Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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Interviewer: Thuy Vo Dang
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TVD: First of all, I’d like you to introduce yourself, including your first and last name, and the date of birth.

TN: My name is Thao Nguyen¹ and my birthday is October 26th, 1956. I am here for the project’s interview.

TVD: We will continue the interview in Vietnamese.

TN: Ok.

TVD: Could you tell us a little bit about your family? What did your parents do for a living? Where were you born at?

TN: Well, my parents were actually Northern refugees who moved to the South after the communists divided the country in 1954. They migrated to South Vietnam, and they had 11 children.

TVD: All born after they moved to the South?

TN: Yes. They had 11 kids after they migrated to the South. I am number 7. My father worked at various jobs, and finally he found a job working for the US government. It only paid a small salary. My mother had a small business, selling cooked sweet rice², to help feeding her children.

My parents lived in Saigon.

TVD: You said he did civil work - being a clerk in the office of the U.S. government there?

¹ Thao Nguyễn
² Xôi
TN: They had an office in South Vietnam to collect information on Vietnam like folks at the magazines.

TVD: How do you spell it?

TN: U-S-A-I-D.

TVD: Ok, ok. You told us your family had 11 children. In which city did your parents live in?

TN: My father came from Thanh Hoa, my mother from Lang Son. I don’t know the circumstance of their meeting, and how it led to the marriage. Back then, the communists divided the country. In my father’s own words, the reason they wanted to move to the South was that they had witnessed a lot of killing themselves. The communists had chopped off the heads of the landowners in the North. My father thought he couldn’t live under Communism, and thus decided to move to the South with my mother.

TVD: Were they members of the Catholic Church?

TN: My mother was a born Catholic, while my father was a Buddhist. However, according to the tradition of the time, my mother followed her husband’s religion after marrying him. So, she converted to Buddhism.

TVD: What kind of social class was your family in at the time?

TN: Not even in the middle class; we were in the working class.

TVD: Once your parents were in the South, and had born 11 children subsequently, did you older brothers and sisters work to help supporting your parents?

TN: When we were in Vietnam?

TVD: Yes.

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3 Thanh Hoa.
4 Lang Sơn.
5 Công Giáo gốc.
TN: My eldest brother was a soldier, a common soldier, not an officer. My other sisters found jobs - immigration work in Saigon. I was still in school. Of the 11 children, I was in the 1st year of college in 1975.

TVD: Did you have any memory about your schools, your teachers or anything special growing up in Saigon?

TN: As you already knew, maybe not because you were born here. I was born in Vietnam, grew up there, and went through high school in Vietnam which was so fun. However, it was very different from here. We respected the teachers back then. We would cross our arms together in deference while talking to them. We stood up from our seats when we asked them a question. Yes, I did ditch class – something one wouldn’t be able to pull off here. I had a lot of good memories with my high school friends. Yet, our living standard was poor, very poor. We were neither considered middle class nor owned a large home. Those games we played with our friends were common games created by ourselves. Regarding those school years, I still like it, plus the tradition of respecting the teachers.

TVD: Could you tell more about the games that you used to play?

TN: For example, we would draw shapes on the ground and hopped around them. Or, we would divide ourselves into two teams of mixed boy-and-girl during the break time, and we would try to pull the opposite team passing the dividing line to claim victory. Then, we had this game with chopsticks and ball. We’d throw a ball up in the air, and tried to turn the chopsticks so many times before it hit the ground. Or, we’d spread the chopsticks on the ground, and tried to grab some of the chopsticks and the ball at the same time. I don’t see people playing that

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6 Nhảy lò cò.
7 Chơi kéo dây.
8 Chơi banh đũa.
game here. Or, we would play with the glass-balls\(^9\), something like that, but being a girl I didn’t play that game. I played Five-Ten\(^{10}\), instead.

TVD: What was it the Five-Ten game?

TN: It was Hide-and-Seek game. It was very popular for poor children.

TVD: For which age groups?

TN: I think it was from 1\(^{st}\) level\(^{11}\) down. 1\(^{st}\) level was equivalent to 6\(^{th}\) grade. During the rainy season, water pooled in the uncovered ditches and drained, which are covered here. There were a lot of mosquito’s lavas or fishes living in there. Or, we’d collect mandarin peels, which other people left around after they ate the fruits, to sell back to the traditional medicine shops. They’d buy them from us, or trade cinnamon for them.

TVD: You are talking about your study, so what subject did you enjoy the most?

