

Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: THOMAS QUACH
Interviewer: Michelle Le Pham
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Track 01

MLP: Hello, my name is Michelle and I am here for the Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine. Today I will be interview the honorable and awesome Dr. Thomas Quach. For the record can you state your name and date of birth?

TTQ: My name is Thomas Tri Quach and I was born March 14, 1967.

MLP: Where were you born?

TTQ: I was born at St. Paul Hospital according to my mother, that's in Saigon.

MLP: Can you tell me your parents' name and more or less describe them in your own words?

TTQ: My dad and my mother are both pharmacists, they both became pharmacists in Vietnam. My dad's name is Quach Nhut Danh and before 1975 my dad worked for the government. Both my parents had private pharmacies. My father worked for what I recalled medical logistics. His job as he describes it to me and how I remember it is, he is responsible for distributing medical supplies given by the US government to support South Vietnam. He would fly out to local hospitals in the southern parts of Vietnam, the Mekong Delta and assess necessity and would go back to look for supplies that were needed and dispatch them to local, rural hospitals. My mother was also a pharmacist and they both had met in pharmacy school at the University of Saigon. My mother's Thuy Xuan Nguyen and she came from a family of pharmacists. My grandfather was a pharmacist from Sa Dec and she pretty much in Vietnam worked in the

pharmacy business. I remember the pharmacy business as a wholesale where they would send their medicine to pharmacies in Can To, Sa Dec, Vinh Long. I remember trucks being dispatched to these areas and that's what my mother did in Vietnam. That's the memory I had of Vietnam, I was seven years old. My recollection of that was, I was at my grandmother's house and apparently in Vietnam if you are a pharmacist you are allowed to own two or three pharmacies and the person running it doesn't have to be a pharmacist. My grandmother was watching of the pharmacies called Cai Cay pharmacies in Can To. I was playing and I saw a big Van with my mother in it drive past. Then they were at home for a half hour to hour, they picked me up and off we went to Saigon. Next thing we know we were on a plane, flying over to Philippines. In the Philippines I still remember everyone was very quiet all of a sudden, being only seven years old, no sorry nine. I was nine years old I remember going to the community center there where we had to ask for a ball. That was my first English word, my parents told me to go ask for a ball so I can play. I was playing with that ball and I heard the whole camp all of a sudden got quiet. It was April 30th, 1975, people were listening to the radio and the fall of Saigon had occurred, when the Communist had crash through the presidential palace. President Duong Van Minh surrendered their troops

MLP: At the time, did you understand the gravity of what was happening?

TTQ: At nine years old I remember I had the understanding that something was going to change our life forever because we left with all our belongings. In the month leading up to that, in the month of February, I remember watching the news; things started to change were the bedrooms. My father constructed a bunker and it was fun. There was a bed and pieces of wood and sandbags were on top of that we climbed and played on it now that it was in our bedroom. We were watching the news; President Thieu was resigning the presidency to President Huong. I

remember he was a really old man with a cane. At that time we already preparing for something to happen. I remember our grandmother would come over and talk to our parents about preparing for something. They were making and sewing these backpacks to prepare for I guess to escape. We were making rucksacks and backpacks, in our clothing they would find seams and slide gold leaflets.

MLP: What do you remember about them, were they heavy?

TTQ: Yeah, I still have a gold leaflet that I'd kept, my mother had taken back and I found it. I told her I was going to take it because that was the one I held in my pocket. As a piece of gold leaflet, I remember it weighed my jacket down, it wasn't heavy but it had a nice weight to it. It was only a few leaves; it was wrapped into a brown crispy paper and had the words Kim Think on it. I guess it was one of the jewelry shops in Vietnam

MLP: You said that "we" played; does that mean you had siblings?

TTQ: I had one sister and was much younger than me. I believe I was playing with the kids outside at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. It is closed now, since coming to the United States I look back and said, "Oh yeah that's where we had stayed". When I was older I was able to understand where it was. I remember the word "Clark" because my father said, "this is Clark". When you are not familiar with English, you have no memory of the word except for the sound or tone. That was the weird thing that I recalled, that the whole came was quite. Before that everyone got a mattress on the floor and every family would lie around, the parents with children would put the kids on it, grandparents would be sleeping on it. We would all sleep in this big community room. There were always noise, kids were crying, adults were talking, but then all of a sudden this strange eerie quiet went through the whole place. Occasionally people would cough then you hear sobbing. That was when the news came that the tanks had entered

the presidential palace, we had lost Vietnam. As a nine year old that was my impression of it. We didn't stay at Clark Air Force Base for too long. The food was interesting though, that was the first time we had beef stroganoff, rice and beef stroganoff. It was actually pretty good, nowadays when I have it I would say, "Yeah, this is what we had at the camp". We would of course have to get in line for food, it was kind of neat. We ate at the army base cafeteria.

MLP: Did you eat along with any of the soldiers?

TTQ: I think the soldiers ate at separate times. I only remember eating with the refugees. We were only at Clark for only two days or three days or so. After that we got back on our C-139 airplanes that took us out of Vietnam and that took use to live on the Wake Islands. Wake Island looking at the map is a small sliver. Now I remember playing one of the video games based out of Wake Islands, WWII. Wake Island after WWII used it as a testing ground for bombs and nuclear things, so they told us to not go into the water. It was a beautiful place, we took up residence in one of the garages, a vacant army housing. A regular home with a garage and there were cots set up in the garage. Some families lived in the house and we would walk over to the cafeteria again and had beef stroganoff, we probably had other selections, but to me beef stroganoff was easiest to eat. We would visit other families there, in fact, I had met again a woman that my father reminded me that I had gone over and met with them, they had lived in Can To. We would seek out people that we remembered from our old city, it turns out that she is my Facebook friend now, about two or three years older than me. That's the memory I had with her, her mom was in this house, another vacant home, the kids were running and playing around outside. Thirty or forty years later I would see her and talk about that experience. So we were on the Wake Island for a couple days, next we knew we were supposed to go to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. My first glimpse of colored TV was Hannah Barbara at the airport; I looked up and

was like, "WOW that's color". We were in Hawaii as a layover. We got into a real airplane this time instead of an army transport, it was kind of neat. I had these red slippers; I didn't have time to go home to get my shoes. I had these red flip-flops throughout the whole Exodus. The red flip-flops, when you are on cold ground; I remember the metallic flooring of the C-137, it had that very rough feel and chilly. When we were on the regular airplane it was chilly and I was like, "Oh this is nice". Then we got to Fort Chaffee and that's when my parents bought me my first pair of shoes; yellow pair of converse, high tops at the PX. There is a picture of me wearing those high tops at Fort Chaffee. Fort Chaffee was good; we stayed in the army barracks, bunk beds which was cool. The coke machine, you would put money in and it dropped down, that was one of the highlights living in Fort Chaffee. All of the kids they would gather and let them watch movies.

MLP: So kind of like a movie night?

TTQ: A movie night! We saw a lot of cartoons. Before in Vietnam, movie night, I went to a Catholic school and every year they would hang up curtains in this hallway and show *The Sound of Music* Julie Andrew's *The Sound of Music*. It was the colored movie. When we went to the movies we saw Bruce Lee movies, Jackie Chan movies in Can To. Two of my dad's friend owned movie theaters, so we would get special VIP treatment at the movie theaters. We would go the movie theaters and sit in the side room, adults would chit chat, talk and eat. The kids would run around chit chat, talk and eat and then would go to the movie theater's side door and sit down and watch. When we were done we would go home. So movies were a nice thing coming to Fort Chaffee, the showed us the Little Rascals: Buckwheat, Alfalfa, Darla. That's our experience. I met my uncle; we left Vietnam using separate routes we found each other there and my uncle's family. Then we left for Connecticut, my aunt had sponsored us. My dad's

younger sister had been living here since 1968 she came here to school and she also came here to teach American GIs Vietnamese. One of my uncles married my other aunt, worked in intelligence and worked on the swift boats. He was part of the swift boat crew and he spoke perfect Vietnamese because my aunt taught him. She taught them up in Monterey, my aunt now lives in Hawaii, but now she's dying

MLP: Oh I'm sorry

TTQ: We lived my aunt for a while and then my father was able to contact one of his doctor friends who we were very closed to in Ca To. Dr. Pham Van Hoang, he's still here. We contacted him there was an opportunity for him to go back to school at the University of Nebraska. We got into the Pinto that my dad bought and drove all the way from across Connecticut to Nebraska, it was the best road trip.

