d tweet. So I did that for hours. That was great. And then you’d advance, like when you got older, you got smarter and you looked around at the older kids and you’d go ‘Oh I want to do that.’ So we’d always have these crackers at home to eat and back then, crackers were put in these hardcore tin boxes, with the lids that slide out. So then, what I did was I’d cut out little walls, partitions and I would put them in the tin box. So then on one side, there’s one cricket, and on the other side there’s another cricket. But they don’t see each other – they only hear each other. So I would feed them and I’d wait for like a week or two when they’re all nice and strong, and I’d open the little sliding door that I made, and then they’d see each other and fight.

JS: [Laughing] That’s awesome.

AL: It was cool. Yeah, it was just so fun. And then you’d bet, not money, but you’d bet like ‘my cricket can kill your cricket.’ You know, you’d bet candy and stuff.

JS: Kind of like cock fights?

AL: Yeah, exactly, exactly. So I did that for like, it was just great just catching them and stuff. So actually my first film with UCLA film school, I made a film about it. About this Vietnamese boy that comes to the states and he can’t find any crickets to play with. But that’s beside the point.

JS: Do you remember your friends back from childhood?

AL: I do…

JS: Did any of them make it over here?
AL: See that’s the thing. You know, when you’re young you only kind of remember your friends’ first name. You don’t know what their last names are. So I had some best buddies that I hung out with, but you know what? I really don’t know if they made it out.

JS: Do you remember your neighbors or any other family?

AL: You know that’s weird, I don’t remember who my neighbors were, really. I mean family members, absolutely. My really good friends back at school, absolutely. But my neighbors? I really had no idea who our neighbors were, which is kind of odd. It wasn’t like we’d keep to ourselves. When Chinese or Vietnamese New Year came around, we’d walk around and get candy and stuff from our neighbors. But somehow I kind of just forgot about them. But I always wonder about those friends, like did they make it out, or did they have to stay and did they survive?

JS: Did you leave any family members behind?

AL: Oh, yeah. Since we were the first “official” wave back in ’75, we left all of our families behind. And then it wasn’t until 4 or 5 years later that was the official second wave of Vietnamese refugees and that was like 1980 on. That was the “boat people.” That’s when a lot of my relatives tried to make it out here. So then over the years, like 1980 on, sometimes they’d come in a group, sometimes they tried and they didn’t make it and they had to stay back. And I actually lost a couple of relatives - since they came on boats and so, a lot of my relatives told me that some of my other relatives - and they saw it when it happened, what they went through. And this is a pretty well known documented story of the Vietnamese “boat people” experience. So they went through the waters around Thailand and they had a lot of pirates. So these pirates would jump on the ship and just raid, pillage, murder - so I actually lost some relatives because of that, yeah.
JS: So you mentioned Tet recently. How did you celebrate Tet, birthdays, funerals, and other special occasions?

AL: we had these lanterns right? But they weren’t made out of like paper, and they were like these wooden frames and the guy down the street made them, we got them at the market. And they were actually made out of like - its almost like see-through, stretchy, kind of like - when you touch it, it kind of bounces?

JS: Cellophane?

AL: Maybe cellophane. You know, maybe, I’m just trying to remember what it was. But you actually have a little candle inside and depending on what animal or whatever you like. So if I wanted to pick a fish, or you know, like a cow, or like a dog or a cat. So you would have a pole and it would connect to the “animal” lantern and you light the candle and you’d walk around at night you know everyone’s just playing and there’s fireworks and stuff. And then you dress-up in your good clothes and go get candy and red money. So yeah, that’s how we celebrated. It was pretty cool.

JS: Could you describe your schooling in Vietnam? Like what level of education did you have?

AL: yeah well let’s see. So when I came here, what was interesting is that they give you like - well okay obviously when I came here I didn’t know English, right? But I actually went to French school when I was in Vietnam and I think that was because my mom was working for the Americans as a nurse at their hospital. And obviously the French were in Vietnam for many, many years and so I guess it was kind of like I guess French school in Vietnam was kind of like private school. And I didn’t really have a choice because my parents put me there. And then of course years later, I found out like “wow that’s actually like a privilege to go to French school,“ like I didn’t know that as a kid you know what I mean. I just went to school and had my friends.
But it was kind of funny because I remember like when I went to French school though – this is a funny story – I had enough sort of like context to kind of think, “where are the French kids? Isn’t this a French school?” But they were all like Vietnamese kids or Chinese kids or Chinese-Vietnamese kids, you know? But anyways so I knew the alphabet – like the French alphabet – and so when I came here I actually was fluent or somewhat fluent in French, but I lost it. But I think because of that it was much easier learning English for me, and plus I was much younger. Because my sister is four years older and it was really hard for her to learn English because there’s a cut-off point, you know? So I came here and then I was actually supposed to be in the fifth grade, but because I didn’t know English and they did whatever they did to assess me – I forgot what they did – I was actually put in fourth grade, but see I had finished fourth grade already or the equivalent of fourth-grade in Vietnam. So that was kind of interesting, like, “aww man, what the heck?”

JS: So you had to repeat fourth-grade?

AL: Right. Or do fourth-grade for the first time in the states, but I had already finished fourth grade in Vietnam, so yeah…

JS: So do you have any other siblings besides your sister?

AL: No, that’s it. Just her.

JS: Older sister? What’s her name?

AL: Irene.

JS: Irene? And she’s four years older?

AL: Mhmm, mhmm. Yup.

JS: So what other languages do you speak?
AL: Well, okay so I was fluent in French, but I lost it. I mean I lost it probably like after year or so because I didn’t have anyone to speak French to. So I lost it, pretty much. If I looked at it, I can still read it. Meaning like I can still pronounce all the words, but in terms of meaning… nope, I lost most of it. I speak Cantonese, I speak Mandarin, and I speak broken Vietnamese. But it comes back… like if I’m hanging out with a lot of Vietnamese folks, then it would just kind of come back, you know what I mean? Like recently, I was at one of my uncles – one of my many, many uncles and aunts – had passed, and so we went to the wake just like two weeks ago and I hadn’t seen relatives in a long – I have so many cousins that I don’t even remember who they are, actually, I hadn’t seen them in a long time. Then when I went back to the wake, it was in the room and they pretty much all spoke Vietnamese and like my Vietnamese kind of came back.

JS: So we were able to converse and…?

AL: I mean, yeah. I mean if I was kind of forced to - I mean not forced to, but if I really had to, I’d probably take a moment, then I would – yeah, but I’m not as fluent as I should be. And it’s only because I never really was able to speak a lot when I was starting to grow up, you know?

