Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: Thuy Vo Dang

Interviewer: Tom Phan

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Audio [Track 1]

TVD: This is Thuy Vo Dang with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine [University of California Irvine]. Today is May 22, 2013. I will be interviewing Mr. Tom Phan in Irvine, California. And so can you please introduce yourself, your name, your date of birth, and where you were born.

TP: Wow, this is honor to be included in the VAOHP [Vietnamese American Oral History Project] project, I think it’s very meaningful and present great value to future generations. The American name is Tom or Thomas, Tom Phan but the original Vietnamese name is Thuận Phan or Tom Phan but now I go with my American name is Tom Phan. Was born exactly today, is my birthday so it’s very special to have a chance to tell your life story on your birthday, May 22, 1955. So I’m officially 58 years old today.

TVD: And where were you born?
TP: I was born in a central, in the town, in central Vietnam. Nha Trang in the providence of Khánh Hòa. Nha Trang is the city. And the province is Khánh Hòa. It’s very close to Cam Ranh Bay and a lot of Vietnamese-American people know Cam Ranh Bay, which is one of the largest naval base built in the world and still is right now. So just about 20 minutes north of Cam Ranh Bay.

TVD: I’ve had the pleasure of visiting both Cam Ranh Bay and Nha Trang. It’s beautiful there.

TP: Oh? Beautiful city.

TVD: Do you have any memories of your childhood in Nha Trang?

TP: Many. You know, Nha Trang at the time, we have one of the most beautiful beaches, I remember the beach and the sand, the white sand beach and we have a lot of corals. And our family home live very close to the ocean. I mean, I can walk from out my parents’ house to the ocean in about five, ten minutes. And that’s where I learned how to swim, in the ocean. And every afternoon - we have a lot of coral, the most beautiful coral and tropical fishes. Tropical fish, beautiful coral, and the water is so clear. We used to just swimming and do a lot of snorkeling. That’s where I learned. But really it’s a sad thing. First time I came back to Nha Trang was in the year 2000, just about 13 years ago, and I could not even recognize, even at that time, all of the familiar places, and the sand, beautiful white sand, all disappeared. There’s no more beautiful coral. So gives us a lot of nostalgia and in Nha Trang I was in a boarding school. In Vietnam it’s very common for family to send their children to boarding school, especially with a large family. So when I was in boarding school, also right on the beach, everyday around 4pm to 6pm, it’s our recreation time. So we could play volleyball, right on the beach, and do a lot of
swimming, so a lot of childhood memories. When I talk to all my friends - I still have a few colleagues in my same class in boarding school, and they had a chance to go back to Vietnam - but everyone try to look for that memories. But it’s all gone now. So, very sad.

TVD: And you said that you have a large family, right? Can you talk a little bit more about your family, how many people? What did your parents do?

TP: Yeah, my father is from Huế, is in the old capitol of Vietnam. But I think my grandparent’s family moved from Huế to Nha Trang, I think years ago, I don’t remember, maybe in the 1920s or 1930s. But in our family, especially on my father’s side, still speak with the Huế accent. (Giọng Huế ok?) And he was a professor of French in the French high school.

TVD: Your father was?

TP: Yea, my father was professor of French. And my mother stayed home. She’s a housewife, taking care of the families and she’s from Nha Trang. Now my grandparents only have two children. My father and my auntie. On my mom’s side it’s a larger, oh seven. My mom’s side has seven children and we stay - my grandfather used to raise a lot of goat. He raised a hundred goat, and make, we have goat milk and make goat cheese. Very close up in the mountains, just outside of Nha Trang. In the year 2000 we also went, come back we call our ancestral home. But it’s all gone. Disappear already. In its place is now a university. Đại Học Thủy Sàn. It’s a university they build on the lot there.

TVD: Oh, yea, I think I visited there, Thủy Sàn.