TN: Math. I was really bad at learning Girl Art\(^{12}\). It was about sewing and embroidering – probably offered here in the States but I am not sure since I didn’t take high school here. We had such a class in Vietnam. They would give us a piece of fabric, and then we had to sew, to embroider it with fish-bone stitch\(^{13}\), chain stitch\(^{14}\) and what not. Those were the requirements for that class, which I took from 1\(^{st}\) grade to 6\(^{th}\) grade in an area called (8:20). Later on, I got transferred to another school.

TVD: They were all public schools?

TN: Public. We could not afford private education.

TVD: Did your parents encourage you to study any particular field because of your gender?

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\(^9\) Chơi bán bài.
\(^{10}\) Chơi trốn tìm.
\(^{11}\) Lớp Nhất.
\(^{12}\) Nữ công.
\(^{13}\) Mũi xương cá.
\(^{14}\) Mũi dây chuyên.
TN: Actually we were so poor back then. Besides Tho\textsuperscript{15}, I have three older sisters-Thuy\textsuperscript{16}, Thuy\textsuperscript{17}, and Thoa. I also have two older brothers. The oldest sister wasn’t allowed to continue her schooling. She only went through 4\textsuperscript{th} or 5\textsuperscript{th} grade before she dropped out to help our mother selling sweet rice. The one after her actually loved to go to school, so she made it through high school. Sister Thoa was a sad case. Our father made her quitting school to be a seamstress. I was like my sister, the one who loved to be in school. I put my mind to the study and I made it to the university. After 12\textsuperscript{th} grade, I entered university upon successfully passing both Tu Tai Examinations\textsuperscript{18}.

TVD: Where did you study at?

TN: The University of Sciences in Saigon. I finished the first year there. We lost the war when I was in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} year, and my study was interrupted afterward.

TVD: Had your family’s life changed in 1975?

TN: Oh, my father was an employee of USAID, thus he was allowed to bring those of us who were still single to Vung Tau\textsuperscript{19}, and waited there to be brought to the USA. Those of us who were married weren’t allowed to come along. I was the oldest one who was still single at the time. Tho, Thuy, and five others are younger than me. The older siblings weren’t allowed to tag along. The Americans offered us 2 options: to take along only the unmarried children or to stay back in exchange for 1 million Vietnamese Dongs\textsuperscript{20} - a large sum back then. My father decided to leave; he knew the communists well. After all, he wouldn’t move from the North to the South, just so he would live with them now. So, he chose the option of leaving the country, and I

\textsuperscript{15} Thọ.
\textsuperscript{16} Thụy.
\textsuperscript{17} Thụy.
\textsuperscript{18} Thi tứ tài. (One exam taken at the end of 11\textsuperscript{th} grade; the other at the end of 12\textsuperscript{th} grade)
\textsuperscript{19} Vũng Tàu.
\textsuperscript{20} Đờng.
was a part of it. I still remembered how I brought Tho and the other younger siblings – they were still really young at the time to a building on Le Quy Don\textsuperscript{21} Street on the 28\textsuperscript{th} to wait for the bus which would bring us to the airport. Monday was the 29\textsuperscript{th}; we lost the war on the 30\textsuperscript{th}. We left for the airport on the 29\textsuperscript{th} and those who were left behind just cried their eyes out. I remember some of them were pregnant at the time. The two eldest sisters had husbands who were soldiers and were absent from home at the moment. A fight broke out on the bus on that day the 29\textsuperscript{th} too. Can you imagine there was a big crowd about 100 persons waiting there? They locked the doors, and only those who had the passes could enter and boarded the bus. When the first bus arrived, people fought to get on it. Being the oldest one in the family, I had to block others, twice, so my parents could board the bus first and followed by my 5 siblings later. I remember someone pulled my hair at the time. Then, the 2\textsuperscript{nd} bus arrived. My father told me to stop fighting and moved on to the 2\textsuperscript{nd} bus, which was the one I rode on. On the way to the airport, I heard a rocket explosion, very close to our buses. I didn’t see any dead body, but debris flied everywhere. My bus’ driver was frightened. He stopped the bus and everyone panicky scrambled out of it. There was a woman with a new born baby who sat next to me. I told her to get down first, so I would pass the baby through the window to her. Everyone just fled from the scene. I stood there crying having no clue of what to do next. A man on a La Dalat\textsuperscript{22} stopped by and asked me where my parents were. I told him they were at the airport, and begged him to drive me there. He declined but asked where I lived. I told him I lived on Phan Dinh Phung\textsuperscript{23} Street in Saigon. He gave me a ride back there. Missing that trip to the airport caused me to stay back in Vietnam for another 4 years. I tried to escape by boat later.

TVD: Your parents and 5 other siblings made it out of the country?

