Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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This is Thuy Vo Dang with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine. Today is March 12, 2013. I will be interviewing Mr. Thuận Trần in Westminster, California.

TVD: Can you please state your full name and your date of birth?

TT: Yeah, my full name in Vietnamese would be Trần Quang Thuận, or, and English is normally pronounced as “Thuan Tran.” I was born in December 30, 1965 in Vietnam in Vũng Tàu, particularly.

TVD: Okay, and can you tell me a little bit about your parents? What were their names, and what were their occupations?

TT: Yeah. My father, his name is Thui: T-h-u-i. It’s a misspell from Thuy with the Y, so that was some years ago, that was a misspelling some years ago but that’s what he—the name he got. Trần Văn Thùi, okay it’s T-h-u-i. And, he was a career government worker in the South Vietnamese Regime until 1975, and spent some time in the education camp, when the Communist took over the South, and after that, for five years living under the Communist Regime, he went back to the village and worked as a farmer; stayed low-key to helping out the family. Since he came over the States, managed to pick up odd jobs here and there, and retired some years ago. My mom Nguyễn Thị Hữu, H-u-u, Nguyễn Thị Hữu. She was a very successful businesswoman. She’s bread and butter for the family for the longest time. Even you ask my dad, he doesn’t want to admit it, but that’s—that’s actually is the case. Strong woman. She’s the
determinant factor for my brother’s and my success throughout the years. She’s in the Orange County, Orange Coast, Hospital Emergency right now, but she’s a, she’s strong woman. She very determined. So after 1975, we closed down all the businesses. I guess this was a move that my family, my father and mother determined to do. So kind of was again, keep low-key. Still—

TVD: What businesses were they?

TT: Yeah, well they’re—my family had multiple business. The main business we have was “bán độ phụ tùng xe Honda.” It’s auto-part in Vietnam, motorbike parts and repairs, and remodel. And so remodel, is you brought—people would bring in a whole bike, we would remodel it, paint it and they come out with a new bike. That’s a very good business at the time. It started back in the mid-late sixties. So that was about the time that South Vietnam start picking up on the economy, so we got right in the middle of the, that boom. Other business like, we’re doing gold tradin’, loans. My mom is very business-minded woman, so she has quite a few businesses, so that’s got to kept the family. We’re able to send my brother, older brother and sister to school, and sent me boarding school because of all that.

TVD: How many siblings do you have?

TT: I have a kid brother. He’s here in the States with us. He came with us. I have a half-older-sister and older brother; also half-older-brother. That’s the thing in my family. We’d never—so this is probably the first time ever I come out and say they are my half-brothers and sister. That’s the thing that we—I was born with them there watching over me, so we never, we never, especially in the Vietnamese tradition, we kind of hush-hush on that.

TVD: Can you explain why, and what do you mean?

TT: My father’s first wife, she died in a very tragic accident. She was also a very business-minded woman, grew up in a very, it’s very wealthy family back in the village. My father was an
orphan; orphan in a sense that he lost his father when he was—before he was born. He lost his mom when he was seven years-old. Back in the village, so they have a very strong family tie. He was brought up by his sisters and all the aunties. He stayed in a big house by himself. So, orphan in a sense that he didn’t have parents, but very well taken-care of. For families back then, so there’s one healthy, very wealthy family in the village and they have a daughter. My father is a very qualified candidate because he’s on his own. That’s how he married his first wife, and she died in a very tragic accident. He was left with my older brother—was about a year old? My older sister was about three. That was right before Điện Biên Phủ 1954, that was right before Điện Biên Phủ, so he actually was drafted to go there. Okay.

TVD: So you have quite a bit of a gap too, between your age and--?

TT: Yes. Yes, quite a few gaps. So it was years later, he married my mom. My older sister’s and older brother’s family; like I said, they very wealthy, very traditional family. They don’t know who’s he’s marrying to. And they very cautious about it, right. They want to keep and maintain the wealth in the family and all that, so very careful about that. They didn’t know who my mom was and because of family, we always been hush-hush in the family, within the family. So this is with my cousin, my relatives; never been spoken as if that, the fact that we were half-brothers and half-sister. In fact, my kid brother, my younger brother, he’s four years younger than me. I don’t think he and I have ever talked about that, that actually the older brother and the older sister are our half-brother and sister. We never had that discussion, so that’s one of those things very sensitive in Vietnamese families.

TVD: I see. So you mentioned earlier that you were, you went to—were sent to boarding school?

TT: Yes!

TVD: For what grade?
TT: I was sent a boarding school when I was third grade until fifth grade.

TVD: Was this very common among your peers, or were other--?

TT: Not particularly. You go to boarding school for a couple reasons. They have good, very good academic program, very good education system. The belief is that, you know, you were in school for unruly, and kind of—unruly kids, which probably was a case, my case. It’s expensive. It costs more than public school, or daytime school, private school, even daytime private school. But it’s definitely is a very good education system, very good—kind of help to shape leadership but all that also.

TVD: Was it a school in Vũng Tàu?

TT: A school in Vũng Tàu, yes. It’s the school itself, it’s the settings. It is in, in a sense is in the middle of the swamp. It’s a big compound its own. It’s a Catholic school. I believe it’s Đa Minh, Đòng Đa Minh, so that’s, I think that Franciscan, probably, I think that Franciscan. It’s a sister school. I’m being Buddhist in a Catholic school, so there’s some challenges back. But the good thing is that when a kid, you have very good perseverance as a kid, or ignorance as a kid.

TVD: Do you have any favorite memories of your times spent at this school?

TT: Oh yeah, the friendships I have. I was in third grade or fourth grade; I got two close friends. I vaguely remember their faces. The one thing I memorized the most, probably in the evening. A bunch of us kids many, we were from seven to ten years old and we lived away from our parents. That’s pretty tough and it’s in the swamp, alright, so it’s basically in the swamp. One thing you do in boarding school, you pray a lot, right. Even after that, we managed in the evening—we managed to go to, by the pond. We kneeled and we prayed. Being raised Buddhist and going to a Catholic school, I was confused who I’m going to, who I was praying to. It was that, yes.

TVD: Do you have any favorite teachers or subjects in school?
TT: Yeah, I actually was very strong in literature, in Vietnamese. I was very strong in literature. One of reason I was sent to boarding school because I didn’t do well. I actually started out in third grade in a private school just across the house, just across the street from the house. I didn't do well there; there was no discipline. My father was busy. My mom was busy, so I was on my own. I didn’t do well. In Vietnam back then, I think even now I’m not sure what kind of grading or ranking system they have, but back then they give you rank. In the class of thirty kids, fifty kids, you would have a rank. If in a class of fifty, you rank twenty-fifth or so, meaning that you are in half, which you are mediocre. If you are rank thirty or below, that’s— you’re trouble. You likely stand in top ten or so. I was ranked probably in the very low quartile, and I was sent to boarding school. Right on the first month that they ranked, the rank come out every month, right on the first month I got right in the top five. My parents kind of pleased with that.

TVD: You mentioned that both of them were busy. So your mom with the business and then was your dad sent away for his work a lot? Did he travel?

TT: No, my dad has very good life. He worked for different department in the government, but I remember he mostly, when he was working for—so under the psychological warfare department, under Chíêu Hỏi. Chíêu Hỏi means that you advocate, you call in the Communist soldiers to return, or to turn to the South Vietnamese government.

TVD: So kind of like propaganda?

TT: Propaganda. So in my very young age, I remember he was working on that. He came back with banners and stuff like that. With the company’s car, with the government car, I remember he got speakers on it. But as I grew older, I remember he worked within Vũng Tàu city hall, he was working in city hall. Go in city hall actually, it’s much less stress for him. Vũng Tàu’s a nice little town, got little French feel to it. It’s kind of funny that Vietnamese didn’t like the French,
but after the French left, they all tried to be the French, right. So live on what they call the French nobler, like noble: nobler. So my father lived a very nice lifestyle. Would be: he goes work, came home for lunch, go back to work—actually came home for lunch, take little nap, go back to work. In the afternoon, he would go out and hang out with friends on the beach. We have kiosks along the front beach, bãi trước. He would take me there, summer the afternoon. He’s quite socializing, knew a lot of people, and towboat business people and government officials. I came along with him, with all the social event. One of the big events when we had our first modernized movie theater. That was nineteen-seventy—I think the end of 1973 we had. So that’s the modernized, that’s the one with air conditioned. We always had movie theaters in Vũng Tàu, but I think that was the first one we actually had really nice facilities and air-conditioning, that sort of thing. He would be invited to guest honor, and I would come along with him. I would come along with him with when we have the fairs, the agricultural fair. We would turn the Vũng Tàu stadium into a… a village where farmers come in and display, like a county fair, that sort of thing. So he would be invited to those events. He had a very, very nice life.

TVD: Would you describe your family then, back then in Vũng Tàu as a middle class, upper class?

TT: I would say we’re middle class. We’re definitely well-to-do. We lived a very practical life. We have, we bought—my mom again, my mom bought the land back in the early sixties, so we managed to buy a large lot. Think about in Vietnam, and you know, you like to build in the front street, or major, the road fair; so that’s where you have your businesses. We built up a nice home there, a nice house with the—small like a duplex, of both on the front would be for businesses, and in the back we have a large garden. We would have guava, măng cầu. That’s another thing that my father does also is gardening.
TVD: After the fifth grade, did you go back to public school, or did--?

