Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: TO TIEN DUNG
Interviewer: Danthu Pham
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DP : Today is Saturday September 27, 2014. This is Danthu Pham with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project. I am interviewing Mr. Dũng Tô at the Westminster Library, California.

DT : My name is Tô Tiến, born on June 18, 1955 in Đà Nẵng ,a city in the middle region of Việt Nam.

DP : Where have you been living in Việt Nam?

DT : After leaving Đà Nẵng, the family lived in Quảng Trị near the river named Bến Hải. Then we move to Hội An and lastly resided in Sài Gòn until 1975.

DP : Please talk about the time you live in Đà Nẵng?

DT: At the time I remembered living in the area reserved for the employees of a distict named Hòa xa .There, there is a beautiful yellow flower garden. I used to remember Chợ Cồn market , we watch movies outdoors. At Chợ Cồn there are also many good food and desserts vendors.

DP : Please tell me about your school life?

DT: My dad worked in the government so my family move around a lot. Not until we lived in Hội An that I went to Hội An Elementary school. After second grade, I moved to Sài Gòn and continued schooling at elementary of Chí Hòafor a year. After that I went to Võ Trưởng Toản High School for 2 years. Then, I moved to a technology school of Nguyễn Trưởng Tộ for 2 year. After that, I stayed at the school of Cao Thắng. Finally I passed my college entrance exam and went to the school named Phú Thọ in Sài Gòn.
DP : Can you tell me about your parents and siblings?

DT: Our family has many siblings, 5 brothers and 6 sisters. My parents have 13 kids but a sister passed away at the age of 2. They are from Hà yet we moved to the south in the year of 54s. My dad was a police officer. Before he was an investigator, my mother was teaching but soon she stayed home and took care of family instead.

DP: Please let me know more about your religion?

DT: We are Budhist. Our 2 brothers and 2 sisters followed Budhism and boyscout in Việt Nam.

DP: How about the traditions of the Vietnamese culture during holdiday within your family?

DT: When we lived in Sài Gòn the whole family lived closely together. The 3 uncles and 4 families lived under 1 roof, total 60 people, 3 generations. There are 3 turns when it’s meal time, the first is the youth then adults, lastly is the early adults. It’s very enjoyable at meal time and we are close enough to wear each other’s clothes without asking permission. When the women in the family go grocery shopping for water spinach or rau muống, the vendor is very happy because she can go home early because she will sell them quickly in 1 hour. The house is behind a market named 20, the market is small so the people lived in there are very close. The atmosphere is cozy among the neighbors.

DP: How about the time during the Vietnam War and what are the feelings of the people at the time?

DT: During the war, the older brother volunteer to be enlisted in the Vietnamese Airborne Division. He got injured at the breast side. Then another injury in the eye so he quited. My dad retired after being an investigator. When he was working, his role is not to torture the criminals but to inform them about the differences between the rights and the wrongs of the Communist. In 1975, before April 30th, 20 days later my brother took a boat from Đà to Nha Trang but got
caught in Nha Trang. Yet he convinced the people to release him back to Sài gòn. Until the April 30th, the family decided to go on the boat to find freedom.

DP: When you went to America, did you bring any thing?

DT: This is a special question for me. During 1975, I was a college student who talks about politics with my dad and brothers. The loss of Đà Nẵng and Ban mê Thước to Nha Trang and ultimately, the south. I went to buy a filmstrip to save the pictures of the ancestors. When arrived here in America, I used them to create the altar for the family.

DP: Please talk more about your family in America and how did the family settle?

DT: We just brought dried food, a friend of my dad gave us 100 dollars and my mom also had some gold. We were on the sea for 5 days. We saw people on smaller boats. On the 5th day, the captain gave me the lead to sail to the north although I am only 20, because the north is the way leaving the home country. At about 4 o’clock, I saw a bright light. I was screaming excitedly and the captain sailed the boat heading to that direction. We realized it was a ship from the U.S Army. That ship took us to an island in Philipines. We stayed until 2 o’clock on the next day and was taken by a C 130 plane to the island of Guam. At Guam, we finished the paperwork, 2 weeks later we went to Fort Jeffery Arkansas. We stayed there for 2 months and we were sponsored by family to Washington in the state of Minesota. On the first day in Minesota, we stayed in the mobile home owned by the student in Washington. On the 2nd day, we went to work for the first time in the U.S, I was farimg for 1 dollar an hour. My job is done to collect the weeds and break the corn silk tops of corn plants. When breaking the corn silk is called tassoo that's not the flowers anymore, but I only put effort in to raising left for it to grow. I keep going between two rows of corn, and with both hands, grasp the top to the break and then clean up the tops of the corn. At that time life was very peaceful despite being as 1 dollar 1 hour but we are very happy,
thinking that 1 hour with $1 can help feed the family. Our family then a total of 18 people, but I work hard after 4 days off work and was fired. He said that all my farm work faster than normal if you do, it takes 2 weeks to complete. Now I have to stop work, but another chance came, I worked as a custodian at Campo, 1 dollar 97cent/1 hour. After 4 days, I have been unemployed; yet the new job is with longer hours and wages almost doubled, life begins to get better.