\textsuperscript{21} Lê Quý Đôn.
\textsuperscript{22} La Dalat: a South Vietnamese manufactured sedan with Citroen engine.
\textsuperscript{23} Phan Đình Phùng.
TN: They made it. They all thought at the time that I had perished in that rocket explosion. How they cried! My father wrote in his diary that he thought I had died. I cried so much when I read those lines. They arrived at Guam in 1975, and my father looked for me everywhere there. They said I was already dead. I was left back on the 29th, and the Viet Cong24 arrived by the early morning on the 30th. I urged my two other sisters to get to the US Embassy to find the way to get out. I can never forget the pandemonium there. The furniture was thrown everywhere. People were looting, opening, and carrying things around me while I only wanted one thing, finding the way out. I had no chance; I was left behind.

TVD: You were 19 year old at the time?

TN: 19. My house was taken over by the communist sympathizers25. They showed themselves when the communists arrived to the city. They were not exactly communists themselves. They followed and helped leading the communists to the homes of those who worked for the American. They kicked me out of my own home and locked the doors. I went over to my sister’s house which was nearby. My parents and my younger siblings left in 1975. I was left behind with the rest. I escaped by boat in 1979, while my oldest sister made it in 1980. My older brother got out through the ODP26.

TVD: So, did you receive any news from your parents and siblings while you were apart?

TN: In those 4 years? No way! They didn’t allow any information to come in or out of the country. There was no letter, but I got information through an aunt living in France at the time. She already lived there for some 30 years. They allowed her to come back, and then she found me. She knew where I lived before the war ended. She told me that my parents had thought I was dead. When she returned to France, she informed them right away. My parents were so

24 Việt Cộng.
25 Nam vùng.
26 Orderly Departure Program.
happy upon learning of my survival. About that time, they permitted us to send mails. It took them 5 years to let us write to each other, and about which time a person organized an escape for me. I must go because I couldn’t live with them anymore.

TVD: Could you tell me about your situation after you were left behind? What was your life like?

TN: For the majority of us - I think about 99% of us Southerners, life was hard. They found out about my father’s connection to the American, so they kicked me out of school. Being denied learning, I turned to work all kinds of odd jobs to make a living. Buying and trading this or that to earn some money. When the food ran out, the officials made people stood in lines for things like bo bo\textsuperscript{27} - a feed grain for pigs. They’d arrest anyone who sold regular rice, the type that we normally buy at the market. Life was miserable. Later, I actually faked my family story by telling them that my parents went to France, so I could to be enrolled in the Accounting School. You know, if they found out that my father had worked for the American and they were living in the U.S., there was no way I could get a job or be admitted to school. So, I lied by telling them my parents went to France. I took the test to enroll in a 6 months accounting course, and went to work in Saigon. While I worked there, the communists started attacking the wealthy people. They forced us, you know, by appointing each group of us to this or that house. They would say this house had a wealthy owner or that house belong to the director of whatever that used to be in South Vietnam. We would surround that particular house in the dead of the night. By dawn, we would enter and sealed all of their belongings. Those wealthy people’s lives were wretched. Some of them took their own lives because they lost everything. It was all over and done with. I was very young being only 19 year old at the time, but I witnessed so much injustice. It was so weird, you know. I knew then I could not stay; I must leave this place at all cost. I saw people

\textsuperscript{27} Barley.
trying to sell everything and anything. Life was miserable for all after 1975. It turned to worse in 1976 when they suddenly announced one morning that everyone must exchange their old currency for their new one. The limit was 200 Dong, even though one may have 1 millions USD. Some killed themselves because they lost everything, on top of having their property being registered\textsuperscript{28}. The communists used that phrase “being registered”. They would seal off people’s properties, took everything and shipped them somewhere. I worked for the government in Saigon until 1979. It took me two escape attempts before I made it out of Vietnam.

TVD: Could you tell me about your escape journey, plus the time you failed too? Why did you fail at that time?

TN: I was not actually Catholic. I was a Buddhist. The first trip that I took was in December of 1978. I disguised myself as a peasant by not wearing any Western style clothes at all; I wore clothes like that character that I wanted to be. I stepped down onto a tiny boat and hide in there until the time came. When the boat started moving slowly toward the estuary, the area where the river met the ocean, the waves got higher and stronger. I climbed onto a big boat that had been waiting for us there to avoid being caught. I estimated there were about 100 persons. Small boats from everywhere would concentrate at one location to transfer their human cargoes to the big boat. The big boat was about 13 meters in my opinion. Not very big at all. It was about 13 meters in length. Half way out, the waves were really stirred up because of the storm. Oh my God, I started praying. People would read their Buddhist mantras or their Christian prayers, whichever they knew. I was scared to dead feeling the boat being tossed back and forth by the waves. I was on the above floor, not underneath in the engine room. I grabbed a container just in case the boat went down I would have something to hold on to. I didn’t know about Christ at

\textsuperscript{28} Bị kiểm kê.
the time. I only prayed to the Buddha of Mercy or some Buddha. {.....} Half of my body was all bruised from being tossed back and forth by the waves. Then, the storm stopped. However, the boat owner decided that it was too risky to continue, so he turned it around and head back. Afterward, I got a ride on a truck carrying pigs to return to Saigon; the famous musical writer Pham Dinh Chuong also came along in that ride.