TT: Yeah, I came back, I came back. Actually I came back to private school across the street. Good turn on my, kind of turn in my life. Once again, I came back; as soon as I get back, returned to the private school. I became uncontrollable again; uncontrollable, basically. I would go hang out with friends right after school, wouldn’t do homework until last minute, that sort of thing. In Vietnam, what it counts the most is the annual examination for every grade. If you flunk that, you’ll stay back the grade. It was considered disgrace, right. I always got pretty close to that. A turn in my life there. One day, my mom took me to, up a mountain, up in the hills; we would call hill here, but back then they called that mountains. Vũng Tàu, they would call núi lớn, but it’s like a hill that I live in now. (laughter) There’s a temple in there. I went in there and I liked it. I asked my mom I could stay overnight and she said, “Okay.” Next thing I know I stayed up there for the next one year, got my head shaved and I lived a life of a monk, a little monk there for a year. Until I got sick, my mom brought me back home.

TVD: How old were you?

TT: I was really young. I was in—sixth grade. (Dang laughs)

TVD: So you just decided that you wanted to try it out?

TT: I decided to stay. I asked my mom, “Can I stay overnight?” and she said, “Okay.” I stayed overnight and I liked it. (Dang laughs) So not sure why I liked it, now I kind of reflect it back, not sure why I liked it. I just did. I wouldn’t say that because it was serene, it was calm, it was all that. It was extremely discipline. I think I do well and discipline, very—structural environment. I think I do well where you look up you have all the figureheads and you have structures, you have disciplines and you look across you have peer, you have brothers and sisters. Something in boarding school, you stay with your classmates; they are your brothers and sisters. Same thing in
the temple, you stay in the temple. Between three or five of us, we are brothers in a sense. The other thing is that probably the adventure also. Always adventure, thirst in that sense. Staying up there in the mountain and doing, and rolling hills kind of thing, and we pitched our own water. We woke up very early in the morning. Five o’ clock; it’s tough. Every day was made—for me, was tough every day. When you’re a kid, you want to sleep. Wake up five o’ clock in one morning, pray and go down to the—going downhill, pitch water, and you carry up to the hill.

TVD: Were you homesick?

TT: You know, the funny thing is that I was homesick when I was in boarding school. I was never homesick when I was in a temple. I don't know why, I don’t know why.

TVD: So then you said you got sick?

TT: Yeah, so in the temple, you have one meal; that’s lunch. You eat only one meal. That’s what Buddhist monk’s—that’s their disciplinary kind of diet system. In the morning, they have very small breakfast. It’s a bowl of rice, nothing in there; just a bowl of rice. Somehow they fried it, so fried rice. You got hungry pretty quick. But lunch, especially for—I would call huynh, “bigger brother”, right; “older brother.” For the older monks, they in their fifteen, sixteen; they work in the field, so they got hungry real quick. They’d eat a lot at lunchtime. You can eat all you want at lunchtime. In the evening, the older monk, they would have a bowl of cháo, and the rest of us have just a little of food. We got hungry at night. Every day, I was hungry every night. It’s just the way, just the discipline there.

TVD: You were there for, you said a year?

TT: For a year, and then I got sick. I need more nutrition, obviously. I got pale, and all that. My mother went up there and got me home. I came home. When I came home, I couldn’t eat meat, I couldn’t eat fish. I was vegetarian until I was in the middle of ocean. It was like, years later.
When I was hungry, when I escaped Vietnam on a boat in 1980, I didn’t eat fish. I think I ate a little meat. But I didn’t eat fish and meat until I was in the middle of the—across the Pacific Ocean.

TVD: Wow, so that one-year in monastery turned you into a vegetarian?

TT: Yes. Yeah.

TVD: Wow. So, what did you do after that? Did you go back to school?

TT: Yeah, I went back to school, short after that. That’s when North Vietnam took over South; right, in 1975. Before that, my family was rather, very big family. So my family of six, my parents, my siblings: family of six. Because of the war back home in the village, so my two aunts on my father’s side, and my grand-aunt on my mother’s side, who I would call grandma, would come and live with us, including one of my cousin. Over the time, because of the war in the village, so—the thing is that during that time, if you about fourteen years old for man, for young man about fourteen, fifteen years old, the Communist would come in the villages and recruit them before they have a chance to get drafted by the South Vietnamese Government when they turn eighteen. So there’s a risk of that. They either wait until eighteen, you got drafted to go into the South Vietnamese military, or they get recruited to go to serve; to go to the communist, the “Viet Cong,” the VC from fourteen to eighteen. Many of them get sent over my house. My first cousin, second cousin, they would come over my house over the years. So many of them came over my house because like I said, we have a business in the front, and then we have sort of like a compound in the backyard, in the back. They came and because my family have business, they get trained on repairing motorbikes, so they work for my family. It was rather, pretty big family. At any given time, we probably have twenty people in the house. It’s amazing house, actually. The family always in order. Never have—there probably was a fight or two by my cousins and
my uncle. They’re sixteen, eighteen, but they got put in order right away. My father quite a figurehead person. He didn’t talk much, but everybody was scared of him. The fact that they actually, he’s the benefactor of whole family so there’s that.

TVD: Besides these kinds of indirect consequences like the cousins and the people that came to live with you, was your family impacted by the war? In any way that you can remember, did you lose any loved ones?

TT: Yes, certainly! In my direct family, my older brother was about the age of get drafted and then he went to college. He went to college in 1974; he was eighteen.

So he was a hippie. He got long curl hair—with all the colorful and glistened beadles and all that. So he was a hippie.

TVD: Were there lots of hippies around, then?

TT: Quite a few, quite a few, yes; quite a few hippies at the time. Even after 1975, I listened a lot of American music like Bee Gees, the Bee Gees from my brother’s collections. Yes, so and even it’s, you know; what did they call back then—quản ông loa, so very large—

TVD: You mean bell-bottoms?

TT: Yes, yes. (Dang laughs) They had that, so they were colorful, yes. He probably got involved in protest and stuff like that. We never knew, so in a sense, there was a risk of him get drafted to go to the war, but because he went to college, he passed the second tù tài hai. That’s the second examination. So I think you passed that, you go to college. You got exempted from get drafted, so that’s closest to my direct family on that.

TVD: Earlier when you said when he might be involved with protest and all those things, you mean anti-war protest?
TT: Probably antiwar. You know, he’s young. I speculate it because he was a hippie, so it could be that. Especially he went to the private college. So there’s a lot of movement at the time and they listened to Trịnh Công Sơn, nhạc Trịnh Công Sơn, “Trinh Cong Son’s music,” and all that, right. I don’t think it was very clear to them what anti-war was not. It’s just peace moment; to them it was peace movement.

TVD: Do you think among those of your generation, you know, those who grew up in the sixties and seventies, that they were pro- or anti-war; pro- or anti-American?

TT: I was still very young in the seventies. I don’t remember much about sixties. So when I stayed in the seventies, basically before 1975, I was a kid. We did have the South Vietnamese Government propaganda, anti-Communist, and my family particularly is anti-communist. I always was grew up in an anti-Communist mentality, so always that. Not hardcore or anything at all. Propaganda all around us. Ugly VC pictures are always in our heads; they among all kids. We definitely didn’t know anything about anti-war at all. At least my generations, born in the mid- sixties, I don’t think we have any kind of anti-war. That wasn’t a concept for us. Wasn’t much any concept for us at all. I would like to call my generation, to have a conversation with my friends. I like to call we are the children of the war, right. So we were kids during the war. When it started, we didn’t know. When it stopped, we didn’t have much—we didn’t have a closure on it. In a sense, we had no direction. We very confused, in that sense. So then on my father’s side—my mother, she came from central Vietnam. So didn’t have much connection with central Vietnam, so we didn’t know much about her family. But my father’s family, we do have my father’s first cousin. He died in the War, I remember that. He died in the war. He served in the South Vietnamese Government. He died in the war, and it was a very dramatic event for the family. Like I said, my father was—he lost his parents when he was very early. He grew up with
his cousins, so he was very close to them. My uncle, my father’s older brother, didn’t exactly die in the war, but died during the war. He was a cab driver and his cab was run over by a U.S. military truck. That was another tragic event I always remember. So that’s sort of during the war, that’s my memories in the war. Because we lived in Vũng Tàu, which is very—it’s a peninsula; it’s almost like an island with the bridges got cut off and which that happened in 1975. So we were very isolated, very insulated from the war in that sense. When I was growing up, I would hear the bomb in adjacent towns all the time, but never directly in Vũng Tàu, not until 1975 when the war came.

TVD: Okay, so before ’75, did you have any interactions with Americans?

TT: Quite a bit. Vũng Tàu is a designated G.I.s on our place, right. So we saw Americans, we saw quite a bit American military men. Most of time they go there to party, and they pretty much party in their own places, on the beaches and stuff like that. Once a while we go out there, we would see them. There’s a huge radar on the mountain top of Vũng Tàu. There two of them, and that were supposed to be the central command for the U.S. in Southeast Asia, so that’s right on Vũng Tàu. That signifies the war, and it signifies the American presence and everything. As a matter of fact, they took down the current government, they took down the current regime, they took down one radar, and keep the older radar as a tourist attraction. It’s huge. And you would see, you would see the two radars from miles of far away, from twenty miles far away. So that’s to us the presence of an American. The other thing is the American. I was growing up and American movie, even though I didn’t understand, most of it I didn’t understand English, but we were growing up with American TVs, so like the Lone Ranger, Hawaii Five-O, Mission Impossible—

TVD: And of course, the Beatles and Bee Gees and music right?
TT: Yes, and the music. But the re-runs, I am pretty sure we were watching re-runs; we were watching all the re-runs there. *Wild, Wild West*; so that was a big deal for us. That was big deal for my age group, but we kind of interpreted the story on our own. We didn’t understand their language; we just saw the emotion and it’s pretty easy, action stuff. One kill the other, the guy would--

TVD: --So there wasn’t any sub-titles, or dubbing or anything like that?

