Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: ALEX LUU
Interviewer: Jonathan Shin
Date: May 25, 2014
Location: Sierra Madre, California
Sub-collection: Vietnamese American Experience Course, Spring 2014
Length of Interview: 01:30:20

Time Log

00:00:43 What are your parents’ names? Could you describe them?
00:00:46 Alex Luu shares his family background and about his parents
00:02:09 Which college did you go to?
00:02:10 He talks about going to UCLA and how his parents were fine with him pursuing a degree in film and theatre
00:02:49 So other than Saigon, where else have you lived in Vietnam?
00:02:52 He talks about where he’s lived in Vietnam and how old he was when he left Vietnam
00:03:18 Could you describe a little bit about the experience of that period?
00:03:22 He explains memories leading up to and during the fall of Saigon.
00:04:49 He talks about the horrific experiences of escaping at the Saigon airport.
00:07:43 Do you remember anything growing up in Saigon, Vietnam? Could you tell me about some of those childhood memories?
00:07:54 He talks about playing outside with childhood friends catching crickets and making them fight for fun.
00:10:52 He does not know if his childhood friends made it out of Vietnam
00:11:07 Do you remember your neighbors or any other family?
00:11:10 He does not remember his neighbors back in Vietnam
00:11:40 Did you leave any family members behind?
00:11:43 He talks about being part of the first wave of refugees and leaving most of his family behind.
00:12:22 He talks about losing relatives to Thai pirates in the 80’s
00:12:57 So you mentioned Tet recently. How did you celebrate Tet, birthdays, funerals, and other special occasions?
00:13:04 He describes lanterns and recalls neighborhood festival activities during Tet
00:14:19 Could you describe your schooling in Vietnam? Like what level of education did you have?
00:14:26 He talks about going to French school in Vietnam and making the academic transition into American schools.
00:16:40 So do you have any other siblings besides your sister?
00:16:45 He has one older sister who is four years older.
00:16:54 So what other languages do you speak?
00:16:57 He describes how he used to be fluent in French but lost it. He speaks Cantonese, Mandarin, and broken Vietnamese
00:17:30 He talks about his recent visit with family members at his late uncle’s wake.
00:18:31 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?
00:18:48 He talks about how his Chinese father left China for Vietnam because of World War II.
00:19:35 He shares a story from his dad about accidentally walking into a minefield in Vietnam and getting rescued from his grandfather.
So did you dad meet your mother in Vietnam?

He explains how his parents met and went to college together in Taiwan.

What religions do you and your family practice?

He explains that his family does not currently practice a religion.

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

He describes how his grandfather threw all of the family pictures into a bonfire out of fear that the Vietcong would find them incriminating. He says he only has 7 or 8 remaining photos.

So what was it like leaving your home and country? Do you remember feeling how you felt?

He recalls the experience of waking up and being shocked to find all of his extended family members at his house to say goodbye on the day that his family left for the airport.

Would you describe yourself as feeling more scared?

He describes the pandemonium at the airport of soldiers, gunfire, and people climbing over gates.

Do you remember the journey to the United States? Like the actual flight over here?

He describes the chopper he flew out of and how he landed on the USS Hancock aircraft carrier.

He talks about witnessing the famous footage of people pushing a helicopter off of the aircraft carrier.
I know you said the chopper was packed with people? What were the conditions like?

He talks about some of the cramped conditions inside the helicopter.

He recalls his first experience with a hamburger out of a military-issued Meal-Ready-to-Eat (MRE).

So you guys first landed in California?

He talks about first living in a refugee camp in Guam after the carrier while waiting to be sponsored. He then came to Arkansas before settling in California.

What was that experience like? Living in that refugee camp?

He talks about people mostly keeping to themselves in Arkansas.

He talks about going to the general store in the camp to relieve his boredom.

He recalls being disgusted at his first experience with a pizza. Pizza is now one of his favorite foods.

So how did you get from Arkansas to here?

He talks about his first airplane ride coming from Arkansas to California. He’s not sure why he had to stop in Arkansas first.

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

He talks about going to school after coming to the states in Chinatown in downtown Los Angeles.

He talks about moving from Silverlake to somewhere in East LA and experiencing extreme racist bullying from the Latino neighborhood.

He talks about being followed and harassed by a group of kids every day on his walk from the bus stop.
He describes making a pair of nun-chucks in woodshop class to fight back.

Did you tell your parents about this at all?

He recalls the neighborhood kids throwing crates of food and feces at their front door every night.

He shares a story of ambushing the harassers and chasing them down with his dad one night.

He talks about failing all of his classes and doing bad in school due to the bullying.

He talks about eggs being thrown at Asian kids on Halloween.

He explains how his past experiences with racism helped form his own philosophy about these issues.

Do you have any funny or memorable experience of culture shock? Like you bringing Asian food for lunch?

He remembers his non-Asian friends thinking it was odd to take off their shoes when they came over his house.

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

He talks about blending in easier because he was able to learn English pretty fast.

He shares a story of a minor racist experience at a toy store.

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

He talks about how his identity changed over the years.

He recalls being singled out by a teacher in front of the entire school for going to French school.
Nowadays, he identifies himself as just Asian.

Do you have any children or grandchildren?

He has no kids or grandchildren.

So what do you think about interracial dating or marriage?

He is fine with interracial relationships, but he finds it very one-sided.

Do you keep in touch with any of your family or relatives back in Vietnam?

He talks about a few peripheral relatives back in Vietnam. But he has not gone back since leaving.

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

He explains how he was forced to become independent and live alone in high school because he didn’t want to move to San Diego with his parents.

Did you have a job during this time?

He describes his first job doing construction when he was 14 years old.

He talks about losing touch with his relatives because he doesn’t see them often.

He explains how his other cousins and relatives are closer with each other because they came to the states together.

So when you and your family get together either any traditions or customs that you guys made an effort to preserve? Are there traditions that you guys have given up or changed?

He explains how his parents never celebrated American holidays and only modestly celebrated Chinese New Year.

Are you involved at all with any kind of Vietnamese community in the US?
01:16:35 He talks about never connecting with many Asians in college especially because there weren’t many in his major.

01:18:33 Did you feel alone at all? Ostracized?

01:18:40 He talks about feeling alone during freshman year due to not living in the dorms with his friends.

01:19:57 He explains how he became comfortable with being alone and how he loves traveling around for his job.

01:21:16 What are the most important things that future generations of Vietnamese-Americans should remember about their heritage?

01:21:30 He talks about the importance of being aware of your culture, past, and family history/heritage.

01:24:00 He talks about the importance of telling your own story and be proud of your current identity

01:27:09 He talks about his work with at-risk Asian Pacific Islander youths.

01:28:40 Are there any other memories are stories that you’d like to share that you haven’t shared already?

01:27:50 He talks about being fortunate to work with API groups and being able to make a positive impact on their lives.

01:29:45 He talks about the satisfaction of helping others realize the value of their stories.

01:30:10 [End Interview]