TVD: So, you went alone or with your family?

TVD: By myself. I didn’t have enough money. I still owed money to the boat owner, who was a younger brother of my brother-in-law. They agreed to let me pay once I came here because I had no money on my own back then.

TVD: How did you get to know these people or the organizers of the escape? How did you communicate with them?

TN: Through the husband of my older sister. When his younger brother decided to organize such an escape, they communicated to each other. My sister then told me to come to such and such home to meet such and such person. I was to identify myself as Thoa’s younger sister. That man would then write a note letting me join in. I didn’t know how others people would communicate with each other. I only knew the principal person had agreed to let me join in and pay the debt later.

TV: So, after that first very difficult trip, you still wanted to leave?

TN: I had to go because of an incident that happened back then. I worked for the Metal Gas Electrical Mechanical Company. I was only 19 years old at the time and had no experience whatsoever. Where I worked, there were 3 Southerners, the rest was the cadres. I was led into something unimaginable. I was even arrested. I worked as an accountant, not the cashier. That

29 Phật bà.
30 Phạm Đình Chương.
31 Công Ty Kim Khi Điện Máy.
day, the cadre who was the cashier told me, “Thao\textsuperscript{32}, you’ll collect the money for today.” I accepted her order without much thought. I received a few millions Vietnamese Dongs and put them in a locked draw. I saw she had the same key that I had, but I thought I was an accountant, so there was no need to be secretive to those working in the same office with me. They may need the documents, and need to have access to the draw. During lunch break, about an hour, I went to the post office to mail a letter with a friend. Then, I had my lunch and took a nap. When I returned to the table, I unlocked the draw to pull out the money to give it to that woman. When I opened the draw, I noticed it had been unlocked by somebody. All the money had gone. They immediately called the police to arrest and accused me to be the culprit. I told them if their allegation was correct, then why would I return to work anyway? They gave me a hard time for a few years. They would bring me in a room, just like this one, to sit me down with a white pad of paper to write my admission of guilt. I always wrote one line, “I did not take the money. I am not guilty.” It went on like that every day for an entire year. Dear God, I almost broke down; I thought I would have gone crazy soon! After that, they exiled me to a storage room to clean the rusting mechanical accessories that they confiscated from other people. I would have to dip my bared hands – gloves were allowed into the cleaning oil. They made me reporting to them every day. If I missed a day, they would arrest me right away. Therefore, after I returned from the 1\textsuperscript{st} attempt to escape, I must present myself at the police office in Saigon in the morning as scheduled to avoid being arrested. I converted to Catholicism after that incident thinking that God must have helped me. I didn’t know why but I really believed so. I made it back in time to report to them and avoided being arrested after all. People followed me everywhere I went.

Every day I would seat in front of a white piece of paper for 8 hours doing nothing but staring at it. “Admit your guilt, and you will be pardoned.” Yet, how could I admit to a crime that I didn’t

\textsuperscript{32} Thao.
commit? At 19 – No, I was about 20 - 21 year old at the time, I thought I must “do or die”\textsuperscript{33} because I couldn’t continue living like this anymore.

In my second attempt, it was in March and the ocean was very calm. It only took 3 days and 2 nights to reach Malaysia. I was so ignorant because I was on my own; I didn’t bring along with me any food, so I ended up very hungry the whole time. Our boat ran across the Thai pirates, but lucky they were busy fishing at the time. There were about 90 some persons on our boat. The water ration was 3 cups of water a day. I had nothing to eat. There was no storm besides the rain, which provided the water for us to drink from, until we reach Malaysia.

TVD: So that boat made it all the way from Vietnam to Malaysia?

TN: Yes. It took us 3 days and 2 nights to reach the island of Bidong directly from Vietnam. We saw people standing everywhere waving at us, yet we thought they were the pirates so none of us dare approaching them. After a while, a Malaysian boat approached and towed us away. In 1979, they didn’t allow anymore entrance into their territory because there were so many refugees. The Malaysian wanted no more. Everyone on the boat was on the knees bowing at them. We didn’t know. They pulled us for a while until night time when they left us on an island called Bina. By this time, I couldn’t walk anymore because of the hunger in the last 3 days. They took everything, money and gold. They searched my body for gold, but for some reason they missed the gold chain necklace with a cross that had been blessed. I still have that gold chain necklace with the cross as a memory. That’s why I believe there is a God and He blesses me a lot. They brought us to a small house where men were separated from women.