TT: No. This is for the American G.I.s! This is for the shows for American G.I. happen; this on free air, and we were able to tune in, right. We made our own interpretation of what was it like. *Bonanza! Bonanza!* Actually I recently saw that on Netflix, and I kind of vague memory, I saw that re-run before, that one episode before. We even gave them names, the actors.

TVD: Like Vietnamese names?

TT: We gave them Vietnamese names. (Dang laughs) Yes, we gave them Vietnamese names. So kids, right, so we gave them Vietnamese names. Yes, so we call them, yes, I forgot all the names. We would call them—I actually was growing up dressing like the cowboys, so naturally. Until now, I am a huge Western movie fan.

TVD: Do you know they’re doing the remake of *Lone Ranger*.

TT: Is that right? Okay.

TVD: It’s gonna be huge. It’s coming out soon.

TT: Yes, I actually, I’m still a big fan of Western. So one of thing I did when I graduate from UCI and got a job at *Edison*. My first vacation was going to Mid-West, go to all the backpacking through all the Western towns. (Dang laughs) Yes, I actually was that motivated by it.

TVD: We’ll get into that section in a bit, but I do want to ask you about 1975—

TT: Okay.
TVD: --You seem to cite this as a very, as a benchmark year—

TT: Sure.

TVD: --when things changed alot. So where were you around the time when the Communists were moving into the South?

TT: My father worked for the government. Words came out that we would have to take refuge somewhere. We have to, flee. It wasn’t very clear, it wasn’t very clear whether we would leave the country for good. It wasn't very clear, anything like that. You know all along, and I kind of go back to my psych, and I told my wife about this. We never thought we would have lost the South. Even me at, you know, ten to eleven years old at the time, we never thought because over the years I remember we would—the South, we would lose a town or so. We would recapture and we’ll have celebration. It’s always, that the case. So we would never thought we would lose the South. At that time, there was news in my father’s circle that we may have to flee. We have to, but it wasn’t very clear whether we would leave the country for good or we would come back; it wasn’t very clear. My father took us to a vacation home near the water, near the beach where the big ships would come in. I think we left our homes in town. We would go to the resort home about, I think, April twentieth, twenty-fourth; something like that. A week or ten days before the takeover: the fall of Saigon. So we were there; wasn’t much to do. Pretty much, the water is pretty close by, but we wouldn’t. My father didn’t let us to go and hang out in there. We stayed across from the South Vietnamese military base, just across the street from them; our resort. So it’s safe, sense of security. They came right on the April 30, 1974; that one exact date. Here comes off the bombs dropping on us, exactly where we stayed because we’re right next to the military base. So it wasn’t safe after all. We all got under the safe tunnel. I guess back then every house, even my house, has a safe tunnel, a hidden tunnel. We get down there, stay away
from the bombs. It was the first time, first experience in my life: the terror of war. You’re holding to dear life. It’s very close. Kids was crying. I was crying. Everybody’s crying. It was my oldest sister, myself, my younger brother, my cousins, and my parents. We were down the safe, and the neighbors. As soon the bombing stopped, my father got out of the tunnel, and he left us for a few hours. Later I found out he went back to the city hall. He would destroyed all the paperwork; he destroyed all the paper trails. That, in a sense, that saved him later on. We never had the chance to make it to the boats. We returned home about April or maybe May first, or something. When we came home, everybody thought we left already. When we came home, my relatives still there at home. We came back and then, “Oh, we thought you left,” but we never did. So that’s one. After that fear during the bomb, and then the tanks would roll into town; curiosity, right. In a sense, curiosity. I’ve seen a few Vietnamese, South Vietnamese soldiers running in the backyard. They would toss their guns over the fence to my house. We would bury them. We didn’t want to give any evidence or any indications we associated with war, or with the South Vietnamese Regime when the takeover. It’s a very eventful day. Well I guess by the time the war came to my town, it was already exhausted. The victory was already declared. I didn’t see any deaths on the streets, as you know, normally see on TV. Because Vũng Tàu was probably at the pocket in the South, so by the time the war got there, it’s already retired. Yes, it’s already retired.

TVD: So what happened to you and your family after that?

TT: My father, the next thing is that he would have to report to the local government office, the new government. I don’t recall all, why we have to do all this, but I remember have to take some paperwork for my family. It’s sort like a—I forgot what are permits for, but it’s sort of like living permit or residence permit or something like that. I forgot all the particulars. I somehow had to
do that for my—I don’t know why I walked over there for. One of the biggest change when they come is get—came in Vietnam, they actually broke the town and city to smaller units, much more manageable units. It was run by—I guess either the Communist enthusiasts or affiliates. You never, you know; those are just common people. Those are just the normally poor people that they live in the racket homes, and something like that, and sudden they rose to—with the post. We would have to report to them. I remember this one lady. We probably looked at her as a peasant family. She actually was the head of our town. When I say town, it’s smaller unit, so, it’s “khóm,” “khóm”. It’s probably the smallest unit in the—

TVD: Nó “tổ.”

TT: --“Tổ,” “tổ”? Nó—it’s greater than “tổ.” Này “khóm.” “Khóm.” She couldn’t sign her —

TVD: “Phường,” “phường” is—

TT: --smaller than “phường.” “Khóm” mà.

Another speaker: K-h-o-m?


TVD: So it’s, “tổ,” “khóm,” and “phường.”


TT: She couldn’t sign her name, so she “x” her name. So definitely was not educated. Even at a very young age, I kind of—I had that recognition already. So those are the changes that you see right away as a child.

TVD: So you have to report to bring identification paperwork?

TT: Identification paper—

TVD: Land holdings or property, I mean?
TT: --I forgot what it was. I don’t remember particularly. For some reason, I was a runner for my family. The reason I was doing that because my twenty large family, twenty people large family all sudden became reduced really quick. All my relatives, now their villages are free, right; liberated, right. So they all went back. The village is flattened, my father’s village is flattened because consider a war zones. The South Vietnamese government soldier would go in there, or actually, in my father’s village, would be under the supervision of Australian soldiers. That area, Australians, the Aussies. They would flatten the area, so no hideout. All my relatives pack up and left home; they all went back. My family immediately became five and six. My older brother was still up in Saigon in college, or got stuck there, or didn’t want to come home yet. Something like that.

TVD: How long was it until your father was told to report?

TT: I would say right the first week. He would report to my public school. At the time we went to public school; went to my public school, elementary school and junior. Elementary, yes, elementary and junior school. He would report there. He would stay there for a week or so. Then he came home. Two months later, a month later? Something like that, I remember the military—I wasn’t at home at the time, I probably was in school. The police came over and escorted him to, out the house. He went to re-education center. It happens to be in Vũng Tàu. So it’d be prisons. They took him to the prison for, and he stayed there for six months.

TVD: Was your family able to visit him?

TT: Yeah, I visited him once. Visitation very strict, extremely strict. I remember I visited him once. He recently, a few months ago he went to—he’s eighty-three years old now. For the last few years, he got back pain, and it got to be his—I guess the nerve kind of get down to his legs so he couldn’t walk straight. He couldn’t get his back straight. Finally he gave in. He wanted to
have back surgery. Pretty tough at that age. He survived twenty-two hours of surgery, a back surgery. They brought him in the first day for ten hours, and opened his back about this long: about eighteen inches long; twelve, eighteen inches long. They put instrumentation in there. Next day, they opened him up again, went in for decompression, rearranged the nerves and that sort of thing for the next twelve hours. The doctor knows my younger brother. He called my younger brother; he asked my younger brother, “What’s wrong with your dad? He got broken pieces in there, broken bones in his back.” We didn’t know. He never told us about it, so my brother talked to him. So they drag him at night, slamming on the door, and he broke pieces. But he never told us; extremely resilient. That’s how he survived twenty-two hours of surgery. Not strong but very resilient.

TVD: So it was during his six months, when he was imprisoned. You think he suffered the physical abuse?

TT: Definitely. Yes, so that’s one of the examples. You know, a lot of them when they come home, they wouldn’t tell you. A lot of things happened to them alone, and to them alone. They wouldn’t tell you a lot is—the humility, the dignity. It’s just a lot in there. They wouldn’t go home and share that with the family. My father definitely went through that, even though six months. Many of his peers get the same career path with him in the South Vietnamese Government. Went on and got transported to other prison camps in the jungle. Some of them even got transported to all the way to the North for seven years or so. Many of them, when they returned, they didn’t live well either. Even when they came over here, they don’t live well here. One of reasons my father didn’t go all through all that probably because of luck. My father kind of said maybe some of the paperwork that he burned, he shredded; he burned, naturally, at the time, it may saved him. Or maybe that because my father’s village. My father lived in a village
and that village had a very strong tie to VCs for—even during French revolution time. Many of my father’s second cousins joined the VCs even during the wartime. They, when the war ended, they came out and be very high-ranking officers. That might be contributed part to that. Just one event that he was in the camp; he was in the education camp, in the prison. One of the heads of the town came visit the camp, and that was his second cousin. He came over and he talked my father. “How are you doing? Labor well, so do your work well and you will get out of here.” Just that one personal conversation in the crowd that actually helped my dad, maybe a turning point my dad in how they treat, how the guards, how the prison guard would treat him, also.

TVD: When did he get released?

TT: He got released six months later. He got restriction not to leave town for a year. He lost his citizenship. I’m not sure you know about that. I’m not sure that other in the U.S. talk about that. After you come out from the camp, you actually lose your Vietnamese citizenship. That’s pretty oxymoronic. I thought about it, right. Thought something oxymoronic, something funny about that. I forgot how long can you reclaim it, or actually it’s not reclaim. You’re not reclaiming. You’ve been re-given, you’ve been re-given. So he stayed in town for a year; no traveling.