TP: Yea, up in the hill. Đại Học Thủy Sàn, right? All that land belong to my grandparents. My Ông Nội. In Vietnamese people, from the central, we call Ông. Ông is Ông Nội, okay? And Mệ is grandma.
TVD: Mệ.

TP: Mệ. Ông Mệ. Instead of Ông Nội Bà Nội, we say Ông Mệ. So all the childhood is in Vietnam until I was about 15. Then I went to a boarding school in Đà Lạt. Đà Lạt is in the highland of Vietnam. Also went to a French school, Collège d'Adran. We study in Đà Lạt for about four years. Now, in Vietnam at the time, we have a Vietnamese educational system and the French educational system. By the year of 18, you have to pass your baccalaureate. You have to finish your high school. Otherwise you have to be enlisted in the army. And in the French educational system, after high school we have to go through another two years. So for us to not get enlisted, then I have to pass the Vietnamese baccalaureate when I was 17, but continue with the French educational system. So I was able to take the French baccalaureate right in March of 1975.

TVD: Was that the earlier exam you mentioned, was that the tú tài?

TP: Yeah, tú tài. Yes. Very good. In the Vietnamese educational system, when you are 18 you have to pass the tú tài. If you cannot pass then you have to be enlisted in the army. Otherwise you cannot continue with education. So with the young Vietnamese of my generation, there were a lot of pressure to the young people to really study hard to pass the exam. Otherwise the war is getting worse and worse each day. So, all the young people pass the exam is such a pressure. It’s not like in the American education system based upon the credit, and if you have enough credit you just pass. This is national exam and you have to pass that. Vietnamese kind of easier than the French, so I passed tú tài when I was 17 so that at least I don’t have to be enlisted, but I want to finish my French baccalaureate. So when I came here in this country in May and July of 1975, when I went to the university, I told them about the story, say, “I have the French baccalaureate” and I
was able - even though I just took the exam in March, just like two months before the black April in our county - but the French people was able to save all the records. And when I wrote the letter to the (unintelligible) Academy, they were able to send me my French baccalaureate to prove to the U.S. [United States]. So that’s why when I come to the university, I bypassed the freshman year. I was able to go straight to sophomore, so finish university in three years rather than four years. So the French education system was just like that. But I think mine is the last general of Vietnamese people who were able to go to French school and speak French, 1975. That’s it. Oh, I will tell you the whole story go from Đà Lạt to Nha Trang, go to Saigon, it’s a long -

TVD: Yeah, so can you actually go back a little bit further and tell me more about your family, your brothers and sisters.

TP: Like most Vietnamese families we have large families, ten kids in our family. I’m the fifth one, in the middle. Six boys and four girls in the family. All the family is now in the United States except my older sister who still stay in Vietnam. She was able to come here a few years ago to visit us. But first time the whole family, every brother and sister, come back to Vietnam was in the year 2000. It was the first time that we were able to see our sister, my brother-in-law, and her family. They have five children also. My elder brother is I guess would be 68, 69 years old now. He live in Dallas, Texas. The second brother is a Catholic Priest, a Jesuit, he is now a professor at Georgetown University in Washington [District of Colombia]. And then older sister in Texas. Then me. And then all the brothers and sisters they still live in area, Plano, Texas area. I only have one younger sister in California with me. Everybody already now get married, each family have anywhere from four kids like me, to two or one. So now if you looking at our family, originally
from parents with ten kids, except the priest who is not married, every time we have
grand family reunion it’s just like other Vietnamese families. It’s huge reunion. Because
now with ten kids, each one them has - let’s just say two to three people, and then now
the kids of my elder brother, and also my older sister also already got married, and each
one of them also has two kids - so it’s just getting big and bigger. And now only on my
side, on my wife’s side, same thing, my wife’s family come with nine children, and same
situation. So if we put two family together you’re talking about close to a hundred, easily.
[Both laugh]

TVD: So with your siblings, were there any of the older siblings who had to serve in the
military?