JS: Yeah. I’m the same way with Korean, so…

AL: Yeah so you know it’s tricky, you know? And then when you have family gatherings, they kind of go, [sarcastically] “Oh you actually remember a couple words? Whoa.” And it sort of comes back, you know…

JS: So what memorable stories have your family members told you in the past, that you don’t remember yourself, but some of your family members have told you? Besides the pirate stories…

AL: Right, right. Hmm. Let me see.

JS: Its okay if you don’t have any…
AL: Well my dad told me an interesting story recently. He told me that when he was young… well okay so my dad’s in China. So my dad was born in China and he actually left China because of World War II. So that’s why we actually ended up in Vietnam.

JS: Do you remember what year he said that was?

AL: I don’t know what year he left. I really don’t remember. He told me but I kind of forgot.

Well okay, World War II started in 1942, and so I think a year so later, Japan was already invading China. So he and his parents… they had to go, right? So then they ended up in Vietnam. Anyway, so my dad told me this really interesting story where – and I didn’t know this… I was like, ”wow, really?” He told me that when he was in Vietnam… I mean, was it Vietnam? No, no, when he was in China as a kid - I think right before he left – he had to like somehow he either did it – I don’t think he did it on purpose, but he was walking down this dirt road and country and it turned out that there were all these mines…

JS: Landmines?

AL: Yeah, you know? And he almost got blown up if he weren’t rescued from his dad.

JS: So he had to be rescued from his dad?

AL: Yeah. I don’t know the exact details but he actually told me that story recently and I never knew about that. I was like, “Wow, that’s crazy, you know?” So yeah.

JS: So did you dad meet your mother in Vietnam?

AL: Yeah, so he met her in Vietnam and she was born there, but she’s like Chinese-Vietnamese. And then they got together and started dating and they went to college in Taiwan. And then they came back from college and they had kids. So yeah, that’s sort of like their history.

JS: So your dad’s fully Chinese? And your mom is…?

AL: My mom’s Chinese-Vietnamese.
AS: Chinese-Vietnamese? I see, okay. What religions do you and your family practice?

AL: You know, we actually don’t really practice a lot of things, really. Like my dad, he wasn’t Buddhist back in Vietnam. Neither was my mom. They weren’t Christian or Catholic or anything. So when we came here we didn’t really have any religion, you know? Although I think when I was actually in college, I was like in a Christian fellowship for like a good chunk of time. But it wasn’t like something that I had since I was a kid, you know?

JS: Right, right. Are you religious now?

AL: Umm, you know actually, not really. Yeah.

JS: Okay. Do you have any family heirlooms or mementos from the past? Like pictures, figurines, or jewelry?

AL: We definitely have some black-and-white photos that I’ve kept - that I’ve used in my shows. And what’s crazy about the photos is that when we left, we were told that if the Vietcong – and this was true – if the Vietcong goes through your stuff and they find any “incriminating” pictures that reveal that you had any ties to America – small or overt or whatever – that they would make the family members that you left behind go through hell. So I still remember – and it’s a scene in my show – where I was leaving that day – April 30th – I mean a couple of days before because we had to go to the airport, and before we left our house, I still remember my grandfather on my dad’s side actually throwing all of our family pictures into a big, old bonfire - like one of those barrels, you know? And I remember asking my mom right then and there and she told me that’s why he was doing that, you know? So we don’t have a lot of family photos. I don’t have any pictures of me when I was a baby.

JS: Oh, that’s interesting…
AL: Like I have no idea what I looked like. The only - like the earliest photo I have – and it’s in
my one-man show – is I think I was maybe three and a half maybe? Yeah, But anything before
that I have no idea because so many photos were destroyed. Yeah, which kind of sucks, you
know? So I treasure those few - I mean there are only like 7-8 photos.
JS: Wow.
AL: And I have them all because when I do my show, years ago – and I still do my show – and
when I started writing my show, I knew I needed some those photos to put in my show. And so I
asked my dad for them so I still have them, but yeah, there’s literally like seven or eight of them.
JS: I see. You didn’t happen to bring any of those photos, did you?
AL: No, but I can e-mail them to you.
JS: Okay that’d be great.
AL: Yeah, that’s easy. Just in my laptop.
JS: Yeah, I can just included in here
AL: Yeah, yeah. I can e-mail them to you.
JS: Cool. So what was it like leaving your home and country? Do you remember feeling how you
felt?
AL: Well, it was very traumatic because I literally remember this: like I knew we were leaving
and people were kind of talking about it and I heard little bits and pieces about, “Yeah, we’re
going to leave.” But then you don’t really know exactly what’s going to happen - and I’ll never
forget the day we left – it had to have been April 8th, or something like that – the day we left our
house to the airport, I was sleeping or taking a nap or something like that. And then I still
remember like my mom slap me on the leg, y’know, like “Wake up!” I still remember that
actually, and I just kind of went, “What?” And then it was crazy - it was like I woke up and there
were all these people at my place. And I actually thought there was a party - my grandparents were there, my aunts were there, my uncles were there, my cousins were there; because we were the only ones leaving - like me, my dad, my sister and me.

So you wake up as a kid and all these people are at your house and you’re like, “Is there a party?” And I thought there was a party, but then it was like “we are leaving, now.” And it was like, “What? You’re kidding me. What?” And it was kind of like crazy, so I only had maybe like 30 minutes tops to say goodbye to everybody. There were a lot of people there. Just my mom comes from family of 16 kids - Isn’t that crazy? That’s nuts, right? It’s just crazy, right? So all those aunts and uncles were there and their kids. And so we said goodbye and I was like, “What the hell is going on?” And the next thing you know we’re on our way to the airport. So I didn’t really have a chance to even process everything. It was just like I woke up, and then I was on my way.

JS: You were just kind of shocked throughout the whole thing?

AL: Oh, totally. I mean it was just like, “What the hell is going on? Are you sure we’re leaving today?” And I think I was kind of upset. I remember thinking, “Why didn’t you wake me up earlier?” And my mom was like, “I wanted you guys to get more rest.”

JS: Would you describe yourself as feeling more scared?