That was a small island, dark and without any electricity. Signaling with a hand held flash light; they moved men to one side and women to another. Then the Malaysian soldiers with guns on their hands came in. They asked if anyone knew English. I was quick to raise my hand, thinking

\textsuperscript{33} Một sống, hai chết.
they would feed us. They told me to come along with them, and I followed them. They brought me to the beach and they started laughing. They said they wanted to rape me, but they thought I didn’t know English. Oh my God, they were holding my hand when I heard what they just said. I pulled my hand out and ran to the opposite way. I ran into the men’s room, begging all the men I met to say he was my husband. The soldiers were searching for me when there was another boat, a quasi-legal boat, arrived with hundreds of people on board. That was the type of boat they liked because the Chinese ethnic refugees would carry lot of money, so they forgot completely about me. They repeated what they did with our boat; they came out to pull it in. That night, the crying and screaming were so horrible that for the rest of my life I couldn’t forget it. I didn’t know what they did to these people to make them screaming and crying all night long. They left us in peace because we had only 90 some people, while those on the other boat were Chinese ethnic who were more affluent, thus had more money on them. We stayed there for about 1 week before they let us come to Bidong to meet the UNHCR folks. We were led in a barn-like structure and made to sit on the ground like animals; they didn’t permit people to stand up. They asked me if I was raped, and if so, they would need to check me out. I told them I wasn’t a rape victim, thus they admitted me into the refugee camp. I stayed there for another 3 months. When they asked for the address of known relative, I gave them my father’s address. I was single and my father used to work for the American and resided in America at that time. I was allowed to leave the camp after 3 months.

TVD: You told me that week when you were forced to stay on the small island, those men were Malaysian soldiers, not…?

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34 Bán chính thức.
35 Cao Ủy Tị Nạn.
TN: They were gun carrying Malaysian soldiers in uniforms. Comparing to others, we were so lucky not being bodily harmed. They did abuse the men by slapping and pushing them around. I don’t understand why they did what they did. Eventually, they let us join other refugees on the other island.

TVD: During the waiting for your turn to go to the USA, did you study English or do anything to prepare yourself for the new life?

TN: Yeah, I learned English and learned to build a shelter. You know, you would have thought of Cancun. We selected a spot overlooking the flying route to the beach, and then we built a shelter with bamboo leaves. Many nights the stormy wind just blew off the entire thing.

TVD: So, this camp was not a closed camp?

TN: No, it wasn’t a closed camp. It was an island among many islands that belongs to Malaysia with few dozen of thousands people staying on.

TVD: So, you could move around freely?

TN: Yes, going to the market. If one got money, one could obtain good food. I had no money, not even the money to pay for my seat on the boat. I still remember the feeling of longing for food because I was so hungry. I would pick up a grape or anything someone dropped on the ground and ate it. It was ok.

TVD: How was your daily life there? What did you eat? How did you cook them?

TN: Each family would have a ration, based on the head counts. Each person would have about 2 bowls of rice a day or canned fish; we would line up to receive them. Then, there was class time. Those who didn’t have any relative, they remained there for a year. Whichever country accepted them in, they would have to go there.

TVD: Where did you learn English, and who taught you?
TN: I learned English back when I was in Vietnam, at the Vietnam-America Alliance\textsuperscript{36}, and continued during my stay at the refugee camp. My English wasn’t so fluently back then. When I arrived at San Francisco, my family came to welcome me inside the airport. The airport staffs allowed that, and it was so touching at the time. My mother and father, who passed away dozen years ago already, were strict parents, especially my father, but he loved his children very much. I came out wearing only a short and a shirt, and nothing else. I was the last person came out, and I cried my heart out seeing my family. Tho wasn’t there at the time. Tho already move to this area, Orange County, leaving the two youngest siblings coming along with my parents.

TVD: You had been separated from your parents for 4-5 years by then? Had they changed much when you met them again? How’s about your siblings?

TN: My parents had changed. In Vietnam, my family was poor so everyone was skinny and dark being malnutrition. My father worried all the time. Here in America, life is more comfortable. My younger siblings just stared at me silently.

TVD: Feeling estranged?

TN: Yes. They were too young when they left. Five years was a long time, so they just stared at me.

TVD: Which city did they live in?

TN: They all lived in Sacramento.

TVD: How did you feel about this society when you first arrived here?

TN: My first impression was how big everything was, and so quiet. I actually asked my parents that because we used to live in a working neighborhood in Vietnam, where door was unlocked and people coming in and out all the time. Here, every door is closed; neighbor’s name is unknown. My first impression of this society was how cold it seemed to be.