TVD: You mentioned earlier that he ended up being a farmer?

TT: Yes. Yes.

TVD: Did your whole family move with him?

TT: I want to give a lot of courage to my mom because my mom is a very strong woman. She knows for sure that we would never leave the city. We would never go to village. We never go to city. We never go to the new economic zone, and all. We got to establish and we got to stay in the city. We have to stay low key, so like I said. My family had the motorbike parts. We had a lot of leftover parts when the war ended. Instead of carrying the business, we actually got everything
hidden. My family buried big holes in the backyard. We would plastic wrap, wrap all the parts. So including spark plugs, tires; all the stuff we would be bury in the ground. We would have all hidden. Then we would turn—my mom would turn my house into a production. The communists, the new regime, their propaganda is to be productive. You have to be, make living on your honest labor. No trades and stuff like that. So we stay away from trade. We would go back to the basic living. We come up with our own provisions. This has to do with her, the village that she came from; the fishing village. She knows how to make “nuoc mâm.” My backyard became a fish sauce factory. Yeah, so we make nuoc mâm from anchovies. We never knew my mom had that trait. Business- minded, she’s would turn that into, our backyard into that. We bought a farm, a big land, at least five acres of land in Vũng Tàu. The farm that my family bought, we bought a big land. It’s probably about at least five acres of land in Vũng Tàu. Word has that the farm that my parents bought—when we left, we never claimed it, right. We never go back and reclaim it. It turned to Resort Nam Vũng Tàu. It’s a nice resort right now, they’ve turned into a nice resort. We have our land there. We grow produces and stuff like that there. My father, because we have, he has land in the village, he would go there and work there. We would join him. I joined him the weekend or in the summer. I’d go to work with him the summer. I worked in farms. I would say about four years or so, about 1976. I would work in a farm. We do have five acres of land or so in Vũng Tàu. After school, I’d go there and work. During the summer, I would go work at my father in the rice farm in my father’s village.

TVD: You were able to still continue to go to school?

TT: Yes, I was able to go to school. I think about when I was in seventh grade or so, many of my friends and I, we become rebellious. It just happened. We didn’t rebel for a cause. At certain ages, or you’re a teenager, you turn rebellious. Just like kids over here, right. But because most
of our fathers being boys and out fathers got impacted by the wars. Like in case my father, even my though he didn’t get really punished by, as much as others. He didn’t get sent North for re-education camp, but you can see right away that his spirit’s gone right after the six months of re-education. His spirit is gone. He wasn’t a man of stature or respect anymore. He works in a farm, he comes home. He has a few friends he hang out with; very small circle. He’s not the man of society anymore. He wouldn’t go to the county fair as a guest of honor. He wouldn’t go the movie theather as a guest honor anymore, so you see that. My friends’ fathers same. Some of them were military in high-ranking officers. They got to send to camp. A group of us, maybe ten of us, we did two thing. We did three things. We all farm after school. We all have work after school. We had to farm, or we actually fish in Vũng Tàu. We all played soccer, and we rebelled. Rebelled against the—I wouldn’t say; the communist is just too big for kids of thirteen years old, but rebelled against the school officials. So basically school. We viewed our principals, vice-principal as—because they all from the North. We have really antagonistic—we have very harsh views about them.

TVD: What sort of things would you do?

TT: In local government, whatever we do. In school, whatever they don’t want us to do, we would do. One of things that about 1976, that’s one thing; 1976, 1977, I forgot. Probably 1976, that’s when they mandated all the kids to be in the youth organization, Thiếu Nhi. We all have to wear the red scarf, right. We managed, never joined. Can you believe that, for four years. For five years I went to school under the communist school, I never managed to join the troop, or the association, or organization, whatever it is. My wife would tell me that she was growing up in Saigon; she’s quite few year younger than I am. She was growing up in Saigon in the late, early seventies,eighties, or late seventies. She said that would be impossible. For some reasons, we
managed to do that. So the ten or twelve of us, we managed not to join the youth association, organization. We never wear a red scarf; that’s a rebellious things. They would have recycling programs. Every kid need to bring in recycled paper and whatever for school. The fee… may be for supporting the troops over in Cambodia or whatever. So that was the seventies, right. Nineteen seventy-seven was when Vietnam got involved in Cambodia occupation. We wouldn’t bring anything. I wouldn’t bring anything and my friends wouldn’t bring anything. When our teacher pushed for it, we would break into the school storage. We would steal the recycle paper from other kids and we would give them to the teacher. They ban fireworks. When it comes to Tết, right, close to Tết, we chip money in and we bought firecrackers. We hang on the flagpole, and we lit them up. That’s things kids would do, rebel. We got kicked out. We would skip classes. We would made wisecracks, so smartass comments during the, political, giò chinh trị, “political hour.” Probably because we were kids, and because—I like to say because we were kind of new. The regime was kind of new, and the teachers, I got to say, I guess they pretty lenient on us. Many, most of the teachers are still our old teachers. We got angry at them. These are the teachers, these are the teachers. They always been in the school. They from the South. We were angry at them, and they were angry at us because we made their jobs harder. We would tag. We knew how to tag. It’s not only the Mexican can tag, right? This is back in the city, in the mid, late seventies. We know how to tag. We tag wisecracks, anticommunist kind of things on, in the school. I didn’t tell my father until later year when I came over here. He said, “Shame on you, do something like that. You got yourself in trouble. You got your family in trouble.” So we got chalks, color chalks. We would tag in school.

TVD: No paint, huh? No spray-paint. (laughs)

TT: There wasn’t enough money to buy paint.
TVD: It wasn’t kind of in a gang, or--?

TT: Definitely it was a gang. (Dang laughs) It really was a gang. It’s not a territorial kind of gang. It’s not drugs, it’s not that. It is definitely was a gang, just a gang of twelve of us; the camaraderie. We got kicked out from one class, one school. So when you get to sixth grade in Vietnam, you have to decide whether you going to go. You going take French or English, right. So determined which class you would go to. You would go either the P for French, Pháp Văn, or A for Anh Văn, English. My friends and I, we were in English classes, but that teacher didn’t want us, so we get kicked out. We would go to, we would attend, we would belong to the lớp 8P. It’s a French class and then during the English hours, we packed up, we go back to the old class for the English lesson. We were that unruly and rebellious in that sense. It wasn’t like any gang fight or anything like that. We got fight, to fight and stuff like that, but not in the sense of fighting.

TVD: At what age did you leave Vietnam?

TT: I left when I was fourteen, fifteen.

TVD: During that time after 1975 when so many were leaving the country, and I’m sure you know, you had news about it and saw it all around you. Did your family make plans to go?

TT: Yeah.

TVD: Did they try?

TT: My family making plans. My family is very conservative. It has to do with the fact because we are conservative people. The other fact is probably because we have a lot to lose. We managed to, we managed to hold our wealth. We lost the businesses, but we happened to keep most of the wealth we had, right. Like I was telling you that we got our motorbike parts hidden and actually some years later, we dug them up. Some of them becomes priceless. Most of them
got rotten because Vũng Tàu, the salty water. Like tires, anything that not wrapped well, it got corroded. But the stuff we were able to save like spark plugs, they just priceless. Because they then became so isolated, and they have cars running on charcoal. There’s no replacement, there’s not enough gasoline. A lot of makeshift tires; they make their own tires for cars. We managed to keep some those. Like I said, my family very conservative because we have a lot to lose. I know my parents making plans. My father attempted once before we in 1980 but there was; it was a distant plan. We part of being rebellious. Even when I was about twelve or thirteen, I never saw myself remain in Vietnam. I always know that I would leave Vietnam. I knew I have no future remain in Vietnam. It was a strong determination on my part, and many of my other friends at the time. We, when we got together, that’s all we was talking about. When we go home, we don’t go like “Dad, Mom, when we going to leave?” We don’t do that because you know, the sensitivity. We got to be really careful because of the local police force, so you’ve got to be real careful with that. But among ourself, among the kids, we talked about it and we knew. I knew all along I would leave Vietnam. One way the other, we would make plans to leave.

TVD: How was it that you eventually did leave?

TT: So my, my--who I call my Uncle; he’s my father’s lifelong friend. He now lives in Wichita, Kansas; lifelong friend. He’s a very established businessman. Right before 1975, before 1975, he had many businesses, but right before 1975, he bought big parcel of land near the waters, and he would turn into a ship-building business. He never took off before 1975. He took off after 1975, and he was very, very—he made a killion in it. He, because of the Chinese ethnic--what you call that-- the unofficial. So Vietnam would allow them to leave with a price. He would build ships for them to leave, and it would be an official government-sponsored program. He made a killion on that, and he make plan to leave.
TVD: That was in ’78, ’77? ’78?

TT: Nineteen seventy-eight, yes. The business was so lucrative that actually, government came in and arrested him and took over his business for about six months? Then they released him. They gave him the ship-building business back. Until this day, he’s eighty-three years old, born same day, same year with my father. He still going back to Vietnam and trying to. He has spent over a hundred of thousand dollars. He’s actually in Vietnam right now, trying to get his shipping company back. It’s a distant dream, but he been doing it for last ten years, over ten years. He and my father—I won’t, won’t say he and my father. It be him planning the escape because he has the pier. He does have the pier and all, everything he built the pier and everything there; sort of like a private landing place. He built his own ship. The boat he built was for ocean waters, so instead of nails, would be all nut and bolt. This would be all galvanized stainless steel, nut and bolt. He made a plan and so because my father his best friend, he let my family to come along. It was pretty much his family, my family and some of his associates. We left Vietnam on April twenty-third or twenty-fourth. It happened Vietnam to—Vietnam was about to celebrate a, big three-day holiday; so April thirtieth, May fifth, and what’s the other day? Whatever day. Right on--I like to think it was a Saturday because in the morning we left right now, in the daytime, in daylight. Most of the escape would be doing at night, right. In the dark of night, but we escape in the morning because he has built that ship, and he has official business and all that so that ship kind of going in and out the port all the time. We pretended as if we were going to leave for the fishing trip.