AL: Well at first it was just surprise – shock. Kind of like, “Oh we’re really leaving?” And then it was sad, because I had a really favorite cousin of mine. He was an older cousin and we were really close, but he wasn’t able to go with us, and that was really, really sad because I thought that he would be able to go with us. And a lot of my favorite aunts and uncles weren’t able to go with us and that was also very sad. So went from kind of like an initial shock and literally like waking up and then seeing everybody and going, “Oh my gosh, I may not see these people
again.” Then we got the airport, then that was crazy because it’s just like pandemonium, y’know? I mean there’s very famous footage of all these Vietnamese folks and everybody trying to climb over these gates - you know some of that footage? Have you seen it?
JS: Yeah, yeah. I’ve actually seen it.
AL: Well I was one of those people, and so that was nuts. So I remember that. And then the ditches, of course. I remember just seeing soldiers everywhere with big guns and stuff - you would always hear airplanes flying over all the time and you hear bombs in the distance and gunfire like getting closer and closer. And it was crazy because we were in ditches like I was saying earlier, the first night, you kind of hear like [imitates distant gun sounds], and then the second night you could like really hear it and you’re like “oh my god,” they were getting really close, you know? So yeah, I think that part we didn’t know what was going to happen. I mean we could’ve died, you know? They could’ve come closer; there would’ve been a gun battle. Who knows what could’ve happened? Yeah, that was pretty nuts.
JS: Do you remember the journey to the United States? Like the actual flight over here?
AL: I did. So it wasn’t that easy and that quick. So we left the airport, right? Okay so on the chopper, the Huey chopper - that was hardcore. So when we were in the air, we still had to clear Vietnam airspace, right? So I still remember this big Marine guy or whatever he was – well he was a Marine I guess or Army – he had these big guns pointing outside the helicopter, in case somebody was trying to shoot us down. So however long it took us to leave the general Vietnam airspace - from that point until we were safely out of the airspace. I mean that was hairy, man. I mean that was still really nuts because we could’ve been shot down. So then we did that - so we finally left the airspace safely, thank goodness – didn’t get shot down, obviously. Then it went from there, I’m trying to remember - okay so it went from there to this other area, and I don’t
remember exactly where, but we had to literally like get on this aircraft carrier and I remember what mine was called. It was called the USS Hancock, and so we landed on this aircraft carrier and it was just like huge. We were on like the top of the carrier with like choppers landing, man. And we all kind of just spilled out and we were all like, “What the hell?” There’s all these people and there’s other choppers and stuff. And there is another very, very famous footage – and you know it was kind of surreal cause I saw it years later when I came here. So there’s another famous footage where – I guess it was because of the weight or they didn’t feel like they needed it anymore – so a lot of the American soldiers pushed the helicopter off the aircraft carrier. Have you seen that famous footage?

JS: No, I haven’t.

AL: Yeah, it was like really famous. Where they push the aircraft – I mean the chopper, off the aircraft carrier - and I was there when it happened. Like I saw them do it; I was like, “what are they doing?” So then years later, I saw that footage and I was like, “What the hell? No way!” and then I like paused it and I tried to spot myself, like, “Where am I? I don’t see myself! Dammit!”

JS: I know you said the chopper was packed with people? What were the conditions like?

AL: It was just like hard floor, you just go in and you’re squished and you don’t know what’s going to happen and no one’s speaking any English to you – I mean they were speaking English to themselves obviously, to each other, I mean. You just sat there, man - and you just lifted. But there is a little comical situation when that happened where we were there and I don’t know how long the flight was because it obviously left Vietnam and it went to the ocean somewhere on the aircraft carrier. And so they gave us food - and I still remember this – I was just a little kid and I’m on my knees and I’m all crying and the adults are crying, some kids were crying. I was just
like, “what’s going on? This is crazy.” So I remember like this big soldier dude came by and we all kind of held our hands out, and he just dropped like this shiny, piece of foil on our hands. It was kind of like, not heavy, not light - and it just dropped in my hands and I was like, “What the hell is this?” And I’m looking at this – it was literally like a foil – something was in the foil, but it was kind of warm. I looked around and I guess people were tearing through it, and so I tore through it. And it was like a piece of ground meat and like two pieces of bread – it was like a fucking hamburger, like without the ketchup and shit, you know what I mean? So that was my first taste of a hamburger.

JS: Wow. Out of an MRE?

AL: I don’t know how they made it, but you know what it looked like? It looked like those hamburgers you get when you’re in elementary school. You know, like when you get in line and they give it to you and it’s in like that foil. Back in the old days – I don’t know how they do it now, but you ripped the foil and hamburger’s inside. Yeah it was crazy. But I looked at it, and I was like, “What is this strange object?”

JS: Do you remember your first experience with it? Did you like it?

AL: I ate it and I guess I kind of liked it, yeah. Yeah

JS: Okay, that’s interesting.

AL: And since we’re on the topic of food, one of the other things I also saw when I came here, I just freaked out. I was like, “What the fuck is that?” So the family that sponsored us bought us lunch, and I think it was like our first week here – it was actually in Monterey Park, near here.

JS: So you guys first landed in California?
AL: Well actually, no. I have to rewind. So we first landed in Arkansas and we were in kind of like a – not a camp, sort of a camp, but not really. But before we even went to Arkansas, we actually landed in Guam. Yeah, so we were in Guam and that was sort of like a camp?

JS: A refugee camp?

AL: Yeah. Because it was just like basic tents and you had all of these cots right next to each other. You had like an outdoor shower area, and umm, that was wild. We were in Guam for – it had to have been at least - I mean, we were there for a while. I still remember my mom would try to make phone calls like, “Oh, so are we going to be sponsored or what?” or whatever. I think we were in Guam for at least a month and a half, at least.

JS: A month and a half? While you guys were waiting for a family sponsorship?

AL: Yeah, yeah. We were waiting for that. Actually, to rewind a little bit more, we were actually on the aircraft carrier for like a while too. I don’t know how long, but at least a couple of nights because I remember walking around; people were sleeping and just checking everything out. I met this little girl and we began talking and stuff. They had people that were walking down patrolling and if they see little kids they just kind of wave, you know? So we were there for a couple of nights. Then we ended up in Guam, and like I said, we were there for at least a month and a half, if not two months. And then finally the person who sponsored us was actually a woman that my mom was good friends with who also work with her as a nurse. But she was married to an American in Vietnam, so she definitely had to get the hell out of there. So she left actually before we left, on April 30th. So she finally settled and she was the one who sponsored us out of there – out of Guam. And then from Guam we went to Arkansas and we were like in these barracks. I still remember they were like these military barracks and we were there for at
least a month in Arkansas. I don’t know where in Arkansas. We just knew we were in Arkansas, and that was sort of interesting.

JS: What was that experience like? :iving in that refugee camp?

AL: I remember the people sort of kept to themselves, whereas in Guam, maybe it was just more free because in Guam, you’re sort of out in the open, like literally. So if your kid you just wander around and meet other kids and you’d hang out and stuff like that. But in Arkansas, people just had their own little two bunk beds. I think we had two bunk beds: one for my mom, one for my dad, and then I slept in one of them and my sister slept with the other parent. We just had our own little belongings, and then right across from us are two other bunk beds. So it was sort of like summer camp, but not really. And I remember going to check out the supermarket – they called it the PX or something like that.