MLP: Why do you say that, or are you being sarcastic?

TTQ: No, no it truly the best road trip because there are few times that our family could spend time together. After that when we got to Nebraska my dad was busy going to school we had our schooling and eventually he came to California, the OC to open his pharmacy, he was working so much. Before that in Vietnam he was busy working all the time. Looking back our trip from Nebraska....Wait, my father went ahead to Nebraska and we flew to Nebraska from Connecticut; when my dad was in school, during the summer they have summers off. Our summers we would go and travel together in the Pinto he had bought when he was in Nebraska across the plains of Nebraska, we saw Chimney Rock, the flats, and we would go to Colorado to see Roy Gorge. We spent a lot of family time those two summers when my parents were in school.

MLP: Was your mom going to school the same time your dad was?

TTQ: They staggered, my father started. It was only a two year program. He had met really nice people, one of the people that he had met that he still keeps in contact with is a Mr. Kurt Benedict was one of the administrators for the University of Nebraska School of Pharmacy, he was the dean at the time. He accepted my father into the special program where they let pharmacists from Vietnam who already had a degree to go back and do two years.

MLP: It wasn't like your dad starting from scratch?

TTQ: No, I believe pharmacy school was three years, so he would do like two out of the three years. My father would go home and have a tape recorder like this and he would record the lectures at home I hear him playing it back and forth. His English was relatively better than most people, but in lecture he still has to record it and listen and take notes. He did have some experience communicating with his American advisors in Vietnam. He would diligently take notes. His notes were so good he said that his American friends he has made asked him for notes. These kids who were there were 25 years old but they would borrow his notes, because his notes were more details. My mom used his notes later on.

MLP: So they more or less took the same courses?

TTQ: Same courses, but my mom went a year later so she benefited from him going first. My father would tutor them. For us we would live in an apartment near the university, if I remember it was 42nd street. Now with Google maps I'm finding places I used to live before, it's kind of nice to be able to walk through memory lane through Google maps. I could see where I used to play in the snow; my parents would go to school all day. My sister and I would during the winter time, I remember most it would snow and we would walk to our school. It was about a 20 minute trek, my father would drive us the first day. We would walk to school after, I was ten years old my sister was nine. It was the winter of 1975, wait I'm thinking of Omaha. The first

year we lived on Lincoln and lived on an apartment. The second year the pharmacy school moved from Lincoln to Omaha so we moved with the school. The first year we lived in Lincoln Nebraska near the capital building. If you are familiar the one thing you see is the statue of Lincoln on the top. In the Midwest a lot of the capital buildings had these gold domes, so from our window I can always remember seeing the gold domes. I went to the third grade there, I remember there was a lot of history I would spend my days at the community center down the street playing pool and then we would have art classes. I would love art classes; that was our lives in the winter of 1975. My mother took a job at the Russell Stover Candy, so she would describe stories like Lucille Ball in the candy line; that was her. She would go to work dressed nicely, hair and make-up done and she would come home with candy stuck to her face. After that she started wearing T-shirts to work.

MLP: Did she bring home candy for you?

TTQ: She did, Russell Stover Candy, it was great. She didn't last at that job very long, she asked my dad to find her a different job. Her new job now was at a bank where she could dress up, she filed computer tapes.

MLP: What is a computer tape?

TTQ: Back then computer was entire room and if you wanted a file you would go and take the tape out and stick it in the computer and it would run it. That was a computer back in 1975. The computer would take up a whole room and had a dot matrix printer. If you wanted a file or something you would have to pull out the tape, and the tape was this big reel and stick it in. That was her job for a year while my father studied at the University of Nebraska. My dad during that time, every Friday he would take us to a park to play while he studied. We lived in this one bedroom apartment, Apartment 11 at 1225 G Street. The only other Vietnamese family across

the street at the time; were the same people who opened Croissant Dore were them. The kids are now attorneys, when we came to California Croissant Dore opened and we were like, “hey you were in Nebraska with us!”

MLP: Was it difficult acclimating to American culture?

TTQ: No, not for kids. When you are nine years old it was easy. First year of school I had a best friend. When I was in Lincoln there was another girl who had brown skin and she was from the Poni Indian Tribe, everyone else was white. The only other non-whites were either Hispanics or Indian. She had dark skin, dark hair, wore glasses; she spoke Poni and I wasn't Poni, I spoke a very different language. So I went to my ESL class, but did great in math, you know Asian kids and math? We were learning division while they were still learning addition. English it was hard so I went to a special class.

MLP: Did you feel bad about it?

TTQ: No I didn't, I felt special. One on one with the teacher, no, I felt special. I felt like they treat me really nice. In Vietnam I was not a very good student, I had trouble writing in between the lines. I'm so glad I came here because I would have been a terrible student, they would make us write between the lines. I have terrible handwriting as you can see. So I was so glad, the fall of Vietnam was a blessing, I get to leave. When I came here I liked everything about my third grade. I remember sitting in color coded groups; art was my best subject math was my best subject. English and everything else wasn't so great, it was clear yet, images you remember. Moving to Omaha was better, in third grade my best friend was Benne Cruz, Jay Heins, and the object of my desire was Michelle Haymas: long hair, glasses, smartest girl in the class of course. At this time I was reading in the advance group, our book was called *Time to Wonder* it was this

blue book, all the kids in advance reading would be in that class, so cool they put me in advance reading.

MLP: Did it just come naturally now?

TTQ: Getting along with the kids was easy. My teacher Ms. McBride she was beautiful, she drove a Honda civic and wore a scarf. She was a pretty, young teacher and I remember getting used to the school. I would volunteer for fire safety, my dad wouldn't let me volunteer for safety patrol, which was what I wanted to do and wear the uniform and help people cross.

MLP: Any idea why?

TTQ: It was dangerous. He didn't want me standing out in the middle of the street directing traffic and having kids walk by. I was able to do fire patrol, that's why I loved fire drills because I was able to do my job. I open up the drawer and had this badge and sash and go and stand in the hallways to guide kids out of the school. This year it was 1976-1977, both my parents were in school. My dad was finishing his second year and my mom was finishing her first year. They both were very busy, my sister and I would walk home from school, let ourselves in. My job was to do the dishes and my sister had to sweep the floor and we would wait until our mom came home and cook dinner. We had dinner and afterwards they would go into a room and study, if we made noise we get a little slap on the hand.

MLP: Did you do your homework while they did their homework?

TTQ: I don't remember having much homework. It was only third or fourth grade. We would stay in our room, my sister and I would play cards and play games. Christmas we would all these games from sponsors from people. There was a lady who lived nearby, her name was Mrs. Agnes, and she saw me playing in the snow one day and said she knew another Vietnamese family. She came and asked if she could take us to church and we would go to a Baptist church

on Sundays. I remember a Baptist church in Omaha, smell: wood, old musty wood, creaky floor, but very clean and shiny and donuts. They would serve donuts, those were the best thing, and they used to have sugar donuts. I sat in church and I went to Catholic school as a kid and I know stories about Adam and Eve, Moses, and the Prodigal Son, Psalms I wasn't into that much because it was too abstract for me at the time. I loved the winter time because I spent a lot of alone time, making igloos. I would have a private place to play. It was mostly students and they didn't have kids, so we were the only two kids in the apartments. It was an apartment complex and there was swimming pool that was half filled with water, they didn't take care of the pool there wasn't any water in it. Thinking back it was a pretty dumpy place, the water was green and at the bottom of the pool. So during the winter time it would freeze over and that was adventure because I can go there and climb over and see what's in there, trying not to go under. One time it did break through and go under, but I could still stand. It was stinky, dirty, green water.