TP: Yes the older brother, he’s the only one. The older brother he’s working for in the
military, but he’s a military attaché, working closely with the U.S. [United States]
Embassy. Initially he was working for the American consulate general in Nha Trang.
He’s also involved, in 1972, when we have what we call “the summer invasion from the
north”: Mùa Hè Khói Lửa, 1972. At the time I was still young, maybe probably just 15,
16. But, from all the story I heard is that the North Vietnamese they were using first time
a type of tank, called T-54, that in normal gun power cannot destroy these types of tanks.
So the Americans supplied to the south Vietnamese a new weapon called TOW, T-O-W,
and my elder brother, suddenly he disappeared for three months, in the family, even his
wife, did not know where he went until he come back home. And he said he was sent into
Quảng Trị. That means at the northern border, between the north and the south, to train
Vietnamese soldiers on how to use this new TOW weapon to fight against these T-54
tanks from the north. And that’s how now I know that he was involved in the military and
because of that activity and his involvement with the U.S. [United States] defense force that our family was able to escape from Vietnam. But let me tell you. Imagine in 1965, the whole thing started in Ban Mê Thuột, which is in one of the central highland central of Vietnam, back in February - and I was a student in Ban Mê Thuột Đà Lạt and Ban Mê Thuột Đà Lạt is also in the central highland, and we study for the final exam because normally the French baccalaureate would be organized in May, and here now in February we have to get ready to study for the exam. But all the news from the front is very bad. So then in about February we have to escape. Now from Ban Mê Thuột Đà Lạt to Nha Trang that’s where we live. How do I escape? I remember we were in the boarding school, there were about 50 of us. And the priest, who is the, we call the general superior, he was in Saigon. And we have to make the decision ourselves because now there is nobody to make the decision. Everybody we just close the house, the boarding school, everybody try to go back, because some people go back to Saigon, some people go back to Nha Trang, some people go back to Phan Thiết. So at the time, this not like the highway that we know today or the very winding road. So you take both walking on foot as well take a, not a taxi, but a bike, we call “camion” to go back home. So after three, four days, I was able to get home to Nha Trang. When I got home to Nha Trang, it’s my younger brothers and sisters already left the home and go back to Saigon to stay with my older uncle. So I’m the only one left. The priest, who is my brother, already in Saigon. Because he just come back from Vietnam in 1972, his most of his time he spent in Europe, in Rome, Germany, and England. So he came back in Vietnam to teach in ’72 in Saigon. And my brother was working with the Nha Trang American Consulate but his family already went back to Saigon, so just him, me, and my parents, and my
grandmother. We live in the very large land, different home on that land, like my grandparents has their home, and my parents have their home; just four or five people.