JS: They had a general store in the…?

AL: They had a general store! Yeah, it was kind of interesting. I would walk in there and just kind of check things out. And I remember seeing brand new pairs of jeans and different kinds of candy and stuff. So when I got bored, I would just go and check out the store.

JS: Were you guys expect to pay for these things or…

AL: Nope.

JS: …were they just handed out?

AL: They had to have been handed out. Yeah, I don’t remember us paying. Not that I can remember. And we were there for a while, and then after we left Arkansas, we came to Monterey Park or Alhambra. So, I don’t remember what we really ate in Arkansas. I mean, it had to have been public cafeteria food, I would assume. But, when we got here I still remember – well we called her our ‘auntie’, but she’s not really our aunt, the one who sponsored us… she
said that she wasn’t going to cook tonight and that she had ordered something. So she brought it in and she opened it up and we were looking at it. And it looked nasty; it was still bubbling, and it was a pizza.

JS: Oh it was a pizza?

AL: Yeah. I guess it was just really fresh off the oven when she bought it. I don’t know where she bought it from - maybe Shakey’s or whatever. It was still bubbling little cheese, and I was like, “What the hell is that?” So I remember that, but did I eat it? I’m about to try it, you know. I’ll eat anything.

JS: Do you remember liking it?

AL: I think I kind of liked it, yeah. I mean I must’ve liked it because pizza is one of my favorite things. So I remember those things like the foods and stuff like that.

JS: So how did you get from Arkansas to here?

AL: So Arkansas to here we were actually on an airplane. And that was my first time on an airplane.

JS: Your family sponsor was in Arkansas?

AL: The family sponsor sponsored us from Guam to the states. For whatever reason, we had to go to Arkansas first and I don’t really know why. Maybe that was just the way things were done for that first wave. Because I remember when my parents sponsored their respective brothers and sisters and uncles or grandparents…they came straight here. They didn’t go somewhere else and then they came here. For us, we had to go to Arkansas first, and then we came here. So I don’t really know why that’s so, actually. So we were on a regular airplane. I was like, “Wow. My first airplane ride.” And actually, the flight attendant took a picture of me sitting in the airplane next to my mom. I think she has that photo somewhere – I don’t have it actually. But the flight
attendant was nice and took a picture – it was like a Polaroid from those old cameras where the film comes right out. So she has that picture somewhere…

JS: Do you know that flight attendant still?

AL: No. Some lady.

JS: So what were some of your first impression and early experiences in the country?

AL: So we first got here, and then I went to school. My first school actually was – it was kind of interesting. My first school was in Chinatown in downtown LA and that school is still there.

JS: Do you remember the name of that school?

AL: Yeah it was called Castellar Elementary School. [Spells name] So that school’s still there. My parents’ best friends from college in Taiwan - they also left Taiwan and had settled in the states for a couple of years. So they had two kids, a boy and a girl. Somehow my parents reconnected with them. So we actually moved to this run-down apartment in Silverlake, and I still remember the street because I went back years later to check it out. And we went to this elementary school and it was Castellar in Chinatown. So that first year was kind of cool. I remember I had a lot of cool teachers and a lot of cool friends and stuff. And I still keep in touch with that guy, who’s the son of my mother’s best friends. Because we went to high school together and we reconnected on Facebook and whatnot so we’re reconnected as friends. So that first year was actually, ”okay.” Not too bad. I don’t remember any traumatic experiences. There were a lot of Asian kids I remember that. And then we had to move. So we moved from that area in Silverlake, where I went to school in Chinatown, to somewhere like in East LA, and that was horrible. So that was the year that my sister and I seriously – you’re talking hardcore – like seriously got bullied. We moved to some fucked up neighborhood. And this is not making a general statement, but this is the truth. So we went to this neighborhood and it was mostly
Latinos. We were like the only Asian family on the block – oh there was another Asian family living below us – but that was it. So we went to school and we’re like the only Asian kids. This was the 1970? 1977? And it was bad. We had to ride the bus to school, and I will never forget this. The bus is always half empty because just that route didn’t have that many kids, so it wasn’t like a full bus. So we get on and like half the seats are empty, so me and my sister would walk towards one of the seats that could fit two people usually. And one of the guys would go and sit in that seat. So we’re like, “Oh, okay.” And we’d go to another seat, and another dude would go and sit in that seat. And that happened the entire ride.

JS: So you guys just…?

AL: We never sat, that whole year. You think that’s bad? That’s nothing compared to what they did. So everyday, we would just get harassed. We would get beat up all the time. So my sister and I, we walk out of the bus after school – we had about a three and a half block walk back to our apartment – and they would take these old Coke bottles and they would just throw ‘em at us. They would just throw ‘em at us. My sister got hit bad. The bottle hit her head, I got hit in the head and I was bleeding and shit - like glass and stuff.

JS: Was this still elementary school or middle school?

AL: My sister was in 7th grade. No, she was in 8th grade. And I was in - 7th grade.

JS: So how long were you guys there for?

AL: For one year. So it was bad. We’d get off the bus and we’d have a whole group following us. Literally, like ten kids following us. And I’m not exaggerating. So we got about three and a half blocks to walk, right? Right after you get off the bus, me and my sister were walking and every step we took, they would kick us. So we walked three and a half blocks to our apartment and they would just kick us, hard.
JS: Were they neighborhood kids?

AL: Oh they were neighborhood kids. I saw them at the school. So it was horrific, that’s when I got the brunt of the bullying. That was crazy, every day it happened. And it was so bad that my sister just stopped eating. She actually almost died because she became bulimic, at a time when there wasn’t even a word for it. I don’t think there was even a word for it at that time. So she got really ill, actually. So she reacted more passively and I don’t blame her. I mean, she was just so depressed, she had anorexia and shit. And then mid-year, I just got tired of it and I started fighting back. They don’t have this at school now, but back in the day they had woodshop classes where you would make stuff. Like any other Asian kid, I loved Bruce Lee, so secretly behind my teacher’s back, I would make a pair of nun chucks on the woodshop things. And then I started fighting back because I had a pair of nun chucks in my backpack. I just beat the shit out of whoever beat the shit out of me.

JS: Really?

AL: Yeah, it was hardcore.

JS: Did you tell your parents about this at all?

AL: Actually, I did tell my parents and they encouraged me.

JS: To fight back?

AL: Yeah. And I’ll never forget there was one night where my dad and I did it together.

JS: Really?