TVD: So did you leave out of Vũng Tàu--

TT: Out Vũng Tàu, yes.
TVD: --and who was on that trip with you?

TT: My father, my mother, myself and my younger brother. He’s four years younger; and my Uncle’s family and some of his past associates; so total of thirty-six people.

TVD: So your older siblings didn’t go?

TT: No. My older brother was on his own. He was talking about rebel. He definitely was a rebel. My older sister was married. Her husband is idealist. He wouldn’t want to leave Vietnam. He’s not a communist but he’s an idealist. His oldest sister married an American G.I. She’s been in the States since the early sixties, mid-sixties. He’s an educated man but he’s kind of idealist. He wouldn’t leave Vietnam, so my sister would stay with him. They just have a newborn, so it was— and she was with us at the time. My brother at the time was a school principal. My older brother he, he was on his own. He got a girlfriend somewhere, shacking up with his girlfriend. Sort of like being disowned by my father, disowned by the family. Yes, he was a hippie, he was on his own. He’s definitely a Renaissance man at the time.

TVD: In that group of thirty-six and then this well-built boat or ship, where did you head to? Did you have any sense, yourself being a teenager at a time, you have any sense of where you were heading?

TT: Yes, there were-- I actually was very aware of things. I read a lot even though during the last three years or so before I left Vietnam, I didn’t really focus in school, being a rebel. But I actually read a lot, whatever materials I had at the time. I actually have some idea where we were leaving. The captain of the ship, being my uncle’s son-in-law, he was the in navy in the South Vietnamese Government. He was going to take us to Singapore. He said he was going to take us to Singapore. Everybody wanted to go Singapore at the time. We would, from Vũng Tàu, geographically, we would—if we kind of keep, if we go straight south, depends if there’s a wind.
We could get blown over to the Gulf of Siam, Thailand. We would fall into the hand of the Thai pirates. One thing that we know that we didn’t want to do. We headed straight out from Vũng Tàu, you going straight out. You in the Pacific Ocean, you’re in the open sea. It’s supposed to go down, go straight down the coast, going straight. We hit straight out and then out there, we would make due south, Southwest, Southwest. Never thought we would go into Indonesia just because I think lack of communication and information, but I looked over the course of the map over the later years, and I know where we’re heading. If we keep going straight, we would go into, like, the Philippines, if we would get there. Wouldn’t, yes, wouldn’t go Philippines. Definitely, we would go to Indonesia or Malaysia, or maybe Singapore if we—yeah, we wouldn’t be able to put Singapore there. The course we took, yeah.

TVD: It was 1980?

TT: Nineteen eighty.

TVD: You ended up in Galang?

TT: We ended up in an island called Kuku: K-u-k-u, right. April 30, 1975. Make it five years.

TVD: Nineteen eighty. April 30, 1980?

TT: Yes; four, five years. So we got into Kuku from—afar, I saw the South Vietnamese flag: the three stripes flag. Even at my age though, it was, in a way it’s sort of like seeing a old, a lost, old friend; long-lost friend. At that time, they would close the—we were lucky. People would use a transitional camp, so we would be remaining in Kuku for about at least six months or a year before they actually get transferred over to Galang. We were very lucky. We were there at the time they close the camp down at Kuku; they would transfer everybody to Galang. So we stayed in Kuku, I think a day or two days, and then we get transported by big ship over to Galang. Yeah, maybe I saw that flag at Galang. Kuku was probably not that organized. The camp; I was really
elated! Extremely elated. When I came to Galang and I saw it’s a camp, there’s a flag; familiar sight. South Vietnamese flag, and I see Vietnamese people. Some reason in my mind, I kind all that with the old South, with the old South Vietnamese Regime. I was saying I would break my life into five periods of time, the first being my memories, my years before 1975. The five years under communist regime, actually shaped me a lot, who I am, even though I always try to forget that time. The six months in the camp, I truly sort of like a transformation. A lot of preparation, a lot of transformation in the six months I stay in the camp. It has to do with age I was in. Freedom, freedom to me was the South Vietnamese flag; the very visible, visual freedom. Site of freedom for me was the South Vietnamese flag. Coke cans, Coca-Cola—hadn’t seen Coca-Cola for the long time. In Vũng Tàu, because where the G.I., American G.I.s at.; so we did have some Cokes here and there, so we love Coke. I saw Coca-Cola; we would call "Coca-Cola." We wouldn’t call it "Coke." Coca-Cola. Dried dates! Amazing for the longest time. I haven’t had a dried date. I saw that in refugee camp and also very, kind of reminded me of the childhood before 1975.

TVD: What was your daily life like in the camp?

TT: When I first came the camp, that’s when I start having my growth spurt. I got to be taller, and more physical and all that, so I play soccer. I hit off with some old friends back home, couple of them, so go back and play soccer. You know, so hot in the camp, Indonesia, right in the middle of Pacific Ocean, right under the equator. It’s hot. We would play no time. We came home and she get really dark and hungry and exhausted, look really beat up, and terrible. My mom shut me down and said, “We didn’t cross an ocean. We didn’t sacrifice all we had to bring you here just to play soccer with your friends.” My mom did say that, so okay. I called those months in my life as transformation in a sense that—so well along the way at fourteen, fifteen
years old, I was thinking so all the time I was a rebel, I was not enjoying living in the new regime in Vietnam. I always wanted to come over, come out, leave Vietnam and go to America. When we say we leave Vietnam, we automatically go to America. We never have an idea, the refugee camp, anything like that, right. I got to make good of that thought, that ideal that I had. I went to school and start to register for classes, for English classes. I start taking English classes. I picked up English rather, pretty, pretty well; pretty quick. Didn’t have all the textbooks and stuff like that. There was English for, English 900 series, so six of, six books of them. The way it worked was that whoever was there before would pass onto the next person, so the book got passed on. Eventually, you would collect the whole series of six books. Then when you about to leave the camp, you pass on somebody else that you befriended with; so your friends. Six months I would, I was in the camp, I managed to go through all six books, so that was quite an achievement. The other thing is that I want to go back and study math and chemistry. That’s when I found out I actually didn’t have a foundation. The three, four years, the three years I was rebelling in Vietnam, I actually lost all that. I found out that others, basically, other my age group also had the same kind of problem. Yeah, we were illiterate in that sense. We were not good in anything at all because the years we spent with the new regime. At the time, they started a ninth grade, just a ninth grade. Just arbitrary they start a ninth grade. There’s no eighth grade, there’s no tenth grade; I think they start a ninth grade. Happened to be, I think, twenty-five people, boys and girls, registered for the class. Most of them dropped out. Either they got resettled, they got called, their names got call in to resettle, or to leave for Canada or to third country. It was eight of us remain in the class for the whole time, so I stayed with eight of them. I think it was five guys and three girls, so we kind of stayed together. We didn’t have any books, so like chemistry, the periodical table. We didn’t have any materials on that, so we actually drew our own
periodical table, and whoever remember the elements and all that, we kind of chip in. We never got that finished. The teachers come in, whoever teachers come in, they would teach you on the topic. Let’s say we have a math teacher and he was teaching Geometry in Vietnam. He would come in and teach us Geometry. It could last about a month before his name got called to resettle, and he would leave and we would have next teacher who come in who would teach Calculus. We would learn Calculus. We were lack of materials, of writing pads. We were passed out by “Save the Children,” okay, that was, “Save the Children.” Every one of us has thin writing pad. I remember we all, not just only me, but we would turn one page into three sections, and we would write really fine, small prints so we can get more text in a book. That’s only writing pad that we, each one of us have until the next, who, whenever the next donation would be. I learn different topics, whatever there was. I found that I was lack of fundamentals from math to science; it a transforming year for me. Then as you growing both physically and mentally, a lot of observation, a lot of things you observe in the camp that I think that helped me, shape me over the years.

TVD: Such as, what kinds of things did you see?

TT: The humility. You would see how people treat each other when everything is scarce. Everything is so scarce from water to food. Survival; people harsher on each other. You will see, you will see young ladies. I was fourteen, fifteen. I see the young ladies older than me; they probably were eighteen, twenty. They would date with the Indonesian police, spent the night over the camp, over their camp, sleeping with them. One of the assumption we all made. Then they would get nicer things, right; make us think about things. Not sure what came out of it; make us thinks about things. One time I went to the camp hospital. Two Indonesian men, probably in the police force, they were playing badminton. One Vietnamese man, for some
reason, I don’t know why, he crossed their court. He could walk around. I would walk around, but he would cross the court. One of Indonesian men reach out and got a racket and hit the man’s head, the Vietnamese head, right. He just—and the Vietnamese man just sheepishly smile and walk away. I was standing there and I was mad. I say well, at least turn around and gave the guy, punch a guy or something like that. Something like that; just a lot of things as a growing young man, you have to observe a lot of that. When we made to Indonesia, I meant Singapore; we came over Singapore. I think we stayed there for three, four days before we flew over to America. The camp there is a closed camp, as opposed to an island camp. In the camp, there were Singaporean business entrepreneurs, and they would sell cigarettes and stuff like that to Vietnamese refugees. On the jar, one of the jars, they would have handwritten something like, “Be careful with Vietnamese. They steal money. They are thieves,” or something like that. I was back, walking back and forth and I was, Am I going to go and tell them to take their sign off? Am I going to go to tell them take their sign off? I keep going back and forth on that. I decided to walk away. I didn’t say anything. I always feel something about that, right.