MLP: Did you get in trouble?

TTQ: My mom could see me; the complex was that the pool was in the middle. So our parents could watch us. If we needed something we would yell. I got to smell my first Indian food, curry. There was an Indian family down stairs and they would make food and I was like, "Oh smells good". First time I met Indian people, "red-dot" Indian not the "feather" Indian.

MLP: Did you go to high school here in California? If so, which high school did you go to?

TTQ: I went to Fountain Valley High School.

MLP: What year was that?

TTQ: It was from '81 to '85.

MLP: How did you end up there?

TTQ: By the time I got to high school, we have been living in Fountain Valley, we had bought a house. My dad already started the pharmacy and there was about thirty or forty Vietnamese at the school. Some of the Vietnamese were children of the owners of Thanh My Restaurant, Hanh, Phouc, and Thu. Phouc now is an orthodontist, Hanh was my junior prom date, but now she has moved to Northern California, Thu, I saw him yesterday. You know Thanh My Restaurant, it's still there. My friends, my other peers were Truc Ho, the founder of Asian Entertainment and Nguyen Do Phu, a lawyer who was friends with Truc Ho. When I was a sophomore, I ran for president of the Vietnamese Student Association, by then my English was so good and my Vietnamese was so bad that I conducted all my meetings in English and so Do Phu and Truc Ho said that, "this was a Vietnamese club why are you speaking English?" So they voted me out of office.

MLP: Aw, that's shady

TTQ: No, no years later when Do Phu got married I got to deliver his kids, in fact three of his kids. So it was nice, when I saw him I said, "Phu do you remember voting me out of office? Look at me now I can speak Vietnamese". I had spent some time learning Vietnamese.

MLP: Was relearning Vietnamese difficult?

TTQ: It was very difficult. I remember my very first radio show, when I came back to work here. It was Little Saigon Radio 1480 at their location on Harbor Blvd. I recently saw Vo Huu Khong and he said "I remember you 12 years ago you came to my radio station with Bac Si Phung Da Thanh." He had a radio show in which he would call you on as a guest and my topic was osteoporosis, my father had helped me write the osteoporosis talk. I practiced the day before I practiced and practiced all night. I was so tired when I got there, I was so nervous, when it was my turn I just read the whole thing. Everyone told me not to read it, but I was so nervous.

Needless to say, it was not a very good program. After that Fountain Valley Hospital would sponsor me to go on with my very, very bad Vietnamese. I remember that I would turn on the radio and listen to Vietnamese programs so I can listen to how things were said. One of the programs I liked to listen to was a gentleman who owned an automotive repair shop. I loved the way he answer questions from patients...I mean customers would call in and would say, "my car makes this *click* *click* *click* sound" and he diagnosed it perfectly and would know what to do with that. I learned from various doctors and I learned mostly from him and how to say things. Afterwards, when I would go on my 30 minute show, my father would listen and I would call him for feedback. I did the radio program for six or seven years every Wednesday.

MLP: Did you learn how to read and write as well?

TTQ: I learned how to speak and afterwards started learning how to read and then write. Now I am much better, but I prefer to speak English. I still think in English, but my Vietnamese is much, much better than it was ten years ago.

MLP: Do you think you would have had a different life if you were to stay in Vietnam?

TTQ: I had this discussion several times because there was a family in which we were very close to in Can To and his father is a doctor for the military and this family, Bac Si Hai's; we were very close to them. The kids: Dung, Tuan, and Cuong. We would play with them every weekend; get together and visit them every weekend. Well, for some reason they couldn't leave Vietnam and are still there now. Their father passed away from lung cancer maybe eight or ten years ago. Their lives are very different, Anh Dung, Anh Tuan, and Anh Cuong they were smart kids, but they were prevented from going further in education because they were from the old government. I figured that I would probably be a decent cigarette representative because that's what Tuan did, he's doing very well. When they had the Doi Moi, the Vietnamese Perestroika,

Tuan took advantage, he's a very smart guy, and he's much more talkative than, so I probably wouldn't have done as well as him. He worked for a Salem Cigarette Company; he did very well and got married. His older brother Dung, whose I personality more like mine, did odd jobs. He was prevented from going to school so just did odd jobs. He's depressed, not happy. I remember going back to Vietnam; I can see how he wished that he would be able to leave.

When I came back to Vietnam it was 1994, at the time I was already in residency. I went to his father's room; their father had passed away a few months before that. I remember he would take me on his moped and we would go to the temple where his father's ashes were because I wanted to pay my respects. I would go to his library and found these books, these American books and one of them was Cunningham. Cunningham is our bible for obstetrics, for OBGYN text. His father had this old Cunningham copy and I was looking at it. It was only one or two editions before the one I currently have and I could read it, I could look through his medical texts and say, "your father used to treat me for these various ailments" I can see the books he had in his library and I could read those. I realized that, that was an opportunity deprived of my friend, my friend if the governments remain the same he would have followed in his father's footsteps and become a doctor and he would be able to read those textbooks. But he couldn't, these books now become to him, "these are my father's books".

Track 02

MLP: This is part two of Dr. Thomas Quach's interview. He last left off when he was in high school. He hasn't graduated yet. So we were going to talk about application to college. Were you the first one to go to college?

TTQ: Yes, amongst my siblings, but my parents were the first one to go to college.

MLP: What schools or what kind of career plan did you have for yourself, if any?

TTQ: At that time, I had thought in the back of my mind that I just want to do well in college and maybe head towards medicine because during 8th grade, one of my dad's friends, who was chiropractor at that time, suggested it. I was never pushed into medicine, but my parents were pharmacists and I had uncles who were doctors. Most my father's friends are physicians because how they worked together in the community. I kind of assumed that and the advice I got from my parents' chiropractor friend, Bac Si Ai. He asked me one day, he was driving all the kids to some place, and he turned and looked at me and said, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" My immediate answer that I always gave was an aeronautic engineer, it was because it sounded nice "aeronautic engineer" I never really had an idea, but since the fourth grade that's what I wanted to be. He asked me why and I said, "I wanted to design airplanes and stuff", then he told me "why don't you become a doctor," then I thought "hmm". I remember that conversation ended really quickly, I thought about it, since most of my parents friends were doctors they seemed like really nice people, people respected them. It was something that sat in the back of my mind. Applying to college that was something I really didn't know, I did well in high school, my senior in high school I lost track a little bit, I was in my AP classes, all my friends were applying to the big colleges, that year I was distracted I had a girlfriend. Instead of going to the counselors to figure out where I wanted to go, I was distracted and so I only applied to a few colleges. I applied to UC Riverside BioMed Program, for some reason I never applied to UCI.

MLP: What year was this?

TQ: This was 84-85. I got into USC. I didn't apply for UCI. So my option was either USC or UC Riverside. I had a friend who was also a friend of the family. His dad is an ENT within the

community. And those two guys were headed to medicine because their dad is a doctor. HE had an older brother named nick and nick was already finished with two years of college. My friend and I were finishing up college. We went to marina high school and I went to Fountain Valley High School. And we both learned that we got into the UCR biomedical program. And I was driving out to visit his brother who is also at Riverside at that time we were going out to check out the campus. It was sometime in February in 1985 so at the time I thought I was going to go ahead to the biomedical program or USC. We got into riverside and looked around and UCR at that time was a really small UC Campus compared to UCLA or UCI. UCLA was too big. I remember going there before and I thought I'd be lost there so I didn't really want to go to a large campus. Got to Riverside looked around and thought hmmm. It was gray and dark.