AL: Because every night, when we first moved there, we would come out in the morning and our door would just be full of dog shit and like fruits. So we stayed up one night and we heard some footsteps, but we didn’t dare come out. And you just hear like, [imitating impact sounds], like stuff on our door. So at like two in the morning, some guys would come over with crates of stuff
and they would just throw it at our front door. So every morning we would come out, we’d have shit on our door, we had old fruit on our door… So my dad and I finally got tired of it. So I made the nun chucks and my dad got a baseball bat – this is a true story. So we hid in his car in the driveway – my dad was in the backseat because he was taller and I was in the front seat, but we were awake. And we stayed awake and sure enough, around two in the morning – because we knew that’s when they came because we’d hear them at night. So we peeked out of the car – just looked up a little bit in the dark and no one can really see us. And there were three guys, two of whom I recognized because they were in my class. They had these crates, these wooden crates, and they had dog shit in bags and old fruits and they just started throwing them at the door. So my dad gave me the signal and we busted out of the car. And at first they didn’t see us right away because they were throwing stuff. And we busted out of the car and we fucked them up.

JS: Were they kids your age?

AL: My age. Yeah, fucked them up.

JS: Were there any cops involved at all?

AL: Nope.

JS: No? They just went home?

AL: Yeah. I ran after two of them. One guy was running and I took the nun chuck and I whacked him in the head and he fell. And I took the nun chuck with the links and chains and I wrapped it around his neck. His neck was bleeding, and I said, “You touch my family, my house, I’ll fucking kill you. I know where you are because you’re in my fucking classes.”

JS: Were there any repercussions after that?

AL: Nope. The bullying stopped after that. But that was near the end of the year, maybe a month after mid-year. Near the end of the year, so that was crazy.
JS: So I guess that would be one of the challenges of settling here?

AL: Yeah it was bad. My sister almost died of bulimia or anorexia and my parents were having more arguments because we were doing bad in school. I failed all of my classes basically, because I kind of just checked out. The only class I didn’t fail in was art because I loved drawing. So I think by the third month of school, I had to show up and I just didn’t do anything, I’d just sit there. I just totally checked out. So it was really bad. Of course we moved out after that first year, but that was a tough year. And even though it was only one year, it seemed like so many things that were wrong about us being there - I think that was the first time that I really saw – I mean, I saw it subtly, before that year – but that was the first time that I really saw just hardcore racism and hatred everyday. And then on Halloween, it was me and the other Asian kids that lived below us. Well, when we got off the bus, we would have to go through like a gauntlet because kids would just stand like this and just throw eggs at you. You just had to walk through because they would block the all other ways and teachers didn’t do shit.

JS: Wow. That sounds really...

AL: Yeah, it was messed up. So a lot sort of happened that year that I looked back – it kind of crystallized a lot of my philosophy about things; how I look at race, how I look at oppression. I’m really fortunate in that – I’ve told this story, but not in this detail – but when people see my show, there’s this scene of me getting beat up and shit. And usually when I do a show, I would have a question and answer session after the show, and people would ask a very honest question. “Alex, not to make a blanket statement, because it’s not a blanket situation, but how do you feel about Mexicans, Latinos, and Chicanos now?” And I’m just being general here, and I’m just like, “I’m fine.” Which is crazy, because you’d think I’d come out of that situation with a serious hatred, but I came out of it not feeling that. My dad came out of that, really hating Mexicans.
JS: So did you feel that your bullying was not really related to the fact that they were Latino, but just that particular set of people?

AL: I don’t think I was smart enough back then to know that. At that time, I hated them. I would lie if I said I didn’t hate them. At that point in time, I hated them and I saw what they did and what they did to my sister and what they did to my parents to some degree. I never put it together where it’s like “okay, they’re Mexicans. That’s why they do it.” Or, “Even though they do it, that doesn’t mean that every Mexican was like that.”

JS: So you didn’t hate all Mexicans.

AL: Right. I didn’t think that. What I did think was, “Oh, they obviously had a strong reaction towards Asians.” Like I had enough brain perspective, if you will, to think about that. Because I remember I saw some Black kids on campus, but they weren’t being picked on. So I thought, “That’s interesting. Why is that?”

JS: So you thought it was more because you were Asian that you were being bullied rather than because they were Latino.

AL: Right. And I really believe that that’s why. So I think when I walked out of it, I didn’t think that all Latinos were going to be like that. But I did walk out that experience having a very visceral perspective on - ”Wow. There’s some - obviously Asians are looked at a certain way.”

Because that school, even though it was mostly Latino, there were a few white kids, there were some black kids, but they didn’t get harassed. Now why is that? I just thought that was sort of interesting. I hope that sort of makes sense.

JS: It does. Do you have any funny or memorable experience of culture shock? Like you bringing Asian food for lunch?
AL: Let me think. When I had friends who were non-Asians come to our house, they didn’t know why they had to take their shoes off. They were like, “What?” And I was like, “No really, you gotta do that.” So they thought that was kind of odd. So I had that.

JS: Otherwise, you thought you were integrated into American society pretty well?

AL: I think yes and no. I think that when I first came here, I went to that school and it wasn’t that bad. And then we went to that other school – that was really, really bad. So I was just like, “What the heck is going on?” So I think I always had this – wherever it came from – I learned English pretty fast. So in that respect, I blended. I didn’t have a thick Asian accent like some of my friends who came later or some of my relatives. But I think because of that year at that particular school, it really opened my eyes to how Asians were treated to whatever degree that they’re treated. And of course when I got older, I had more racial incidents happen. I don’t know if it would compare to that thing that happened in that year because I was physically beat up. But I saw things that were subtle or sometimes they were overt. I saw it when I was at UCLA, I saw it when I was in high school…

JS: Could you give some examples?

AL: Oh, sure. This became a performance piece of mine, actually. I was in a toy store and I was getting a toy one year for my niece, and she was really young, like two or three years old. I went inside this toy store and I had a backpack – something like that [points to my backpack] – actually, even smaller. It wasn’t even a backpack. It was like a bag with a strap on it, and I walked in. This guy was working at the counter, and I hate to say it, but he was like the standard, total - he just looked like he came from the Midwest, I’m sorry. I’m just going to throw that out. Just kind of just a backward, country guy. So I walked in, and he kind of glared at me right away. And I noticed it right away because when you’re that age – I was already graduated from college
– and so you just pick up things quicker, unless you’re not noticing. And even before I walked into the aisles, the dude screamed at me. “Leave your bag right here on the counter! Leave your bag here!” And I looked around and everybody had their own bags and purses and he singles me out. So that happened. It got kind of crazy.

JS: Did you confront him about it?