DP: Have you and your siblings attend any schools?

DT: When our family arrived in Washington in July, we started a new life for the work concerned, and in September, the siblings in the family are still in school age have please write list to go to school. Personally, though we have 1 year college in Vietnam, we think our English is too poor so we would go to high school, enrolled in two classes, one English, one math class. At the same time we were also going to school at the University of Washington. We went to high school to learn English, so that we do not lose time and get acquainted with the school in America. We learned there and after 2 years of work we wanted to go to a bigger than school named the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis which is about in the southwest of our house, a 2-hour drive away from our family. We learned for half a year, and on Christmas we visit family. My dad wants to take the family to California, because of the warm and sunny weather. In Minnesota the weather is so cruel, so cold and transportation is difficult. The climate is not suitable for the Vietnamese people themselves. I told my dad to please wait one more year to be completed in engineer major, then we can move there. I will have to get a job to help support the family, then my dad said if we can wait for 1 year and a half, it will be 2 years waiting for my brother and the other children to finish school. I asked my Dad to let me out of school to go to the company Campo suit during the summer for half of the year to have some money for the settlement in California. Then my dad said if you wait half the year we can wait one more year
for completion in school. I think my dad was determined to move to California, I asked my dad when and finally the day of Christmas in 1977, our family packed all assets in 3 cars and moved on San Jose. In San Jose, we started to apply for jobs, and got at IBM working as graphic designers. After 9 months, I applied to college, then I got into Berkeley and the San Jose State. Then I chose San Jose State because it is nearby. I finished school in 1980. I have brothers and sisters who work, who go school. My family of 7 people graduate from San Jose State. At that time, fortunately, before graduation in two months, I got a job and since 1980 I work as an aeronautical engineer until this point.

DP: Then can you talk more about family life, how you met your wife?

DT: Since 1975, I became the first child to leave the family away. In the time away from our families and began to attend activities in the Vietnamese community, there was a period that I also participate in a political organization. This organization of political activity is where we met our spouses. But we do not have any emotional relationship yet, until one day in a fundraiser, I played a young man recently married to his wife, saying farewell to his loved one to serve the nation against the foreign invaders. While we were sad, walking backward to leave the stage. Then my partner, do not understand the reason why that made the crowd from the hall laugh and we laugh along with them. When I left the scenes there is a girl teased me “you two performers together on stage look like a couple, so why not get together. Because this girl, we started to notice each other now. In English it means that’s all she wrote. Three years later, we are married to each other. There is one more to share here is that on the day of the performance, from the crowds, through exchanging stories with elders, we discovered that our family leave on a same boat in Vietnam.
DP: Now married, do you still keep the tradition and culture of the Vietnamese people in the United States?

DT: In the hope to help the Vietnamese language students learn about Vietnamese culture, my wife and I encourage students to attend cultural activities. In a fairly long period of time we have created an art, the first step is the little music scene. Music first scene we get is talk about weapons Hoa Lu Dinh Bo Linh, a hero of his country in Vietnam. And the music scene was brought to the village in a program using Vietnamese Hung Su Club. We find that the music scene is well suited to contribute to the Club. It is the art display, which conveys cultural historical and cultural value of Vietnam. The art began to grow stronger, some students after years of practice, are better. They contribute original art for community activities as well during every year on the occasion of the death anniversary of the Hung kings, or the anniversaries of Hai Ba Trung, Mid-Autumn Festival, and the emulation program such as special entertainment program Vietnamese love of the arts and also at the annual Lunar New Year Fair Association student organization. From the initial program representative of the Vietnamese language center for the Vietnamese Village program. Perhaps it is our honor when we open the Vietnamese language school with no tuition fee. We traveled to find sponsors. Students not only learn the a language and participate in music rehearsals, but they have began to penetrate into the Vietnamese soul. By the way, I also want to thank the parents who have support their communities with the Vietnamese children born in the United States.

DP: Yes, thank you very much Mr. Dung interview today.

DT: Thank you for this valuable opportunity to talk about my life in the United States.