TVD: Discrimination against--

TT: Yeah. Yeah. There great example is like one of the teachers that came that taught us in class. He came from Thailand camp. He was transitioning from Thailand camp. He lost his wife and children. Some of his children he still had; a boy and a girl with him. All the things that he went through, still managed to come and teach us math. He really there, and a man with respect. It’s just amazing, what he went through. That’s kind of thing you learn about: human survival and the spirit; perseverance that we have in us Vietnamese. At same time you see people that—there are no ranks. They have no ranks, no official titles in the camp. They just affiliate themselves with the Indonesian. In a sense, the camp guards; camp guard, prison guards; whatever you want
to call them. They got extra things and they would boss all the refugees around. They would act as if they’re somebody with the position when they are not. You see those kind of things. As a young person, I always have an urge to say something, but of course, I don't think I managed to say anything at all. That’s something I kind of lived with, also.

TVD: You were there for six months? Was your family sponsored?

TT: My uncle sponsored us. My uncle; my mother’s side. He came here in 1975. His wife came here 1968, and they sponsored us over.

TVD: Your whole family? Your group of four people?—

TT: Four. Mhm.

TVD: —And where did they sponsor you to?

TT: They were living in Gardena at the time. We landed in Gardena.

TVD: When you found out that where you were going, that you were going to America, how did you feel?

TT: It’s almost a default. Some reason, we made it more like an assumption than anything else, but some reason, we know that we would be coming to America. We almost took it for granted. Not until later on we found out that not everybody get to apply. And because of my father’s affiliation with the South Vietnamese government, they granted us some status. I forgot what it’s called. It’s called C3, whatever; we all have certain class of certification. That kind of grant us that status. It was great; coming to America, it was great. I remember I would go to the refugee camp library, and they would have Sears catalogue. I would stake out what I was going to buy when I came over the States. I would get myself a Ping-Pong table. I saw the size of the refrigerators, and I want to get that myself, that refrigerator. I looked at, yeah, all the catalogues they have and I get one of each.
TVD: So when you actually did arrive—

TT: Yes.

TVD: --what was your first impression of what you saw when you got to the U.S.?

TT: My uncle’s military man all his life. He’s very frugal all along, right; nothing exciting to him. I remember when we came out, we all had hope. We all have this grand hope about coming to America, and he killed it. (Dang laughs) He’s definitely anti-climactic. He came out; we saw him and his wife. She was pregnant. My family actually pretty expressive in a sense that we pretty touchy-feel, in a sense. We actually hug and stuff like that. I remember my kid brother came and gave him a hug. He was kid. He came over and gave him a hug, and he goes like, “Who are you?” Literally, “Mày là ai?” (Dang laughs)Yeah. “Mày là ai?” and “Oh!” Yes (both laugh). So we got a little …Coming out from the LAX airport, my observations—it’s kind of, it’s actually very different. America is very different from the visual facts of what you think it would be. All along, we probably, because most movies show in Hollywood; mostly probably New York, but you always see Manhattan on. Superman; I actually watched Superman with Christopher Reeves when I was in the camp, so you always think of Chicago, downtown Chicago, and New York with high-rises and stuff like that. We came out and it’s kind of all different; kind of different. He lived an apartment at the time, small apartment. He got one bedroom apartment. The four of us, my family, we slept on the floor in the living room. But that’s what it was. It was all good, I mean that wasn’t—it just, you know we all shared that. We came to America, it seemed to be—I think most refugees who came America, we very depressing. It’s because our expectation, our high expectation of not knowing what it is.

TVD: Yes.
TT: But come to realize of it, you’re just; you’re just penniless in a sense. We probably had—we actually, my family when we came over. When we got out of Vietnam, my mom left with the safe guard, most of the wealth we had, so that’s gold, right, in case we got caught. Like I said, my family, we very conserative; we plan for the worst. It probably passed on to us. My wife has problem with me still because I plan for the worst; so conservative, in that sense. I think it’s from my family, roots of my family. She would save our wealth, gold. We brought what was considered enough for us. Actually, my family went on a shopping free in Singapore so we all got new jeans. They actually have new Levis. We all got Seiko watch. Even my kid brother got a watch.

TVD: So when you came to the U.S, you were actually dressed pretty well.

TT: Dressed pretty well, yes; dressed pretty well. The whole time we wandered in the camp, my family extremely adaptable. We were in the camp. I don’t think we—I think whatever it was just handouts we got, clothing, everything hand out. I think my mom bought some old clothing from people would leave for me. But when we camp in Singapore, we went on a shopping spree. We came over; we looked like we were decked out. At the time, I’m not sure you know, but Singapore tax-free that the time, duty-free. Most people, actually, that have some money, would- -gold was expensive. It was very good price for gold at time: $800.00 for a tale, Môt lượng vàng. We came with a sharp boom-box. That was a thing to do at a time. If you have money, you buy a boom-box, a huge boom-box.

TVD: To do what with?--

TT: Properties. That’s your possession. Boom-box, right? In Vietnam, boom-box, at the time, that’s your possession, that’s your property, that is your wealth; whatever it is. You can afford to buy it, and it wasn’t cheap either.
TVD: Yeah. So it was kind of the status symbol.

TT: Everybody who have money would want to buy a cassette player. A nice cassette player as a--

TVD: I guess it’s kind of like the iPad of the time.

TT:-- Yeah, it’s probably like that. But it’s not for kid, it’s for the family, kind of thing. We would walk off the airport. (Dang laughs)

TVD: In your Levis carrying your boom-box!

TT: Exactly! Later on I found out from my aunt, my uncle’s wife: she did have a little problem with that. (Dang laughs) We were supposed to be refugees. They were newlywed, in a sense. It’s big sacrifice on her part. They were newlywed, she’s pregnant. She didn’t work at the time. He got a job with Northrop. In that part, she sacrificed to bring us over, and we walked off the airport with jeans and boom-box, and Seiko watch.

TVD: You didn’t play the part of the refugee very well.

TT: No, yeah. We didn’t do that. We have gifts for them. Each one of them got a Seiko watch, got a Seiko5 watch. (Dang laughs) That was our wealth, right. Whatever we had, whatever we brought, we spent quite bit on Singapore shopping spree.

TVD: How did your family rebuild your life over here? Did you have any assistance from the government?

TT: We found out later on that we actually needed the money that we spent on Levis jeans and boom-box. It was probably good $400.00, $500.00 dollars at the time; they could have paid more than a month of rent. We really struggled the first few months here. We stayed with our uncle for a couple weeks, and he would find us an apartment. It was only in the three-hundreds at the time: two bedrooms. First thing was that we would seek government help. In that time, there was
transition from Democrats to Republican with Ronald Reagan, so there were cuts; they were starting cuts right there. That was tough. We applied; we didn’t get help. We was struggling on the few months. My father was looking for a job. He did get a job working in the factory making tennis gloves. He was doing it for a while, and when they found out he lost his finger during the war. He lost a thumb, a right hand thumb, and I never knew about that. I knew how difficult for him to go through that until recently, when he was; he made a back surgery. That’s when he had to learn to use his hands again. I came to learn how hard for him to learn to manage, to use chopsticks and pen. How you hold, you know, chopsticks and pen with-- amazing that all these years, for almost fifty years, I actually never learn how he done that. They found out he’s handicapped, and they fire him. He struggled to find jobs. My mother’s tailor again. She works in a tiệm may, “tailor shop.” That was a big thing for Vietnamese at the time. She babysitted. Not until 1982 or something, a second year or so, we kind of—so in between the first couple years, we got some government help. System program, it got cuts, and we applied and then we were on our own. It was some struggling at first, a year, year and a half. Not later on we have more consistent government help. It’s amazing that they help at the time, maybe $600.00, $800.00 a month. I forget what it was for a family of four? We thought we were all good. We were set. We make ends meet. We live very within our means. It’s probably because of our conservative values. I would get summer job. I worked on summer jobs in my ninth grade. I came over and I started ninth grade. In my ninth grade, I worked in summer school. I saved every dollar I made in the summer; never spent a dollar of it, not even for lunch, not even for anything at all. It all goes into the family. My brother, he was ten. He ’s a newspaper delivery boy. He save every quarter he made and gave it to mom. We were all together.

TVD: Was it hard for you to start high school in the U.S.?
TT: Yes, sure. Like I said, I thought I made good progress in learning English when I was six months, spending six months in the camp. That’s all I was doing. I came over and realized that I couldn’t speak, I couldn’t speak very well. I couldn’t listen very well. The listening and understanding part was very difficult. In the school I went to, there wasn’t that many Vietnamese. The ones that been there before, he came over 1977 or 1975. They were much more fluent in English. I felt certain pressures, certain peer pressure on that. Because of my lack of fundamentals, I didn’t do well on the Math placement test either. I was put in a very, in an arithmetic class. I thought it was kind of a disgrace of my part. I didn’t score high in math class, something that I actually spent my six months learning, but because I didn’t have a good grasp on the fundamentals. I get adapt into the school environment, so a little bit tough. During the P.E. hours, didn’t have anybody to talk to; I kind of stand on my own. Got into problem. I got into trouble because there was a white kid. He’s sort of like the bully in the class. He’s not big kid anymore or anything at all. He just been a brat. Once time he would walk around with an underwear, and he would put that over people’s head. He would go and, sort of kind of bully people; kind of go and put it from one kid to the other, and they would wake him up, that sort of thing. He was walking around and I was kind of standing by myself. I was thinking, He’s not going to come over here. He’s not going to come over here, alright. He’s not going to come over here and he did! He came over and he was trying to put that underwear over my head. I didn’t know how to react with except I kicked him in the belly and punched him right in the face. He didn’t expect that! He didn’t expect I would go ballistic on him. That’s when I realized, Oh, I’m in trouble. He didn’t fight back either! He was real, total surprised. I run and I called the teacher out without explaining. (laughs) He probably didn’t have a full idea of what I was doing. I actually was kicking and punching the guy. The teacher came out--so I guess he was jumping on
the other kid. He was defending me. I came out of it good. The other kid later came and talked to me. You know, Bruce Lee, and that sort of thing. So Bruce Lee was big at that time, yes. Karate and stuff like that. They also put me in the voice class; so singing, learn how to sing. Here, I was struggling with speaking English, and I was put in a voice class. That one thing I never got. At the time, I was about fifteen years old. For fifteen years, I actually had speech problem in Vietnamese. Even in any languages, I have speech problem. There were Vietnamese words that I couldn’t pronounce, like “T.” I couldn’t pronounce my name. I couldn’t pronounce my name, “Thuận,” before. For the longest time, I always try to avoid that in my years in Vietnam. I avoid to say, use the word “T.” If I say “T,” I would make it really subtle so people wouldn’t know that I actually couldn’t pronounce it. Even now I still have problem with certain syllables in Vietnamese like “Â”, “Â”; I wouldn’t say it right. Same thing with, probably with English in a long E, short E and long I, short I. Probably have problem with the speech problem. I would be stutter when I get nervous. That voice class helped me to come through, and I was able to pronounce similar words that I couldn’t pronounce before. It worked miraculously for me.