AL: It actually came as such a shock. And prior to that I hadn’t had a lot of incidences for a while. So it was just sort of like, “Whoa. Did that really just happen?” So, I actually, like obeyed him. I didn’t really like think about it. And so I went down the aisles and I thought, “Wait a minute. That just fucking happened. That’s crazy, man.”

So I have a twenty-minute piece called “Toy Town USA” where you get into my mind. I’m walking up and down the aisle and you hear me talking and its just some funny, crazy shit like, “Hey, if I walked in with a white chick, maybe I wouldn’t be bothered. Hey, if I didn’t have pho today or maybe if I didn’t have some fish sauce. Or hey, maybe if I had a bigger dick”, like that’s my show. But I was thinking about those things. Maybe I look thuggish? Maybe I look like some Vietnamese gang member? So I didn’t really confront him until after I processed it and I thought, “This is crazy. This is messed up. There’s all these other people - dude had a big backpack and no one was calling him out.” So I walked to the counter, and as I walked to the counter his arm actually went below the counter, so I’m sure there was a gun there.

JS: At a toy store?

AL: Well, he probably had a gun to protect the store. He just kind of went like this, and I didn’t see his arm anymore. And I said, “I’m gonna have my bag back.” And he kind of just tossed it at me and I just called him out. I said, “Hey you know what? That’s fucked up, man.” And I was really loud. “See that lady? She’s got a bag and you didn’t fucking call her out.” So I pretty
much let him have it and I walked out. I didn’t buy anything. What’s crazy is that a couple of years later, that store burned down.

JS: How? Do you know?

AL: No. I don’t know.

JS: So I know that you’re of a mixed racial background. How do you identify yourself in American society?

AL: Yeah. That’s changed over the years. That’s a good question. I think when I first came here I just identified myself as Asian – or well, not even Asian because that term wasn’t really around when I first came here. I just identified myself as Chinese-Vietnamese. And then maybe when I want to high school I identified myself as strictly – well this is actually interesting. My new show actually explores this whole dynamic. Then for many years I identified myself as American even though I knew that I wasn’t really all Chinese-American or all Chinese. And I did that because my dad sort of ingrained in me that Vietnamese people were like bad. Because if you look at the history of Vietnam, French were there, Chinese were there. And let’s be honest, there were a lot of people in Vietnam, who were pure Vietnamese, who did not like Chinese. I got a taste of it because remember when I told you about from French school? One year my mom and dad decided to take me not to the French school that I went to. They decided that this year you’re going to go to the Vietnamese school. So I went and I guess somehow the administration and that teacher that I had for homeroom knew that I went to the French school. So then when we had a big assembly – and I didn’t know they had this – they had a big assembly to introduce the new kids to the school. And it was me and two other girls or something… I don’t remember, maybe another boy. I don’t know. So I remember standing there and the teacher came out, some Vietnamese lady and she’s on the podium, talking on the microphone. So she was like,
“Oh, introduce yourself.” So the girl introduced herself. And then it was time for me to introduce myself, so I introduced myself. And the teacher goes – oh and I introduced myself in Vietnamese by the way, that’s important to know. And then she goes, “Why don’t you enlighten us and say your name in French because obviously you’re settling with us and you just came from a very prestigious French school.” And I’ll never forget that. It was crazy. I’ll never forget that. And I stood there and you could tell the teacher was being pretty fucked up about it.

JS: Like singling you out?

AL: Yeah. And I still remember she would lean into the microphone, she goes, “well aren’t you the boy from the French school in the other district?” Like what are you even doing here? It was fucked up. Then she basically forced me to say something in French, like I was some monkey. There were hundreds of kids in the auditorium and they were all quiet. And I said the first thing that I could think of, which is like a name of the snack that my grandmother ate, and they just all laughed. The whole audience just laughed - the teacher laughed. And then she goes, “well I guess your French isn’t that great. So maybe you will fit in because none of us speak French, we only speak Vietnamese here.” I’ll always remember that. I got kind of traumatized. So I just went home and I told my mom and dad about it and then they said that they would go talk to the teacher about it. And somehow they talked with them for about week, I still went back for about four or five days. Then the next week they pulled me out and I went back to the other school. But, I’m using that example because when I was growing up my dad kind of ingrained that in me. So I didn’t really believe it but I didn’t claim it – like I didn’t claim that part of me. And then I went through college and then I started doing performance as a career and that’s what I really delved deeper into my history and looking at all the good stuff and the bad stuff. And then I just kind of realized I have to look at realistic things. So then I stopped identifying myself as
Chinese-American because I really wasn’t technically Chinese-American. So that’s changed and nowadays I actually identify myself as Asian.

JS: Just Asian?

AL: Yeah. Like I don’t even identify myself as Asian-American anymore. And I don’t really have like a main reason…I just…I don’t know. Maybe it will change 10 years from now, who knows? But now I just go, “Yeah I’m Asian.”

JS: That’s interesting. Do you have any children or grandchildren?

AL: No. No kids.

JS: I see, so what do you think about interracial dating or marriage?

AL: I’m cool with interracial dating. I think a lot of times it’s very one-sided.

JS: What do you mean?

AL: I come from a different generation. I think it’s not as much now, but especially in college I saw - I remember seeing pretty much like 99% of Asian women dating white guys, I saw a lot of that. It did kind of make me think about things, like, “What’s wrong with us?” So I think I had a personal experience with that, personally seeing all this stuff.

JS: I think they called it “Yellow Fever”?

AL: Right, right, exactly. But it’s was never the other way around. In my generation, when I was growing up – and this isn’t just like me whining about it – but I remember thinking back then, “Man. Either way, Asian guys are fucked.” Asian girls wouldn’t date us, non-Asian girls wouldn’t date us. But I’m totally fine with interracial dating, but I think even now it’s still kind of one-sided. Not as much, but still.

JS: Do you keep in touch with any of your family or relatives back in Vietnam?
AL: No, because pretty much everybody – you mean, the ones that are here now, right?

JS: The ones that are here or back in Vietnam.

AL: As far as I know I think I only have like one uncle and maybe some very peripheral relatives that are still in Vietnam. I think pretty much 99.9% of them all made it out here. My dad had a half-brother - he never made it out. I think he’s still alive but I don’t know where he is. I mean I haven’t gone back since I left, actually. I want to go back, but I just haven’t had the chance to go back. Every year, I go, “I need to go back, I need to go back.” But then I don’t do it.

JS: So do you still keep in touch with your family that’s here in America?