\textsuperscript{36} Hộ Việt Mỹ.
TVD: Your neighborhood had more American Caucasians lived there?

TN: Yes. There wasn’t many Vietnamese around. Even when I came here to Orange County in 1980, this entire Bolsa neighborhood was just grass, nothing like the current prosperity. There were few Vietnamese; most were Caucasians.

TVD: What did you do when you came here? Did you go back to school?

TN: Yes. I went back to school at Salt city.

TVD: You were about 20 some year old.

TN: I was 23 year old. I took ESL class, and then told my father I would move here to work and study at the same time. I moved to Santa Ana and found job working on something like a heart valve, the artificial heart valve, using the cow tissue. The cow’s heart was huge. After I dissected it, I needed to heal the tissue together and cleaned it finally. We cleaned them in a separate room. I worked the grave yard shift, from 12 o’clock midnight until morning so I would attend school full time. I thought here I was being free finally; I must take the opportunity to go back to school. I set my mind to it. Back then I wasn’t so fat like I am now. I was skinny, instant noodles and cup noodles were always on my menu. We had a car the size a tank that all sisters shared because we didn’t have the money. My sisters interviewed at Paris by Night, and the owner likes Asians, so she paid them $2.15 per hour. Back in 1980, the minimum wage was $2.15. I worked while studying.

TVD: Where did you go to school at?

TN: I enrolled at OCC for 2 years before I transferred to Long Beach.

TVD: Why did you decide to come to OC when you just reunited with your family?

TN: Because there was no job there. You know the only jobs in town in Sacramento are those government jobs which require knowledge of English. My English wasn’t good back then. So, I
enrolled at OCC to learning English and worked meanwhile; it took me a total of 5 years to finish the study.

TVD: You said you already had a younger sister who settled down in this area earlier?

TN: It’s Tho. She came here earlier in search for a job. Then I also had an older sister, the same woman whose younger brother-in-law let me board his boat, who lived in this area. We all live in one house at first. I liked it. It’s challenging but I had set my mind to it, so I loved what I was doing. The work was demanding. In each night shift, I would use the break time to take a nap, and asked friends to wake me up on time. There was a supervisor who was such a racist. There were workers who were Korean, Vietnamese, White American, and Black, yet he always picked on the Asians.

TVD: Yes.

TN: When I was done with my study, I became his boss. That was interesting. His name was Bob. I still remembered it. There were few Vietnamese in 1980’s; more would arrive to the U.S. in the 90s. People came here through the ODP, foreign exchange study and what not. Back then, I was so happy to meet any Vietnamese. Very happy, indeed.

TVD: About your social life, did you participate in any socializing activity during this time? I understand from your telling me that you were very busy between work and study. What other social activity you had apart from those two during this period?

TN: I only went to the church.

TVD: When did you convert?

TN: About 1 year after I was done with my study. Meanwhile, I went through a six months long religious seminary before I was baptized, and officially became a member of the Church.

TVD: Was there any Vietnamese-speaking church at the time?
TN: Very few. There was only one mass being offered where I lived. Nowadays, there are a lot more. I have a belief...Actually, my story doesn’t have a lot of romantic moments, but personally there is something to learn from there. We can look back to every instant in our lives and see how it had been changed, and the difference resulted from. I am not regret that I am here even though our traditions have been changed because of the cultural differences. Sometimes, I wished we could adapt a little bite of our Vietnamese for the better. Yet, culture is what it is; each country has its own way. So is the way we teach our children. In Vietnam, I grew up in a very large family, and children must obey the parents. Any talking back would be met with corporal punishment. Over here, parents really defer to their kids.

TVD: Do you have any children?

TN: I am still single.

TVD: May I ask you a little bit about your siblings. You have a total of 11 persons, with you being number 7, haven’t you? Could you list their names in order from the oldest to the youngest?

TN: Yeah, the names all start with the “Th”. Thanh, Thuy, Thuy, Thin, Thoa, Thao, Thien, Tho, Thiem, The, and the last one you will be surprised, Them. Do you know why it is so?

TVD: Them sounds like “more”, doesn’t it?

TN: Yes. Do you know why? Vietnamese are superstitious. My father had wondered why he kept having children, and someone suggested to him that if he wanted to stop, he would need to

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37 Thin.
38 Thao.
39 Thien.
40 Thiem.
41 The.
42 Them.
name his child in the opposite direction. Thus, he called her “Them”. It was true that after
“Them”, he stopped having anymore kid. Now, she calls herself Tammie.

TVD: Oh, that is a female name?

TN: Yeah, a girl’s name. My father was in love with my mother, whose name is Tho. So, he
wanted to use names that started with “Th”.