TVD: Did you learn how to sing though?

TT: I’m sorry?

TVD: Did you learn to sing?

TT: Yeah, a little bit. (Dang laughs) Yes, so I would be in the choir class to do “We Three Kings.” Yes, few class for Christmas. I stayed with that class one semester and I opted out. I remember the teacher. I never knew how it happened until this day. I still never figured out how did it happen. We were supposed to go up the stage and do Christmas songs, right. Somehow the school figured out that myself and another Cambodian kid, we were refugees and our English wasn’t that good. This is the first semester for me in that school. They would take us to CNR
clothier for shopping; so a complete suit and shoes, dress shoes. A tie, and a bow ties and all of that; and then we got to keep them. Until this day, I never knew who did all that because the folks who took us to CNR clothier, they were not from school. They somehow they know the Cambodian guy. They from his church. They from his church, and they came over and took me along. Until this day, I never figure out how that generosity came out, I mean came about. Yeah.

TVD: I know that after high school, you went to UCI?

TT: That's correct, yes.

TVD: Was that your only choice? Did you apply to other schools?

TT: Yes, I applied for USC, UCLA, and CalPoly Pomona. UCLA my number one choice. I got rejected by UCLA. That was the first year they actually do the racial; that’s the one they use the, what you call the—

TVD: Affirmative action?

TT: --Yes. I was impacted. I was that impact year; or maybe the year before me. There was maybe 1983, there was a first year in 1984. I get letter a year and a half later? If I appeal I would have got accepted, something like that. At that time, I was about a year and a half and two years in Irvine already. UCLA was my primary choice because I was living in L.A. area.

TVD: What year was it that you entered UC Irvine?

TT: Nineteen eighty-four.

TVD: Did you have an idea of what you wanted to study?

TT: Certainly. At that time, my default: Engineering.

TVD: Why by default?

TT: The upperclassmen, right; we’re awfully focused on math, whether you’re good in math or not. For the longest time in our community, at least for my age group and those before, even
those after, whether you’re naturally gifted in math or not, math is a focus. I finished high school math when I was in tenth grade. I told you that when I came in ninth grade, I started out in the lower arithmetic class. In a year and a half, I took tests and challenging tests, and I finished all high school math. In junior and senior year, I took college math, Calculus math in El Camino College. I would finish college math by the time I got done with high school. Whether I’m naturally gifted with math or not, I doubt it. I don’t think I am because I kind of focused in math and our delinquency in English. Engineering probably was a booming thing at the time, also. By just looking up the upperclassmen, those that went before us, we thought Engineering was kind of natural choice for us. If there was any decision to make at all, it was either Aerospace Engineering because Aerospace actually was pretty big during the Ronald Reagan years; or Computer Science, Computer Engineering. I made decision to go to Electrical Engineering.

TVD: Do you remember UC Irvine in the eighties? What was it like?

TT: It was great! I applied for UCI without knowing the school, the campus at all. I remember when I got the rejection letter from UCLA, I was disheartened. That’s when I actually came and visited UC Irvine. I fell in love with the school. There was no parking structure. We were working on the first ring. I think we got the first ring built out. There was no second ring, so really nice! I didn’t have a car, but those have a car just park right behind the buildings; you just walk right in. Very nice, very nice about that!

TVD: Did you live on campus?

TT: I lived on campus. I lived two years in the dorm, Mesa Court; the other two years on campus apartment, something Village. Campus Village.

TVD: Were there any Vietnamese students there?

TT: Oh yeah, there quite a few Vietnamese students there.
TVD: Did you hang out with them?

TT: Yes, I hang out with them. The first couple years, I stayed in the dorm. I pretty much hang out with Vietnamese, Chinese kids, students in my dorm. Engineering; I hang out with Engineering. On third year and fourth year, I hang out more with the VSA and all.

TVD: There was a VSA?

TT: Oh yeah. There was very established VSA by the time I came in already.

TVD: What kinds of activities did you do with VSA?

TT: Quân Nhớ, “Memory Café” is a really nice thing at the time.

TVD: Quân Nhớ. Is that, the sort of like open-mic, hát cho nhau, “sing for each other” kind of café?

TT: Yeah, yeah. So like quán chè, “dessert bar,” quán café; all in ones. More like makeshift talent show kind of thing.

TVD: Where was it hosted, and what was the physical location? Would it be on campus?

TT: On campus; on campus. I think what is now is the Student Center, right. What is now a Student Center was a smaller setting back then; kind of nice, very nice venue. Nice event.

TVD: Did you overlap with people like Dr. Bích Liên?

TT: Yes, I know Dr. Bích Liên. No, actually I don’t. I know Dr. Bích Liên way later. She graduated way before I came in. Dr. Bích Liên; I knew her and the Vietnamese American Cancer Foundation when Edison supported her program. Anh Thọai? You happen to know Anh Thọai?

TVD: That name, it sounds very familiar, but I haven’t interviewed him yet. Project Ngọc also started?

TT: Project Ngọc started later on, yes.

TVD: Oh, yes. In eighty--
TT: Eighty-six, ‘87, ’88; something like that, yes. It was a very big thing, and the other big event for us was the Văn Nghệ Thuyên Nhân, “Boat People Entertainment.” It started way before I came into the school. I like to think it was at the peak of the years I was there because of Tân. You know Tân? Lê Minh Tân? He was so active the years he was in school. Since he left school, I don’t think he’s been involved in any Vietnamese community activities at all. He very gifted, very talented musically, and that sort of thing.

TVD: The Văn Nghệ Thuyên Nhân was to raise funds for refugees still in camp?

TT: Yes. I didn’t get involved until my junior year or so. That’s maybe in 1987 or so. Most of the focus at the time probably was for Hong Kong, for the Hong Kong camp; Whitehead camp. Project Ngọc maybe started before that. Project Ngọc may started in ’85 or something like that because I remember Tom Wilson. You happen to know Tom Wilson? He’s the founder of it.

TVD: Yes, I met him recently.

TT: Yes. okay. Tom Wilson started with, you know. I remember he wrote one flyer talking about the pirates. These are actually real pirates; these are not the Pirates of Caribbean. These are not the—

TVD: The movie pirates.

TT:--Yes. These are rape and rob you, you know. It’s not the children tales or stories. He started on that.

TVD: What would you say is most memorable thing about your time spent at UCI?

TT: In UCI, I would say the campus itself because I live on campus. I spent a lot of time on campus away from. Once again, I kind of go back to whatever that is that I made. I love my family, but somehow, I always kind of enjoyed the time I was away from family. I’m not sure what it is. I missed my family all the time I stay there, but I guess because you kind of being
your own. You do whatever you want; more time for reflection. I remember all the time I wandering in Aldrich Park. It’s a really nice place. I remember that part. And of course VSA activities. So we have a Quán Nhớ, và ngày Thuyền Nhân and big year-end event.

TVD: Culture night? Was it culture night?

TT: Wasn’t, no. No, it’s a party night.

TVD: Like an informal dance, kind of thing?

TT: For formal dance; so it’s workshops. It’s two big things. We would have dance workshop, week before the event.

TVD: So what kind of dancing was this? Was it like ballroom because you know Vietnamese are very into that?

TT: Yeah, it was big at the time.

TVD: Or it was more of hip-hop?

TT: No, no! Definitely was ballroom—

TVD: Okay, okay. (laughs)

TT: --actually chachacha, and tango and rumba. It was big. There were prominent dancers among ourselves, and whoever; not me! (Dang laughs) I never managed to get into that for some reason. The other big thing about it is actually, it’s almost like a Vietnamese Prom night, annual prom night. It’s about finding dates. It’s about looking for a date. Those who managed to find a good-looking date at the time, so for the night is a big deal. I never managed to score one either, score a good date either.

TVD: During all that time, high school and then through college, were you dating? Since you brought up dating.

TT: I was dating when I was transitioning from high school to college.
TVD: Was it acceptable for any Vietnamese family?

TT: It was okay with my family. I dated an Asian. So Asian, what do you call that? An Ameri-Asian.

TVD: Oh, Amerasian. Con lai.

TT: Con lai. She’s actually supposed to be, but she’s not. I don’t think she is. Her father is an American G.I., but I know she looks all Vietnamese. Her real father was a Vietnamese, but I came over her family. I met her mom, Vietnamese, and her father is a Caucasian. It was okay for my family. For some reason, it acceptable. I think it has to do with the fact that I actually was, by the time I got out of high school, I was very determined. Người lớn, “adult”; pretty mature by that time.