MLP: Still is, it still is

TQ: but it's got a med school now. And so I went over to visit his brother Nick and I learned that his brother nick didn't do too well at UC Riverside was going to switch school to Loma Linda. And so the way it situates is that UC Riverside was on central and La Sierra was on Peer Street. So it happened that we were in the same car and his brother wanted to visit this school. So we tagged along and I went to the school and all of a sudden I said wow. This place looks a lot more comfortable even though La Sierra was a private college and it was even a smaller college than Riverside was but it felt really comfortable for me for some reason and it felt right. I didn't know why. It turns out at the time the girl I was dating is a Christian girl and my family was Buddhist. And so I talked to. And we were having a little bit of trouble because she didn't invite me home to meet her parents because I was Buddhist. She wasn't supposed to date anyone outside of her religion. But I told her I went to Loma Linda today to check out this campus and it looks really nice. I looked at the models to make the manhole and that's something in high school that it was

something that it was a rule I had to live by. I liked to play sports. Academically I liked to do well, but of course though I didn't go to church often, I did like to listen to the stories of the bible and why did I do that? Going back to another story is how I met this girl was in the summer of my junior and senior year. My friends who went to this church in Santa Ana. Mot Su Dai

MLP: Oh that sounds familiar my dad probably mentioned it once or twice

TQ: Yeah Mot Su Vang Dai he heads the midway church now. But my friend Thong who is now an internal medicine doctor in the valley, he invited us to go to church. It turns out they had a basketball team and if you wanted to play on the team you had to be a church member. So summer was coming up at the end of my junior year. I would go to church every Sunday so I could play on the team.

MLP: Did your parents mind at the time?

TQ: My parents were very open about religion

MLP: Oh so they're not very restrictive

TQ: No, in terms of religion they're open for us to follow whatever we want as long as it's for good. My parents believe that all religion is the same and creates good people. So I went and that's how I met that girl through Church Summer Olympics and summer sports camp.

MLP: Was she playing basketball too?

TQ: She was playing volleyball. And so I went back and told her about the college and she was quite excited about the college. And she said, "oh my dad heard about that college and he really likes it" and I thought oh your dad likes it huh? So maybe I can get some brownie points if I choose to go to that college.

MLP: Right

TQ: Yeah so I did. I made the decision to choose La Sierra College a private Christian College and a Christian Education over UC Riverside's bio-med program.

MLP: Did your parents say anything about it?

TQ: No I went home and I told them that I went to this campus and I just loved it. And it just turned out that my dad was talking to some of his friends at the time and he said "you know small colleges are better for your kids, rather than a large college" and that so that helped.

MLP: So there was no convincing or begging of your parents?

TQ: No strangely there wasn't much and everything lined up just right. I had an uncle who was a physician and he was also a member of the seventh day Adventist church. So we had heard of Loma Linda in the past and so for me to bring it up, it wasn't a far stretch that they were thinking. So I just said you know I kind of like this place and I want to go here. I had my own motives, wanting to impress my own girlfriend.

MLP: Did you tell your dad about it?

TQ: I told my dad this college has everything I want. Its small, it feels right, you know sometimes we just go to feeling, and I liked the motto "make man whole" spiritually, physically and mentally. And so that's what I live by before and I wanted to cultivate that. And off we go. I remember the first year. It was quite restrictive because you're not allowed to bring your car as a freshman.

MLP: Was that school policy?

TQ: but I also learned that. But it was only 40 minutes away from home. Close enough so I didn't have to go out of state or anything. And that wasn't an issue.

MLP: Did you commute or live on campus?

TQ: I lived on campus in the dorms

MLP: For the commute I'm just curious about commuter schools, how did they deal with that and how you're not allowed to have your car on campus.

TQ: I think all the freshman had to live on campus and they had very strict rules. The men's dorm and woman's dorm were separate there was no such thing as co-ed dorms. At the time UCI, UCLA and all that had co-ed dorms, there were men and women in the same hallway. Not at Loma Linda. I think my parents liked that a little bit, but for the boy it's no big deal but I think they liked the discipline of it and so they were okay.

MLP: So this time were you still with your girlfriend? Or no? The first year?

TQ: Yeah well summer, I had chosen a college. And then we had broken up.

MLP: But there was no regret though right?

TQ: No, I liked the campus. We broke up for... well she was about a year older and it just didn't work out.

MLP: But she didn't go to the same college right?

TQ: No, she was at Cal Poly Pomona at the time and it was close. If I chose that school it was only thirty minutes away for me to go visit her. My senior year in high school I was missing half of Friday because I would take off early and go visit so that's why senior year was sort of a blur. But that's how I chose my college. It was based feelings and then there was the personal agenda and yeah.

MLP: So the first year of college were you the only Vietnamese American there or were there a number?

TQ: Surprisingly I was the only one that I know of. It was a small campus and I don't recall the other Vietnamese that were there they were upper classman. And there were only a handful there was only five. Mostly Filipinos and Koreans.

MLP: Did it bother you? Or were you more indifferent about it?

TQ: I was indifferent about it and it didn't matter. It turns out that my roommate was a Taiwanese guy that went to the same high school that I did. It was like two months before the end of the school and this Chinese guy comes up to me and says, "Hey, what college are you going to?" and I said "Do I know you? I think I'm going to Loma Linda" and he said "Oh really? Where is that?" and then I hadn't talked to him and the first day I didn't know who my roommate was going to be and I go to the dorm and I'm assigned to this room and I opened the door and half the room was already decorated and had all of his stuff in there already. I said okay... I thought it was random. He said, "Hi, my name is Steve Lee" and I said "Huh?" He said, "Remember me? I went to high school with you?" I said "Oh Steve!" You know? Because I was in the AP classes and Steve was in the regular classes and so I never knew. And it turns out Steve Lee is a parachute kid.

MLP: Meaning?

TQ: Parachute kids means that they have wealthy parents in Taiwan and they send their children to American for high school and college. It doesn't matter where they go and pay for school, they stay here and hopefully they get citizenship.

MLP: Do they sponsor their families or is it just for their own good?

TQ: It's just for their own good. You know, kids that are extremely wealthy. My friends dad apparently owned a BMW dealership in Taiwan and at that time someone who had other

Taiwanese kids at the school said oh yeah that's his dad, he's the fifth richest man in Taiwan. I said oh wow.

MLP: Lucky you!

TQ: My half of the room was bare and it just had a bed. And his side of the room had all the computers and all this fancy stuff.

MLP: have you kept in contact with Steve since then?

TQ: I mean he finished college with just a college degree. I think he stayed back a couple of years too because really they needed a place to stay and go to school. Parachute kids.

MLP: So this is the first time I've heard of the term "Parachute kids" or anything, at that time was the Vietnamese community in Vietnam doing this here in the United States or...

TQ: Back in Vietnam, it was 1989 Perestroika in Russia and then after that, that is when Vietnam had the Doi Moi. Doi Moi is new change. And coincidentally, the architect of Doi Moi is Ong Nguyen Xuong Wan. He was a finance minister for the old republic and he is famous for marrying Tham Thuy Hang. She's an actress and at the time people would say that Nguy Xuong Wan, he went to Harvard. He had a Harvard MBA and came back to Vietnam to help the old republic. And then he met Tham Thuy Hang, who at the time was the hottest movie star in Vietnam. And they married. And they begot a child and that child is now is a friend in my writing group. It's a small world. But when I met Nguyen Xuong Wan after 1985, 1995 through – because he would come over here after Doi Moi. So the story is that the Vietnamese community now in Vietnam has enough money to send their kids abroad. Di Du Hoc.

MLP: Right, my cousin is doing that right now.

TQ: Back then no, the iron curtain was still up. So the only kids that were coming over were from Japan and Taiwan or Hong Kong.

MLP: And China wasn't a part of this at all?

TQ: China was still an iron curtain at that time. So last year it turns out that there was a favorite landing spot for parachute kids because it was a highly disciplined college, there's no booze, no alcohol, and it was vegetarian. And the rules were strict. And so our parents liked that. And so we had a lot of kids that were from Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Koreans and Filipino's kids because of the church. There are a lot of Koreans and Seventh Day Adventists and Filipino Adventists. And so that was the mix of the school and I was the Vietnamese kid from Westminster. I think I was the sole or the only one. I looked through and they have it classified, but I looked through a few. It was 1985 and at the time there was the story of the Vietnamese Fall of Saigon was only ten years old.