TVD: So romantic.

TN: I can read them so fast because I used to it. There are 11 of us in all, but my mother
actually born 15 children. Can you believe it?

TN: Wow!

TN: There were other five who didn’t survive.

TVD: Of the 11 still alive, do they all live in the USA now?

TN: Still alive all, and in the States. My mother is in her 90s now, and I love her so much. She
is the only in the world. She is very sweet and very loving to her children. She bears her
hardships well.

TVD: Where is she now?

TN: She lives in Sacramento with my eldest sister. She is very gentle.

TVD: You told me your father had passed away dozen of years ago, was it from an illness?

TN: My father started to have symptoms of heart disease when he was 60 year old, followed by
kidney disease. He went through dialysis before he passed away.

TVD: You said your father had a diary?

TN: Yes.

TVD: Where is it now?

TN: Each of us has a copy. He made copies before he passed away.

\footnote{Tho.}
TVD: Do you want to include this diary into…?

TN: Yes. I’ll make a copy for you. It is thick, are you sure you won’t be bored?

TVD: No problem at all. I want to help your family to preserve the memories by archiving it. It lasts longer that way.

TN: He wrote about how he came to the U.S., how he took care of the kids and raised them. It is very touching.

TVD: OK. Now, may I return to ask you a bit about your career? You told me you continue to work for the same company once you graduated from college?

TN: No. I studied a different field – computer sciences. I went looking a different job. I have been working as a software engineer for 18-20 years.

TVD: You are still in this field?

TN: Yeah.

TVD: Do you have any thought about what you will do after you retire? Do you want to achieve something else? Do you want to experience anything else?

TN: Actually, right now I have a hobby that I really love which is photography. I will retire when I am 62 year old. I want to travel and help the poor in my own way. I have donated, within my family, to the places I want to give. I don’t want to go through the organizations like the Red Cross. There are a lot of poor people in Vietnam. I am concerned more with the caring of the elderly. I don’t know why. I think the younger people are also very poor, but because of their youth, they can still survive. I have come back to Vietnam 7 times already.

TVD: Could you tell me about your first trip back to Vietnam? Which year was it?

TN: Oh, I just cried. It was in 1989. That time I worked in Hong Kong, and it was only a few hours fly to Vietnam from there. So, my first impression upon returning to Vietnam was just
crying. My tears came gushing out. I don’t know why, but I felt pitiful for them – the people. However, that was back then. Nowadays, they are more open. There are more buildings that would give a skin-deep sense of prosperity in the country. However, one can find the truth by coming to other places. Corruption is the worst thing in Vietnam. One has to use money for everything one wants….There are a lot of poor people there; people who have nothing to eat.

TVD: You came back so many times, and yet your family is all live in the States. What is the motivation for you to be back there? Are you there like a tourist?

TD: No. I didn’t join in any tour. I have friends who still live in Vietnam. Nowadays, I would stay at a hotel, but back then I stayed at my friend’s place, those old childhood friends who are very poor. I helped them within my limits. I also depended on their helps because I had been gone away for so long that I no longer knew what was going on.

TVD: Do you still maintain those contacts over the time?

TN: Oh, you know, with the emails and inexpensive phone calls we can talk to each other frequently. I went looking for our old home when I was back there. I couldn’t locate it because people built new structures everywhere. I knew the location, but I couldn’t find my old home. By the time I found it, there was some else living there by permit from the officials. I asked them to let me film the place so I could show it to my father who was still living at the time.

TVD: Your father never return to Vietnam?

TN: Once. He went to Thanh Hoa\(^44\) to visit his siblings. He was the one who should return. He was from the North originally. He wanted to do that. My family still debates whether we should follow his last wish to be buried in Vietnam after he passed away. Some of us, including me, disagree. However, another sister wants to complete that last wish. He was cremated, and we brought his ash to be kept at a temple. I think it is backward to move his ash back to Vietnam,

\(^{44}\) Thanh Hóa.
because as people come to the States, they move their loved ones’ ashes over here. If we bring him back to Vietnam now, who would keep him?

TVD: What does your mother think about it?

TN: My mother is against it; she still debating right now.

TVD: Come back to you. What would you want to leave behind after you are gone?

TN: Death ends it all.

TVD: But to keep a memory about you, what contribution you have to society that you want it to remember you by?

TN: I think I am but a small part in this world. I do whatever to make myself happy and help others within my own limits. I am not Bill Gate or famous people with their own foundations and stuffs. I am simple, very simple indeed. If I have the capability, then I would help out within my own capability. When I pass away, I have a living trust. I would donate some to the foundations that dear to my heart, and some to family. It is that simple.