AL: Not as much. I think to some extent I’m the product and as I get older I regret it more. I’m being very frank about this. I think to a great extent, I’m the product of very, very early American indoctrination about not being close with family, because that’s like the American thing. So I think because I came here so young and I was the first wave. I think the first wave had to do certain things that later waves of immigrants – and I’m talking just for me like from Vietnam or China. Just my experience. I can’t talk about the KA experience. But for me I think, we really have to sort of not look back because we were the first wave and there was a lot of pressure on us that we put ourselves and we also got from society in general. So I think what happened was I just became really, really independent. I mean, really independent. And example is, when my parents moved to San Diego right before the end of my junior year in high school, I didn’t go with them. My sister was already in college – she went to UCLA too. But my parents moved from this area in Alhambra, and their jobs moved in so they had to relocate to San Diego or Else they lose their jobs. So they relocate San Diego and I was like, “Aww man that sucks. I don’t want to go to San Diego.” Not because I didn’t like San Diego – I didn’t know much about it. But I didn’t want to finish my last year in high school and my last couple of months as a junior
in a totally different school. So I stayed behind and I bounced around between friends’ houses. Then a good chunk of year I was at one of my aunt’s place and she just let me stay in her garage. So I just became really independent.

JS: Did you have a job during this time?

AL: I had a job the summer before my junior year and then the summer before my senior year in high school and I had a job the summer before my freshman year in college.

JS: What did you do?

AL: Well my first job was crazy. My first job I worked at a construction site doing the same thing the adults did.

JS: Manual labor.

AL: Manual labor. It was hardcore. I was like 14 and I dug ditches. I came home and my hands were all blistering and bleeding and stuff. I laid out power lines because they were building all these new condos. It was like a big boom in the early 80’s. So yeah, I was really independent. So I think over the years I really lost in touch with my relatives, but it was also because there were so many of us because my mom comes from such a big family. So I lost in touch with a lot of my relatives and cousins. I see them at weddings and stuff. Like the first time I saw a lot of them was like two Thursdays ago, when I went to my uncle’s wake. I saw cousins that I hadn’t seen in like 15 years. I think they were the second and third wave so they’ve remained really tight and I’ve sort of always been on the outside because here’s the other thing…I was known as Alex the American. So I was very aware of it, but it also became a bone of contention between me and them. I always felt some tension from them, not because I think they meant it that way, but it was like, “He had the privilege to come here first so he knows English and he doesn’t struggle with English.” So they always saw me as blending completely, even though they didn’t know about
some of the stories that happened to me. And so they had a harder time because they we’re on
the boat so they became more tightknit. They stayed in enclaves and I didn’t. And so when I
went back to some of these events I was always like the odd kid out. They would always tease
me, “Oh my gosh, you actually remember how to eat that dish?” So because of some of those
factors, I kind of like – I didn’t consciously stay away – but I just didn’t blend as much with
them.

JS: Your family just thought of you as more Americanized?

AL: Right, exactly. My mom and dad and especially my relatives, big time.

JS: So when you and your family get together either any traditions or customs that you guys
made an effort to preserve?

AL: You know, not really that much anymore.

JS: So are there traditions that you guys have given up or changed?

AL: Well the funny thing about my parents is that they never really celebrated the American
holidays. So when I was a kid here I loved those holidays because I looked around and all my
friends were like, “Where are you going to get a turkey?” and “let’s get a Christmas tree!” And I
was like, “Aww man. How come I don’t have that? Why aren’t we celebrating Christmas? How
come we don’t have a tree?” And it wasn’t because I was mad at my parents. I just didn’t know
why we weren’t celebrating that. So I grew up not having that it all.

JS: Was it because your parents didn’t know about these holidays?

AL: They knew, they just didn’t really care. My dad was like, “A tree? Why are you going to
bring a tree into the house? That’s stupid, you’re going to dirty up the floor.” And so I never had
that. I didn’t have like a real, real Thanksgiving – like the total nine yards with the turkey and all
that shit – until one year I made it for myself. But they didn’t celebrate that. So while they didn’t
celebrate the American holidays, they kind of sort of celebrated Chinese New Year, but it wasn’t as big or elaborate as back home because we were the only family unit here. So for like 5-6 years we didn’t have any other family members because they were still back in Vietnam. So it was sort of hard to have a big festive Chinese or Tet New Year with just the four people. So we got our little red money and that was pretty much it. We didn’t have some big meal – I mean, we had dinner I guess. So on both fronts, we didn’t really do that, so that was sort of a rare situation.

JS: Did that change once your family came over?

AL: It changed a little bit in that they’d have it more at their houses, but by that time I was already in college or high school, and I just got really busy so I didn’t really go to their houses that much. I mean, here and there I did but it wasn’t like a regular thing.

JS: How about now? Does your family celebrate Christmas or Thanksgiving now?

AL: No. They still don’t.

JS: Even if they’re not being integrated into American society?

AL: Yeah, they really don’t. As a matter of fact, I have this joke – kind of a bittersweet joke – but I’ve actually celebrated more Thanksgivings and Christmases with other peoples’ families like girlfriends in the past or good friends of mine. But I never really had Christmas or Thanksgiving with my own family because they just never really celebrate it. They still don’t.

JS: Are you involved at all with any kind of Vietnamese community in the US?

AL: No, not really. I think when I went to college at UCLA I remember there were a lot of groups like VSA, Hong Kong Student Association and stuff like that. And I was just really out of it, like I didn’t really connect with those guys.

JS: So you hung out with more Americans? Like white kids?
AL: Hmm. Yeah only because my major was film and theater and there weren’t that many Asians in it. I still remember when I went to film school there were like two Chinese-American girls who were friends of mine in the program and there was a really good friend of mine who was older. He was in graduate school, but he was from Korea. I don’t know what happened to him. I tried looking him up one time. I mean, he was amazing and I remember when he graduated he went back to Korea. His name is Kang Ho Lee and I said, “Kang Ho, I have no doubt that you’re going to make movies in Korea.” But I don’t know if he ever did, I don’t know. But anyway, we were the only three Asian kids in the program. So because of that I hung out with more, I guess non-Asians in college. But for a couple of years I was actually in an Asian-American Christian Fellowship at UCLA. So I was a part of that group so I did hang out with those idiots, but other than that it was kind of mixed actually. But it wasn’t because I intentionally wanted to hang out with one group or the other.

JS: Did you feel alone at all? Ostracized?

AL: In college? I think in college my first year was rough because I didn’t get into the dorms. You know in freshman year you’re supposed to live in the dorms? Well for some reason I didn’t get into the dorms and so I had a lot of friends who went to high school with me who ended up getting into UCLA they all got into dorms. I didn’t get in the dorms.

JS: Why not?