MLP: Did you feel any different? Or did you feel like you were treated differently?

TQ: No, I was treated differently or felt different because I was not Adventist.

MLP: Oh so it had nothing to do with cultural background rather religious background?

TQ: Not at all, there were quite a few Asians there at the campus already so that, me being treated like that is not unusual. The seventh day Adventist College, also took a lot of kids from their Adventist schools across the United States. And so there are a lot of white kids that have never seen Asians before.

MLP: Oh that is always fun

TQ: Yeah, but they always have their own group. The groups from Southern College, Michigan, in the East Coast, they all hung out together. But these were Christian kids and so they mingled well. But you can tell that they were a little uncomfortable because they came to California and they were surrounded by Asians. For them it was difficult.

MLP: So the Asian population at that time was pretty high?

TQ: I think it was about 35% if you count all the others

MLP: Right, right.

TQ: SO I didn't feel like an outsider in that respect, but I did feel like an outsider because I wasn't a seventh day Adventist. Because a good 80% of the kids there are seventh day Adventist. The ones that were not seventh day Adventist were either the parachute kids or kids like me who have various reasons wanting to go to a Christian college and a Christian education.

MLP: It seems that there are strict seventh day Adventist types of college. How did you get yourself in or what do you think you brought that you think they liked?

TQ: New people to evangelize.

MLP: Oh yeah that also leads up to the second question. What kept you from converting?

TQ: I think it's because of my respect for my parents. You know There are a lot of families that they're have the history within family conversion you know where the children convert where the parent stay. And so that's what happens to a lot of prior generations of Asian kids there like the Filipinos and the Koreans. A lot of Korean's grandparents there are Buddhist and so these kids would convert as a result. As for me, I never made that transition partly because of the time, out of the respect of my parents and they have been so open about the issue of religion and spirituality was more important than religion itself and so we didn't feel the need to make the conversion. We studied the books of the bible very carefully, especially the book of Daniel and the book of Revelation

MLP: Ah always a fun book to read.

TQ: Yes because it is the Armageddon. So you know, I learned words like exegesis and is Jesus and reading and taking out. So I had a more, I knew more about the bible than probably other

seventh day Adventist and we had to take an intro to seventh day Adventist so I knew. If you're non-Adventist you had to take that class.

MLP: Oh so it's kind of like a citizenship test.

TQ: So you had to understand the origins of LNC white and how the church of 1844, how Christ expectance and second coming, how he came and went the disappointments and how the church decided to open up the sanitarium and stuff. So I never converted but I made a lot of friends that are seventh day Adventist. I still keep in touch with them. One of them is the wife of Dr. Peter Nguyen the plastic surgeon here in town. He has an office over at the Bella Terra.

MLP: Oh that Peter Nguyen!

TQ: Image plastic surgery

MLP: Right, right.

TQ: His wife is my college classmate and she was the one that gave me and kind of gives me bibles and stuff.

MLP: So you still have a lot of friends that are active.

TQ: I guess I remain lukewarm

MLP: I like that lukewarm

TQ: Apparently I learned that the term lukewarm is a negative term because you're supposed to make the leap of faith, the commitments to be baptized you know?

MLP: Did you know a lot of the parachute kids that converted? Did you know anyone who converted?

TQ: I did not know anyone who had actually converted, except Peter Nguyen.

MLP: Oh he converted?

TQ: He converted for his wife, he is Catholic. He had converted

MLP: Oh, so do you think that if you made the conversion choice to be a seventh day Adventist, would your parents mind at all?

TQ: No, my parents would be open with that and they would be okay. I just chose not to because I never had any restrictions or barriers to that.

MLP: Are you the same way in raising your kids like if they chose to follow a religion that is not the same with yours, would you be okay with it as well?

TQ: Yeah, yeah we're open to that because of spirituality. I teach the kids there's a higher being that is great and responsible for who we are and where we come from and all of the tenants of humility. You know, it's still the basic of principles that is inclusive in all religions. They teach similar concepts to those human concepts, but yeah, never converted.

MLP: So after your four years at Loma Linda, you started applying to medical school? When did it sort of become concrete that you were like yeah I'm going to become a doctor?

TQ: Acing all of my science classes. My first year I had all A's. My second year getting all A's and getting noticed because it's a small campus, they know. And so then I got to apply to be a teaching assistant.

MLP: A T.A. already? Oh wow.

TQ: So I taught chemistry in lab and then I kind of gained their trust of the professors so then I ran the lab, I was responsible for mixing all of the reagents for all of the classes and then I taught the classes. So I did that partly to make extra money

MLP: Was it a substantial amount?

TQ: No, it was just pocket money. But more so because I just like to teach and I enjoy teaching as a part of it and it keeps my mind fresh. Because I wanted to and knew that I had to take the MCAT.

MLP: I'm starting to study for it now and I'm starting to forget some stuff I learned first year too.

TQ: So this was a good way for me to keep well versed in chemistry so by teaching this stuff for so yeah and then I continued when I took organic chemistry and then I taught the organic chemistry class and then I became a grader where I graded papers for the professors. So I stayed active within the chemistry department and then I realized hey I like teaching and science and so after two years I had already taken all of my physics, organic Chem, chemistry and all the courses necessary for the MCAT, so I took my MCAT early. I took my MCAT at the end of my sophomore year.

MLP: Oh wow... How did you do?

TQ: I did well. At the time it was graded from the scale of 70 is the maximum. It's a different scale. And so I had a 62 out of 70 and the average at that time that kids that were getting into med school was 54 as I remember. When I came home I got the results and I said 62, and I showed it to my friend. My friend that I was telling you about from Moreno High School that went to one-year bio-med program at UC Riverside, he joined a fraternity and his grades were straight B's. So his dad says "Well you got to do something about that." So the next year he became my roommate and La Sierra. He converted, not to the religion but to the school with no fraternity and no fun, no booze.

MLP: Oh so there were no fraternities or extracurricular that you were a part of?

TQ: Just sports, I played tennis.

MLP: Oh so there wasn't any like medical clubs?

TQ: No, it was mostly for me spending my time in college taking classes and then teaching the chemistry courses.

MLP: I wish I went to there now

TQ: Yeah I didn't do a lot of extracurricular, it was strictly school. And of course on the weekend I had another girlfriend and so Friday as a non-Adventist; it's very lonely for us.

MLP: Why is that?

TQ: Because of vesper Sabbath through the seventh day Adventist. From Friday afternoon to Saturday night midnight is Sabbath. And so everything shuts down. The kitchen the cafeteria everything shuts down.

MLP: What happens if you get hungry?

TQ: You have to go off campus. So that's why after two months into that place I had to get my car because I felt trapped. And it turns out if my high school GPA is more than 3.9 than I was qualified to bring my car up.

MLP: So your high school GPA counts.

TQ: Yeah because they have to see if you're a responsible kid

MLP: Ah I like that. Okay.

TQ: So I said oh thank God that I got my car. But the car was for me too... sometimes I didn't use the car all week and I stayed on campus. The car was just to drive home in Orange County and rejoin the human race where I got to see my girlfriend. We went out Friday and then Saturday I was back up hitting the books. So I spent Saturday either at Long Beach, or Huntington Beach Library where I used to hangout, or go to UCI's library.

MLP: UCI? Langson?

TQ: Yeah I would go there to get a change of atmosphere.

MLP: Right

TQ: Because I was bored and sometimes when you're bored you're just distracted and not concentrated. So I would go....

MLP: Need that background

TQ: Yeah I would need that background noise and different people I could look at but for serious studies I would reserve different places. But I would do that Saturday and Saturday night I would pick up girlfriend and we would do things and Sunday I was back at the library. And if I had a test Sunday morning I would drive back up to school. So I could use the library up there. And when I go back to school sometimes I would go to Riverside Revera Library or the bio-med library to study. So that's how I spend most of my days.