TVD: May I have the permission to inquire about the reason why you decided not to get married?

TN: Actually, I had almost gotten married. Then because of something very personal we couldn’t make it. It hurt.

TVD: Was that in Vietnam or here?

TN: Over here. I grew older after a time of waiting and waiting, I have given up. That’s all. I don’t want to get hurt anymore.

TVD: How is the relationship between you and your siblings? Are you close to them?

TN: Very close. We love each other a lot. That’s a good thing, right? There are unhappy stories, problems or dissatisfactory feeling between this and that member which are unavoidable
in a large group. It is difficult to make people agree all the time in such situation. The most important thing is we do try helping each other out. I am closer to some members in the family because they understand me, and I can share with them my thoughts. Maybe because they think in the same way or share the same interests, so it is easier to be close to them. I am closer to my sisters than my brothers.

TVD: Do you live separately or together with your family?

TN: I live separately now. I live near Tho’s, Thoa’s homes in the same area. We see each other every day.

TVD: You so very near to the Little Saigon area, do you come here often?

TN: Yes. I go shopping every week, and eat in the restaurants around the area. However, I don’t really like participating in the meetings organized by this group or that group in the community itself.

TVD: So, you said you have witnessed the changing in this neighborhood, from being grassy field to being large and prosperous commercial centers. Do you think Little Saigon is important and if the next generation, the Vietnamese-American, would care about it?

TN: Very important. I think that’s a good thing that we have Asian Mall or Little Saigon. For the youth, this is the United State, there is nothing about cultural about it. We live here and we have our own unique tradition of the Lunar Festival\(^{45}\), the Lunar Flower Market\(^{46}\) each year. The Americans have their New Year, but I don’t think they have a flower market. They have the Rose Parade instead. We have our flower market and festival, organized by the college kids. That is a positive thing we want to keep for the future generations. A few more generations

\(^{45}\) Hội chô Tết.
\(^{46}\) Chợ hoa Tết.
down the road, they won’t even know who Trinh Cong Son\textsuperscript{47} is, that may includes you too. I don’t know. This neighborhood started out from the fields; there were 2 grassy fields between the Vietnamese shops. Where the Lee Sandwich is now, it used to be a Vietnamese market, a small one.

TVD: Oh, was it A Dong\textsuperscript{48} market?

TN: No, something called Binh\textsuperscript{49} right where Lee Sandwich is. Back then, the market was small size like that. Now, oh my God, every time I drive from Fairview Street all the way down to Golden West Street, Vietnamese shops just line up along the roads. There are so many of them. Of course good things go hand-in-hand with bad stuffs. Luckily, there are more good things than bad. Visitors from afar can come here and enjoy this or that.

TVD: Do you follow the tradition media like listening to the radio or reading Vietnamese newspapers?

TN: Yeah, I do.

TVD: How often? Every day?

TN: I don’t read newspaper that often because I read online nowadays. My Vietnamese is good. I watch TV. I also follow the community’s news to see if there is any event such as the Tet market\textsuperscript{50} to bring my mother to. You know Tho, don’t you? She would let me know if there is anything interesting coming up. Tho is very involved with it. Those in my family living in Sacramento, they have a large Vietnamese community there too.

TVD: Do you have a special dish in your family or do you have a special dish of your own that you make for your mother or has learned from her?

\textsuperscript{47} Trinh Công Sơn.
\textsuperscript{48} Á Đông.
\textsuperscript{49} Bình.
\textsuperscript{50} Chợ Tết
TN: My mother makes sweet rice, the best, because she used to sell them.

TVD: After this interview, I’ll process your story and archive it along with other stories of the Vietnamese-Americans. Do you have anything else you want to say or advise to the future generations at all?

TN: I believe this project is very good. I like it. That’s why I take the time to come here because this project will leave something meaningful to the next generation. I think it’s helpful, needed, and I hope the youngsters will think so too. I has set up my life in this manner because the miserable life where I came from. This nation is full of opportunities, so they should move on and forward, not backward. Life has two faces; if one doesn’t know how to use it, one is done for, right? Our own tradition have both good and bad things, don’t you think so? For example, the issue of corporal punishment by parents on children. I don’t like that, even though in our culture it is a sign of caring to actually beat them. However, we can’t just give up because they don’t listen to us. So, somehow we need to adapt in a manner that helps us moving into the mainstream culture and yet keep our own at the same time. Youngsters need to communicate more with the grown-ups. I hope there will be genuine closeness between parents and children. I have seen many families being torn apart because of the lack of communication. Families like mine still keep the communication going. We were so poor, but we lived in the love of our parents. We need to communicate to keep our culture alive.

TVD: Thank you very much.

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51 Yêu cho roi cho vọt.