AL: I just didn’t get chosen. It was weird. I applied and I remember getting a letter that said “sorry!” But then I ended up this apartment with two guys that I didn’t really know because I had a friend who knew two other guys that were looking for a third roommate. So my freshman year was really low actually. Because my parents were in San Diego so I didn’t see them and I didn’t really have time or money to go home. No transportation, really. So I spent my freshman year
pretty much every weekend at that apartment. It was really kind of depressing actually. And then when I was a sophomore I ended up in the dorms, but then all of my friends were out of the dorms.

JS: They all moved out?
AL: Yeah. [Laughing] It’s so stupid.

JS: That’s usually what happens though.
AL: Yeah, but other than that, I got kind of used to it. I think over the years I got used to and really kind of relish being alone. And so a lot of my work – even though I work with a lot of people because I do performance and I also do workshops. As a matter fact we’re also trying to do a workshop at UCI where I can come and workshop with the group - And so when I do workshops I work with a lot of students or adults depending on what organization I’m working with. But when I’m performing and doing workshops I do a lot of traveling. So I’m always going to different places and I think that a lot of times people can’t do that. And that’s understandable: people can’t handle that. One day you’re in one city for three months and then you come back for a month and then you go off again. And that’s like my schedule, so I really like it actually. I really love it because I deal a lot with people but then I go from one place to another.

JS: So you really like being independent?
AL: I really like it, yeah.

JS: Okay we’re going to wrap up here pretty soon. What are the most important things that future generations of Vietnamese-Americans should remember about their heritage?
AL: That’s a good question. I think that – this may sound like a standard answer, but I’ll try not to make it too basic. I really think it’s important to know – and this sounds sort of cliché – I really think it’s important to know your history and your past. I think it’s really important to
know what made up the history of your family and your culture and I think I say that because to a great extent that’s the work that I do and that’s what I’m empowered by. I always have people say things like, “I have a lot of friends.” and “I look towards the future. The past is the past.” And I get that in theory, but in practice I don’t believe in that. I’m not saying that you need to always dwell in the past, good or bad. I want to clarify. I think it’s important to…have some knowledge and depth of knowledge – not just basic stuff – of what was your history? And it doesn’t always necessarily include you, personally.

JS: Family heritage?

AL: Right. So this family heritage, but I think it also goes beyond…like what is the Vietnamese experience? Like what is that diaspora? So let’s say I can talk to someone and let’s say he or she is a freshman in college or high school and my challenge to them is like, “Do you know what happened to the people before you? Do you know that there is like a pattern of being treated this way? Whether its colonization, whatever it is.” So what do you know of that? You don’t have to know everything in a month, but you need to sort of know some of that stuff because, believe it or not, some of that stuff blends in to what’s happening with you. You may not think that, but it affects you. So I think it’s important to have that worldview and that history and knowledge. The second thing I’ll end with is that I think it’s very important to tell those stories – to tell your own story. To whatever extent you tell it, and whatever mode you want to tell it in - like what is that story? Do you know what your story is? And I don’t mean, once again, that you have to know every single thing, but I think it’s important to be proud of it and say, “This is where I’m at now.” You can still figure it out because I was still trying to figure it out when I was in college and everything and part of it is I’m still trying to figure out. But I know more now than I did ten or fifteen years ago, twenty years ago. But I think its important to feel strong about what it is as a
Vietnamese person or a Vietnamese-American. It’s also important to look at things that might make you feel like - Are there things about being Vietnamese or Vietnamese-American that you’re sort of afraid to explore? Are there things that – and I’ll go there – are there things that you are actually ashamed of? Well, what is that? There’s a reason why that’s so. Maybe it’s you being told something. Maybe it’s you being socialized in it from your own family or society. My example about how my dad ingrained in me, “Vietnamese are just not as good as Chinese people.” Well for many years I thought that. I never believed it though. I always wondered, “Why does he keep telling me that?” when I was a kid. So I had to go through my own process of – “Oh, now I know why you said that.” Because there’s that whole dynamic between Vietnamese and Chinese in Vietnam; It’s political, it’s sociological, it’s all that shit. Then I understood why my dad said what he said. I never agreed with him, but I understood why he said that. And then I could make up my own mind, but I need to look at it deeper than just what my dad said. So I think it’s important to know those things and I think as a Vietnamese-American, it’s important to know that story – whatever your story is in whatever increment or degree – I think it’s important to know those things and to speak it. I will go to my deathbed – and I’ve told Tram this many times because she and I have worked on many workshops before and she knows that this is the work that I do – if you’re not going to tell your story, trust me, 99% of the time someone else is going to tell it for you. And usually that someone else doesn’t know what the fuck they’re talking about. I mean seriously, let’s be open and honest here, they’re not going to know – or they think that they know. Because I work a lot with youth, like a lot with youth, especially at-risk API youth and we dig deep in our workshops. So I’m like, “Let’s talk about some of these things.” And after my workshop, they really get empowered until their own
stories. We have a final performance. So that’s sort of something that I hopefully would like to share and make that as clear as I can. Hopefully that makes sense in all that rambling.

JS: Are there any other memories are stories that you’d like to share that you haven’t shared already?

AL: I guess it’s not necessarily a memory, but sort of thing that has created a lot of great memories is that I always consider myself really fortunate to do the work that I do because I work with a lot of API youth and API college students, depending on where I go. But the underlying focus for me is always to give whatever group I’m working with, and especially API groups that I work with a lot, a venue and a safe space to really like dig deep and look at the stuff that make up their autobiographical lives. Whether its positive stuff, whether it’s negative stuff, whatever it is. And I really feel lucky because I’m doing these workshops and they come out of it like, “oh my gosh. We now know a little more about our stories.” Or “Actually because of this story, we’re closer to our parents and they’re actually sharing with us more because they came to the performance.” So I love doing that.

JS: That’s really cool.

AL: I’m always thankful. I feel like I’m blessed in a lot of ways, even though I’m not really religious per se. But I feel like that’s what I was put on this earth to do and I love being able to do that because going to a group, especially with younger kids, you know they’re kind of thinking about those things, but they don’t have like a safe venue to kind of like connect with each other and look at their own stories and listen to each other’s stories which is really even more important. It creates a lot of empathy and tolerance.

JS: I think especially in today’s society where that kind of stuff is pushed aside.
AL: Exactly. It’s pushed aside, so I always try to do my part in that and I always come out of each group so satisfied because now this group, all of them are like, “Whoa, we know the value of looking at our stories now.” Because maybe we grew up being told that our stories that matter, whether it’s society, but also like with media. And you know how that is. So that’s what I would like to kind of share.

JS: Awesome. Thank you so much for the interview. It ran a little long…

AL: Sure. No, I hope it wasn’t too much rambling…