MLP: Wow you've been everywhere

TQ: Yeah I made the library tour. But mostly because I like to look at different people

MLP: I feel you; I do the same thing especially when it's in a quiet room, right? Your hands become that much more interesting.

TQ: Back then we didn't have the Internet, we didn't have Facebook.

MLP: Right

TQ: Facebook, I think it might be very difficult for kids to study.

MLP: So, can you tell me more about your application process?

TQ: At the undergraduate, 62/70 99 percentile, MCAT in hand and it was good and so at that time some of my friends said I had enough classes already to qualify to apply to med school early. And because Loma Linda is a school of medicine where they've only had a program, they would take college kids without a B.S. or a B.A. degree and would give us a degree in physiology in something. And we could go to med school one year early you know after three years.

MLP: Did you take advantage of that?

TQ: I applied and I got on the waiting list but things were against me at the time where I remember the admissions lady that came to the college I think Mrs. Demozzle. She said "Tom, you have a very good chance. Your GPA is very good". My GPA was 3.9 at the time, and then I had this 99 percentile MCAT. So you know your chances are really good. I said "Great" and she puts me on the waiting list. And I asked "How many people are on the waiting list?" And she said I was number 4 on the waiting list.

MLP: Is there a reason why you were on the waiting list? And you didn't get in?

TQ: Partly because I was not Adventist.

MLP: You're kidding me.

TQ: Because they have a quota you know. They would take Seventh Day Adventist above Non-Seventh Day Adventist who goes to their college and then they'll take Adventist from Non-Adventist schools and then they take the pagans you know

MLP: So how did you feel about that during that time?

TQ: I accepted it. I mean you feel kind of oh man I kind of wish I was seventh day Adventist.

MLP: Did you feel a little jaded at one point?

TQ: I was because I really wanted to be done with college and start med school early. So I remember I was disappointed, but my dad was telling me "you know what look at it this way, if you're on the waiting list this year" borrowing some disastrous thing that I did to my grades in the last year of school then there won't be any stress for you when you apply next year. And that was true, there was no stress.

MLP: So you didn't make it in?

TQ: I did not make it in, but my senior year comes around. So I waited my junior year and it was all the way until June I was still on the waiting list and I was still active in the waiting list all the way until the day before school med school started.

MLP: The day before?

TQ: Yeah and so they call me and said “No you know you didn’t get in this year” I said “Oh okay, that’s fine. I’ll do it my senior year.” So the good part about that...

MLP: You did get your bachelors right?

TQ: Yeah so I stayed my fourth year to get my bachelors and my minor you know.

MLP: What was your major and minor?

TQ: My major was BioChem and minor was biology. And my senior year was stress free because I already knew where I was going and everything.

MLP: So envious!

TQ: You know that’s the thing my friends and peers at the time who had revealed to us that they were pre-med at other campuses were stressing you know? My friends from high school, who were in my AP classes, revealed that they were Pre-Med too. They were stressing out applying for medical school. And for my I said yeah I was applying too, but in the back of my mind I said I was already on the waiting list, I had a place to go you know?

MLP: So everything was set?

TQ: Yeah everything was set and it was stress free and I enjoyed my senior year. I took classes, I was teaching, I made a lot of extra pocket money and I was spending time with my girlfriend.

MLP: So everything was coming up daisies?

TQ: It was nice just because I didn't have the stress of applying. And of course my friend who had switched over from UC Riverside was sitting on pins and needles because his dad was a doctor.

MLP: So there was the extra-added pressure?

TQ: Yeah, and so being roommates I would come in and out and relax.

MLP: Oh so you were no longer Steve Lee's roommate?

TQ: No Steve Lee is just some stranger parachute kid that would pay me to clean his side of the room.

MLP: You're kidding me? And you did?

TQ: No! I said dude who do I look like? Your coolie?

MLP: Some Asian coolie

TQ: Yeah I said uh because one day I said hey you got all this nice stuff. And we became friends and I would go over to his house.

MLP: Were you offended? Or was it more of like joking?

TQ: I was joking, but he was serious. I said "Steve..." Because at the time the guy had a Mercedes and a BMW parked in the parking lot.

MLP: And you had a...

TQ: Well you know I didn't have a terrible car, my parents bought me a new truck and everything, but you know it was just like... okay... He would ask me to go wash his car for him and I would go do that like no big deal. He would ask me to drive him to Alhambra to go to this expensive restaurant and I said "Okay, I will go along with you."

MLP: Like go along would he treat you out too?

TQ: Yeah he would treat me out

MLP: Oh ha-ha yeah I was just making sure you weren't just sitting in the car

TQ: Yeah so I would drive him you know at that time. I would say "Ooh... nice Mercedes." And we would go to this expensive Chinese restaurant in Alhambra and he would pay and I would say "Oh nice life Steve." And after one year I said no.

MLP: No more.

TQ: Right, me and him had nothing in common you know? So my friend was coming over and so I roomed with him for three years. And so I got into med school and I got news of getting in very early you know like late January I already got my letter of acceptance. So getting the letting of acceptance was nice because then next six months... everyone was stressing saying "Oh it's March! Oh it's April! And I'm not in yet"

MLP: So could you tell me about your first general experience in med school? I remember going to your office

TQ: There were eight other Vietnamese and none of them were Adventist. They're couple Buddhist. One of them was a daughter of a very good friend of my fathers. They all came from other campuses

MLP: So they weren't undergrads with you?

TQ: Except for my friend, his name is Joe and he's an intern down at Mission Viejo. But I roomed with my friend the first year of med school.

MLP: So was it a different campus or could you still retain?

TQ: No you had to go thirty minutes away. Yeah Loma Linda Campus, Riverside was in the middle, La Sierra is south, and med school is north, by the health science campus. So we got the

off campus apartment. And med school was interesting because you know you go in there and there's the... and that's the same year the same movie "Gross Anatomy" came out.

MLP: I have not seen that, should I?

TQ: DVD. Yes. Gross Anatomy. I think it still talks about you know what first year med school is going to be like. So it just happens that we were taking anatomy and the movie came out and half the class went to go see the movie and funny thing after seeing the movie, we all laughing like it's just like school again. You know we felt that's sick because it was so stressful that you know the first year taking anatomy being surrounded by all of these people that are really smart and you know, so you're no longer the cream of the crop. But it was fun. Same thing, Friday and Saturday everyone is gone so non Adventists we would just find our way home.

MLP: Were you still with your girlfriend at the time?

TQ: Yes I was. We broke up after two years of med school, but... yeah my experience in med school was like that.

MLP: You seem very cool and collected during your undergrad were you like that in medical school too?

TQ: Yeah I was never stressed out. I would go to bed at midnight. I would never stay past up midnight. Partly because I always felt getting plenty of sleep I would be more productive during the day.

MLP: Do you credit it towards good time management?

TQ: Yes and also that "make man whole kind of thing." Physically, mentally, and spiritually fit. I sort of just not let myself stress and when I do feel stress I would go on a run, I would play tennis or I would do something physical. Just to you know balance things out. I do see that things that do seem foreboding aren't as bad after a good run.

MLP: So at this point, were you involved in the community in any way or were you still sort of in like your education bubble?

TQ: Yeah, cocoon. On top of that it was the seventh day Adventist campus that was not like any other campus cocoon. The reason LNG white put the school out there in Loma Linda was because it was in the boonies and we were away from things.

MLP: Kind of like UC Davis?

TQ: So yeah there was no temptation to do anything. L.A. was too far to drive for you know evil deeds. They weren't allowed to sell alcohol in Loma Linda, but I didn't drink.

MLP: Even if you were over 21?