TVD: And college-bound.

TT: Yes, and college-bound, and then we broke up and my mother didn’t break up, I think. Not by choice; I think she left me when I was in first quarter in college.

TVD: Tough time though.

TT: It was tough time! Yeah, it was tough time. You think it was the biggest thing, biggest crisis in your life.

TVD: How did you meet and marry your wife?

TT: I met her years later through circle of friends.

TVD: This is after college?

TT: Way after college, yes. Way after college; this when I worked Edison already.

TVD: You mentioned earlier that she is Vietnamese.

TT: Yes, she is Vietnamese. I get circle of friends and through them, I met her. You know, you actually have certain codes when we date. You never burn your bridges. Somebody like you and
you don’t like that person. You don’t have to think for that person. You still make sure that you have a good relationship and all that. This is actually the case. It happened it was a lady, a girl that probably liked me. I didn’t have a thing for her, but I always kept a good relationship. She’s the one who introduced my wife to me, and she hated us for that (both laugh). Yes, she never. I forgot whether she went to our engagement party. She didn't go to our wedding.

TVD: Do you have typical Vietnamese “đám hỏi” and then wedding with the, you know, five-hundred people?

TT: Yes, yes, all that.

TVD: You mentioned that you met her after you got the job at Edison.

Was Edison the first job that you got after college?

TT: Yes, Edison is the first job I got out of college, yeah.

TVD: Wow, that’s rare this day and age, to be with the same company?

TT: Yeah. I’ve been there twenty-some years now.

TVD: So you graduated in ‘89?

TT: Eighty-eight, ’88. Yes.

TVD: Eighty-eight. Your major was Electrical Engineering?

TT: Yes.

TVD: Did you just fill out applications?

TT: Yeah, I did that, put out application. I was fortunate that UCI was recruiting, and Edison was recruiting UCI. I got an application and I got a job with Edison.

TVD: What did you start there as?
TT: I started it out as a, back then they call either Associate Engineer or Assistant Engineer. Kind of worked my way up. Spent a lot of time working in the, spent about three months working in the field. I actually was doing labor work in the field.

TVD: Like with power lines and all that stuff?

TT: Yes, basically pulling cables; big cables, and you pull them. It’s hard physical work. It wasn’t a problem for me at all. The company has a very strong family tradition. I started out in the Santa Ana office. That’s in the corner of Grant and McFadden; had the strong militaristic, chain-command tradition. Think about family tradition in the company: what if you are not in the family? There’s that. There’s a way of pressure to be in the family. If you are the only Asian let alone, you are only Vietnamese in the whole area in this district, put a lot of pressure put on you. Good thing that I was young. Even though I was Electrical Engineering, I spent a lot of time doing schoolwork. But good thing I was young, strong, so I actually was able to do, hang with them, with the workforce out there. It’s some physically-demand jobs out there. The three months I spent out there. Same thing when you came to the office, you do design, you do work for the construction forces. You have to go out and be with them. Even instruction give them work orders, they always challenge you, right. You got to overcome. I think I overcame a lot of that, the peer pressure. Things I didn’t when I was, even was in college. I never drank coffee when I was in college. I had a beer or two in a very rare occasion. Actually the most that I had was maybe two beers at most in UCI. I kind of picked up the coffee drink. When they have beer bar in the district, I went out and hanging out. First you got a beer, and then you got two, and then you got three, and then you got more. There’s that. Good or bad, I kind of picked up those kind of social events.

TVD: You were one the first Vietnamese Americans that works for Edison?
TT: Yeah. There was quite people. You know Dr. Phạm Kim Long?

TVD: I heard the name.

TT: Yes. I think he run for offices here. He was in the board of education. I think he came in before me. There were others who came in before me. But mostly in the office environment and the headquarter environment. Not many people working out in the field. Bryan Pham, that’s another on. Bryan Pham and I were probably one the very first Vietnamese Americans. They worked in few offices of Edison. Nicholas Dasia, his name is actually Thạch Dương; for the longest time he fooled Edison that his name is Nicholas, Nicholas Dasia. They ask him, “What is Nicholas Dasia? What does that stand for?” He goes, “Nicholas of Asia.” (Dang laughs) The longest time that you go into the company’s directory, you would look up his name and you would see Nicholas Dasia. But in his paperwork, it’s actually “Thạch Dương,” right. He’s very smart, very intelligent man. He’s quite a hacker. He meant to do that. He said one of reason he did that because in the past, he applied for jobs, and when they saw “Thạch Dương”, they rejected his resume. So he forged his name into Nicholas Dasia. That kind of worked out. When he applied for it, he go under the name of Nicholas Dasia even though his birth certificate and everything else is “Thạch Dương”. Until Edison actually kind of revamp, the new system revamp. Now his name is actually Thạch Dương, but everyone else called him Nicholas.

TVD: He is still employed by Edison?

TT: Still employed by Edison.

TVD: I would love to talk to him! (Both laugh) Ask him about his name! I know from earlier that you have a new baby. I think I’m going to wrap up by asking you this question. We’ve been looking back at the past a lot, I want you to think about the future, and about what legacy you want to leave behind, what you want known, especially to your child and maybe to your future
grandkids, and their grandkids. What do you want future generations to know about your experience?

TT: There’s some privacy about this. I’ve been married for fifteen years. We’ve gone through a lot. My wife’s gone through a lot in fertility treatment. Fortunately, we have the money to go this far, and we’ve gone to the best clinics there are. We’ve been going to Beverley Hills for the last three years so we get where we are. This is a gift. My daughter is a gift to us. I kind of go through this and kind of the, playing that supportive role for my wife. I like to think that as a Vietnamese man having a legacy of your name carried on is very important, but hasn’t been the case for me. Whatever I do has been supportive of my wife. There’s a part about, there’s time I struggle in my life. I always recoil back to. Somebody was saying this: you can take a Vietnamese out of “refugee” but you cannot take the refugee camp out of the Vietnamese. That’s too fancy for me. But somehow when I struggle in life, whether in family, sometimes it worked. I always kind of recoiled back to the humble refugee past that I have. Somehow I seek comfort in doing that. Starting out with nothing, but then you have the greatest hope. Everything you do, what we had in the camp, was hope. When I was talking about looking at the Sears catalogue, actually was the hope of getting there; the hope of getting those and getting there. I don't know if I would have a very good life if, let’s say 1975, events never occurred and I stayed where I would be. Let’s say my life would be much more, a little bit smoother, wouldn’t have to go through all that. I don't know how I would deal with difficult times in my life that I had; where would I seek refuge or comfort if I didn't have the refugee experience, even though it was only six months of my life. For my children, my daughter, I definitely want to pass on is that resilience that we always have. We talked about conservative values my family have: the adaptability. We stayed very frugal, very conservative when we were in the camp. But we had
the chance in going on shopping spree in Singapore and we would. I always have a dream about
taking my daughter, when she gets about three, let’s see how it goes. I think about two or three. I
would take her back to my father’s village, where he recently built. He hasn’t been back there for
a long time, but he sent money home to build an ancestral shrine where the grave of my ancestry
at. We have pass on to her would be seventh generation, and we have the graves. This is
incredible. This is where the war came through that place, and not a single structure survived.
There’s nothing survived. Even trees, we don’t have any old trees there. Everything wiped out,
right. We had graves that been there for a hundred years, and that's where my father has the
ancestral shrine. I’d like to take my daughter when she’s old enough, to back there to visit our
roots. There’s something in us started at very humble past, right. When we come over this
country, we’re literately penniless, struggled making a new life. As we move on to the covered
life and family life, we continue to struggle. This time, we’re going to struggle. In my case, I
kind of return to my refugee past to seek comforts, seek refuge, and seek strength from that.
Yeah, I certainly have to pass on. My daughter: she definitely would have much easier life in
terms of material. We would have everything for her, ready for her. Think about how she going
to be. Her life would be so easy in how she going to encounter. What can she resort to when she
run into difficulty. I would think the resilient values, perseverance, conservative values that my
parents passed down to me, I certainly want to pass down to my daughter.
TVD: Thank you, and is there anything that you haven’t had a chance to say that you want to
include before we end the interview?
TT: I want to thank for the opportunity. I heard about the program and when I think about what
the world thinks about the Vietnamese community, we think about the war, we think about the
boat people experiences, which is very true; hits every one of us. The focus has been on the
generation that directly impacted by the war, so basically our parents. In my case, my father, he missed treatment that he got in the camp. We never thought about how will that psychology get carried on to us. In my case, I like to think we are the children of the war. A lot of things happen before I came to life. The war kind of ended, and I was kind of left without any closure. It went on, and there is no closure in anything we do, about our history and all that. In Vietnam, the kids growing up in Vietnam, they be thinking that we have country and reunited and we move on to bigger and better things now and all that. But then for my generation and those few years before, even those after, we actually kind of have certainly lose part. We have never closed on that. No, we never had a chance to close. If anything at all, it’s pretty much within ourselves. You probably hear people when you go to every coffee shop here, and Coffee Factory, you hear people just talk about; they just talk. I don’t think there was an attempt to close anything at all. If anything at all, like myself, I live in Diamond bar by myself. I don't have any friends up there. By myself up in the hills, by myself and no Vietnamese neighbors and anything at all. I have much more time reflect on things than those down here hanging out at coffee shop. There’s the thing that I really wonder is how that the impact of the war and what came after impacted my generation. Even us, we get in our fifties now. When the war ended, we were ten, or twelve or so. We in our fifties; it’s never been closed.

TVD: I think I will end it with that.