TQ: Even if you were over 21 in Loma Linda City limits, alcohol wasn't sold so you had to go outside. And it wasn't hard Redlands was next door, San Bernardino was next to us so you would just cross the street. So I mean at that time it was just wholesome. I didn't stay out late; we didn't go out to clubs. My girlfriend and I when I come back here we usually just go to dinner, go to a movie, mess around, and then I would go to my library again. So for the first two years that was the routine.

MLP: So what about your third and fourth year?

TQ: Ah, rotations. And that kind of threw me off a little bit because I'm kind of a creature of habit.

MLP: How would that throw you off?

TQ: Every few months are a change of living area. Because if it's off campus, then you'd go and the university would put you up in this place near this hospital and you would stay for a month.

MLP: Was it all paid or did you have to pay for yourself?

TQ: It was all paid. It's a part of the education. The living was free and so you just go to your rotations. That's the benefits of the Loma Linda campus.

MLP: So with the rotations did you still have that sort of like was the Seventh Day Adventist of Friday and Saturday would kind of be half days?

TQ: Because we would rotate at White Memorial which is Seventh Day Adventist hospital. Glendale Adventist and so Friday was very quiet, even though the hospital continues twenty four seven.

MLP: Oh okay so the hospital doesn't just...

TQ: Even in the main campus people still work, but you can tell it's still very quiet. Everyone goes home to Vesper. They have bible meetings and if you weren't Adventist, it was their social time.

MLP: it was their time to meet

TQ: Yeah it was there time to meet other people and stuff

MLP: You weren't inclined to go out and mix and mingle with people?

TQ: Yeah a few times but because I had a girlfriend who was back at home, there was no incentive for me to stay. But if I had stayed I would have probably met some friends and got closer to some of them, which I did, but not on a level where we still keep in touch regularly. Mostly because I had a girlfriend who was Buddhist. Really when I came back to Orange County it was a different world.

MLP: So it was coming out of like....

TQ: Yeah coming out of that bubble. So yeah, that was my med school experience. And then I met my wife like two... third year of medical school.

MLP: So what year was that? I remember she said that you guys met in 1991?

TQ: 1991 Yeah.

MLP: When I was born! So you guys met in 91' when you graduated medical school did you know that you were going into OB/GYN

TQ: No. Well I knew OB/GYN that I wanted to do that in the winter of my third year. That's when I did the OB/GYN rotation. I finished going through it I was miserable because the residents were really tough and really on me and I didn't think that would like it but I really liked the deliveries but after I did the rotations and I did general surgeries and I looked back, and I said "Which rotation was it that I enjoyed the most?" And so I picked OB/GYN because I like surgery, but I also like patient contact. General surgeons sometimes don't get enough patient contact. Their patients are asleep you know. They just see them for pre-op and then post-op and that's it. But OB/GYN I get to see the patients for nine months.

MLP: Before, during, and after.

TQ: The patient stays with you because I can be the primary care and see them on a regular basis and sort of know their lives and stuff. And so I chose that and said that I wanted to have an office. I wanted to see patients on a regular basis and I like to do surgeries and deliver babies. And so all of that fit and I said okay that's what I want to do. I applied though. I put all my eggs in one basket. I only applied to one program.

MLP: That's really, really, really, really, risky

TQ: Because the program that I was at, I went back to do my fourth year of clerkship at White Memorial and they loved me there, and you know they said that they would pick you as their

resident and I only picked one program. Well the match system at that time was... all of a sudden the computers went mad and all of a sudden I fell through the cracks and I was like huh? So I had to scramble my first year.

MLP: Wow...

TQ: So I didn't get into the first program that I want. And so it was unmatched.

MLP: Were you just floating around in limbo at that time?

TQ: You have a twenty four hour period to scramble for a spot because the way the system works, even if the program wants a certain person, sometimes the programs go unfilled is because the way of how they system matches you. Now they changed it, it's better now.

MLP: So there's not that much of scrambling anymore?

TQ: You still scramble but they have a systematic way of scrambling.

MLP: That sounds very oxy...

TQ: Oxymoron. Systematic. But at that time what happens is if you're unmatched you have twenty- four hours to call the program.

MLP: Calling right?

TQ: Directly. With an unmatched slot. Because they have to match because they have to have enough bodies to see patients starting July. So I called and it was... you know I just chose the internal medicine program in Loma Linda because you know it was...

MLP: Unmatched?

TQ: Usually goes unmatched. And I said "Okay I will do internal medicine" I'll do categorical, meaning you know I had to do all three years of it. They have an internship year and the categorical. And you know what I said "give me the categorical". I was kind of down at that time you know, they promised me and I didn't get in and so I went in to do one year internal medicine

and I you know I stayed back in Loma Linda and all of my friends went off to their respective residencies, some of them stayed back on the main campus to do their residency so I still them. But residency is different because you're getting paid; you're working a lot harder.

MLP: Were you getting like buku money?

TQ: No, nuh-uh it was just you know... but it was more than I did when I was a T.A. you know?

MLP: Yeah

TQ: But you know I was able to save money at the time and I had my own apartment and so it was nice. I settled half way through I kind of said okay I will be an internist because I liked it. I didn't love it, but I liked it. I remembered there was a turning point when I was doing ontology and then I came on service through ontology and I was looking through my list of patients and most patients were over 50. And then I saw wow a 22 year old, Vietnamese name with cancer. And I go visit her and she smiles, she's beautiful, smiling, and happy all the time. Wow. She doesn't look sick at all. I open up her chart inoperable gastric metastasis gastric cancer.

MLP: Oh Jesus Christ...

TQ: I said "Ohh...God..." this girl you know... So basically she's on hospice there's no chance, they're not going to operate on her. They're not treating her, but she just comes in for pain management and goes home. So I get to know her now and I uhh...

MLP: How old were you at the time?

TQ: This was 1989? No... '93 so I was twenty-four.

MLP: Mid-twenties?

TQ: Mid-twenties, yeah. I was twenty-four. And this girl was about twenty one twenty two. So it just happened that my service ended in February and during my service I realized you know what

I don't know if I can do internal medicine. I like young patients and I'm not sure if I can do sad stories seeing patients die... And so it just happens that I was walking in Pasadena one day with my family and I saw one of my attendings at White Memorial who was an op-nutrition and he really liked me. I was walking by and he said "Tom, what are you doing?" and I said "Oh I'm doing internal medicine in Loma Linda" and he said "Hey, do you still want to do OB?" and I said "Yeah" and he says "Let's see what I can do" and apparently the guy that they had matched in my place was somebody they did not want, turned out to be a terrible resident, everyone hates him.

MLP: Was he a prick?

TQ: Well I don't know what happened, but he managed to piss off everybody there.

MLP: Oh wow! Okay...

TQ: So it's unprecedented that once you're a resident you never get fired right? But they're going to fire this guy

MLP: So he must've been really, really, really bad

TQ: Either he's really, really, bad or they felt really bad that you know they didn't match me because they made a lot of promises to me. So anyways, I get a call from this attending like a week later and says "Tom, we want you to come as an OB/GYN resident." And I said "Really? Sure" you know "We want you come here and talk to us" So I drove out the same day and interviewed again but it was just a formality and when I went back they sent a letter of acceptance and they were going to accept me as a second year unprecedented meaning that it was a four year residency program

MLP: Right, right

TQ: But the first year...

MLP: You were doing internal medicine already right?

TQ: Internal medicine I had no surgical you know... the guys that were there doing first year stuff, I missed it all. But they were going to accept me as a second year.

MLP: Did you miss out or did you have to re-learn a lot of the stuff?

TQ: No because they said I was such a good med student that I was doing first year stuff already except surgery that they could just throw me in second year.

MLP: Wow.

TQ: Second year, so wow, you know, I get to go back to do what I wanted to do and I don't have to repeat that first year.

MLP: Yay!

TQ: And I say "wow" what is this you know? So I just go with it and I remember being on call the last day of June 31st. Last day, one year, driving out to L.A. to start July 1st because residency you know you get to start July 1st. So I was on call again I was on call the last day and I was on call the first day so I go oh my God I'm tired, but I loved it you know, I was doing what I wanted to do.

MLP: So was that the first time you had to stay up past midnight?

TQ: Oh yeah, by residency plenty of staying up past midnight because you have to take call the whole night so yeah that's how I became an OB/GYN resident.

MLP: Just walking out in the middle of nowhere.

TQ: Yeah it just happens. And that just happens and here I am. I came on the year that there were three residences. In my year it was two women and I.

MLP: Right

TQ: And because I felt that I was the underdog the guy that came after, I had to learn so much more so I had to work extra hard. And as a result working extra hard...

MLP: Puts you up ahead

TQ: I think that's the case because then I felt like I didn't have my first year and then all of the others....

MLP: Got to step up my game. So after all of a sudden Tom, when did you get married?

TQ: We got married in 94'

MLP: And then you had your first kid?

TQ: Um in 98' and then I opened my practice in 99'

MLP: Okay

TQ: I was working for a Chinese guy for two years in Alhambra but he had a restrictive clause. If I stopped working there I couldn't within a fifteen-mile radius.

MLP: There's stuff like that

TQ: Still. Uh-huh. It doesn't hold, but I try not to fight him because it did teach me you know how to run an office and stuff like that.

MLP: Oh so there is stuff like that... so not... kind of like a drug dealers type of turf type of thing.

TQ: It is, it is called the non-compete clause.

MLP: Ah okay

TQ: It's not legal but they tied it into my contract and I signed it. So if it doesn't work out here I'm going to go out to Orange County.

MLP: Right so you already had kind of a back-up plan?

TQ: Kind of, but my wife's family is from Alhambra so it was okay if I stayed there to work too. But after two years I came out to Orange County and opened my practice.

MLP: The one next too...

TQ: Uh-huh. October 11th 1999 is when I opened my doors. My dad helped me with setting it up. He actually had to cut a piece of the pharmacy to accommodate.

MLP: When I did his interview he mentioned that.

TQ: Yeah, and so I remember the cost of putting up the office and putting up the walls, everything was forty thousand. He gave me the loan to do that and I said okay.

MLP: How did you, did you feel that you accomplished everything? Or did you feel that there was more to do? Or did you feel that it was kind of the first step?

TQ: I was just trying to survive because when I came back my Vietnamese was not good. And there were thirteen other doctors within the community. So I was concerned.

MLP: Were you hoping to make waves within the Vietnamese community?

TQ: No I was just hoping to survive.

MLP: Okay

TQ: Things that were going against me was that I'm young and I couldn't speak Vietnamese.

MLP: So why was being young such a big...

TQ: Drawback? Because doctors are supposed to be old. They're supposed to be old and seasoned and you know?

MLP: Do you think that still remains true within the Vietnamese community?

TQ: You know surprisingly when I started with my poor Vietnamese accent; the community sort of embraced the young doctor. He can't communicate with anybody, but he seems young and

honest. And so I think that helped and of course I put on my time at work. We only had Nathan at the time and he was one year old but my wife was working as a dentist at the time to support my work. Because as an op-nutrition you don't make any money the first six months of the year because the deliveries you know

MLP: Then what happens after? Well duh...

TQ: Yeah, yeah you don't get paid you see them. Getting in the insurance, applying to become a provider for these insurance takes six months to a year

MLP: Is there a reason why you wanted to be on your own instead of working with a group? For example, Kaiser or any other medical group at the time?

TQ: After two years working for the solo practitioner I felt like I could do it. I like to have control over what I do. I like to control my destiny. If you work for Kaiser or for somebody you do feel helpless.

MLP: But did you understand the financial risk? Or was there a financial risk at the time?

TQ: There was. You had to synch your belt you know and go through that. And I had some advice from my parents. They had run a business before so they know what it takes and so yeah. I mean it was scary, but I tried and some of it I winged and other times I would emulate the other guy's practice would do and my wife would help me with the clerical work of it.

MLP: So from there, is that when you started getting involved with the Vietnamese community? Because I know you're pretty much involved with the Vietnamese community now. But when did you kind of started getting your feet wet?

TQ: Not until the last couple of years because basically I was working. The things I did in the last few years were to promote myself. The radio work I did was to teach about medicine but some of it is for self-promoting and then when I got busy I started doing more... it was basically I worked a lot. It's only the last two years or so that I just started being more involved in the Orange County Vietnamese Alliance Club, doing more charity work.

MLP: Can you highlight some of the community work that you have done? Some of the stuff you are most proud of.

TQ: I like my participating with the Vietnamese America Cancer Foundation. I often volunteer to do their programs for ovarian cancer. My involvement with the alliance club it's going to open more opportunity for me to give back to the community. My radio work in terms of promoting women's health issues and questions because even the first few years the radio worked for self-promotion and after that even though I was really busy I continued that for the next ten years because just to keep woman's health issue a uh... like cervical cancer. At the time when I opened my practice the issue of Asian women and the risk of cervical cancer were so high.

MLP: Right because women were so afraid of...

TQ: Right...

MLP: So we're going to move on, now that you have kids and anything, have you talked to them about where you came from and where your parents came from or anything like that?

TQ: Every year on April 30th, tradition my parents would give us a synopsis about what happened on April 28th, where we were and April 29th what we did, and so you know we try to tell these kids these stories. So it always surrounds the Fall of Saigon.

MLP: So they're pretty well versed and they know. At least the older one?

TQ: The older one starts looking at Wikipedia, using Google, you know looking at the history about Vietnam. And so we try to retell that story of how we left Vietnam and everyone else's story. We would point out when we go, we would point out certain miles or landmarks within the city, where and what things used to look like.

MLP: Have they been back to Vietnam at all?

TQ: No we haven't taken them yet. Maybe sometime soon in the future

MLP: So it's not like you're totally against it. You want to take them back right? Or do you have reservations and if so what kind of reservations do you have?

TQ: Well because Vietnam has changed so much now and we don't have any close relatives there so it would be just to vacation. And I don't want them to see Vietnam as just a resort. A lot of the Vietnamese go back now and they spend a lot of their time within the resort and they forget. And right now there's a little bit of an issue of I just don't... I would just take them to the historical parts of Vietnam, but I don't know if I like the way of the city and the people's mentality are now.

MLP: Understood. So it's still pretty up in the air right now?

TQ: Yeah it's not a priority.

MLP: Have your kids asked you about going back or has it ever occurred to them?

TQ: No, never occurred to them. But there's some events that are going to come up soon that may increase their awareness. My grandfather's family burial ground in Ba Ria, the government wants us to move the bodies you know.

MLP: They already had my family move my grandparents' bodies because they took the land back and built something like a parking lot or some kind of corporate thing on it.

TQ: Yeah, so that's what my dad is going through my right. They want to move it so we're trying to decide what we're going to do. And so we think that the kids will be more aware once we start doing this project.

MLP: So we're going to wrap this thing up right now. So do you have any sort of like future college generations and for your kids do you have any last remarks about tying culture with you know your American culture for the kids like me who are born here but their parents that are from Vietnam. Anything that ties everything up in a pretty little package?

TQ: I think it always goes to the old clichés and old adages you know. Know where you've been.

MLP: Why is that important to you?

TQ: So in my 47th year now, things that I used to think about as a teenager, some of it are still the same. Some values you know I still believe that is classic and the tenants and the rules of the bibles the Ten Commandments, the belief of Buddha living in the moment, and not worrying about things you can't change, and not worrying about the things that hasn't happened yet.

Things like that you know, people live by principles and these principles are human values that have existed for thousands of years and so it is really a lesson for living. The rules are the same, the situations may change but people haven't changed. And so going back to the basics is being aware of your surroundings, understand, respect your elders, and be mindful of things that you are doing right now because you don't know what is around the corner, and be positive. So all of these things are handed down by our parents and we won't know all of that if we don't listen to what the older generations are saying.

MLP: Okay so I would like to thank you on the behalf of myself and UC Irvine for letting me come to your wonderful home and interviewing you this evening.