And I remember I was telling my, this is on April 27th, in the morning of April 27th. I told my parents, “Why don’t you, you are older, go to Saigon to take care of the younger brother, I can stay behind. At the time I was 19, I was never in the military, they could not do anything to me, the communists. Nice to have my grandma. So I urged my parents to go with my elder brother, because there is the last helicopter to leave at 5pm from the American Consulate General in Nha Trang. The airport was closed, you cannot fly from airport. So my brother took my mom and my father, my parents, to go to the American consulate but they could not get in. So they went back home. And the trip was about maybe about 45 to 30 minutes. At that time, my parents said, “Okay, we could not go. So you just go, and we stay behind.” And my elder brother said, “Okay, just two of us, easier to get inside.” So just my elder brother and me on a jeep and we were able to fight our way to the American consulate to catch the last helicopter. I think he told me that’s the last at 5pm. On the last helicopter to leave Nha Trang. I remember when we got to Saigon, airport Tân Sơn Nhất by helicopter, there’s American people with the flag that says, “Welcome to Saigon,” have nothing to worry about. At that time a lot of people from highland from Đà Nẵng come to Nha Trang from Bảo Mê Thuột trying to get into Nha Trang, and there was rumors that maybe the country will divide. Phan Rang was the capitol, the birthplace of the President Thiệu. There was a rumor that he would try to keep the Phan Rang at all costs. And then maybe have the north from Vĩ Trí Parallel 17, cái chỗ mà Quảng Trị now go to Phan Rang. So everybody just try to go from Huế to Đà Nẵng. All the refugees and the Pleiku come to from the highland all come down to the
Nha Trang. So extremely chaotic. And after we got to Saigon, we lost the contact. Because Nha Trang, was lost, I think in March. And we did not know what happened to our parents. There’s no news at all. And then a month later, by April 15th, just two weeks before April 27th, suddenly they appeared. Our miracle, we were so happy. And they tell us the story - after my brother and I we left to go to American consulate, then they take on a motorbike. They put on my grandmother in-between and then they drive to Cam Ranh, where my older sister live there. Her husband was a police chief of Cam Ranh Bay area, in Vietnamese we call Chi Trường Căn Cận Sát. So maybe his rank is captain. So they lived there and also he’s the eldest son in his family. So that’s why he have to stay, in Vietnamese he stays to take care of his family. My parents, when they got into my sister’s house, they then organize that we have to leave Cam Ranh. Now, which way? The road to Phan Thiết is already cut. They decided to rent a boat. They rent a boat from Cam Ranh to Phú Quốc. On the boat trip, my grandmother, already at that time probably seventy-some years old, said, “There’s no way I can just go by boat.” So she decided to stay. And it think because my auntie is from Ban Mê Thuột, she said, “Let me stay behind to wait for my younger daughter,” because my grandparents only have two, my father and my auntie. So she stayed behind to wait for the news for my aunt to come from Ban Mê Thuột, so she stay. And then my parents, and my sister, and her family - and she was pregnant - took the boat, almost a month, to get from Cam Ranh to Phú Quốc. They just tell me very shortly, but I imagine it take one month to go by boat and then to stay in it, concentration camp in Phú Quốc Island. And then from Phú Quốc, they probably pay some money so they can get to Vũng Tàu. And then from Vũng Tàu, they rent a car to get to Saigon, and then we have family reunion. Now, when we get to Saigon, it was in
March, and I been studying for the whole year for the French baccalaureate. And I then went to the French high school, in Saigon at the time, we have about two or three French high school, Jacques Cousteau and Marie Curie, two French, and the French people they knew it may be impossible to organize any kind of test for baccalaureate so they decided to hold it early in March. So that’s why I was able (unintelligible) [laughs] through all this, but we still have to focus because I know if we go outside it’s good to have that French baccalaureate. I pass with great honor in the French. Just tell you, the year earlier, in French system, you have to take French baccalaureate “un,” one, and baccalaureate two. Two different exams; not just one exam. And in the exam one, out of the Indochina - which is Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos - my score is the highest [laughs] so then I pass easy on the second one. So that’s why when I come to the United States, I show them the diploma, they just pass me to - so, there is another things, when we come to my uncle’s, it’s a small house, and now we have my grandparents, all of us, and he thought that he did not have to notify the local police chief. Because at that time everybody from every part of the country go back to Saigon. So on the evening of April 26th, April 27 was Sunday, so April 26th is Saturday night. The police then go into every house and make sure you have the right paper because they are afraid you might be V.C. [Viet Cong], the communist, and my uncle which is my father’s cousin, older. Bác dó; he forgot, or he did not care to notify that we have new people so they put me, and my younger brother in jail! And I know on Sunday we have to go to U.S. [United States] Embassy to leave. On the night of Saturday night, luckily then on Sunday at 6 o’clock, he then came to the house of the police chief the whole story, my Bác, right? So he decided to come early looking at the case, so they release me. So they release me and then my brother, he was at
mass on Sunday. Phảì làm lễ to the prisoners, he’s a chaplain to the prison. Thủ đức, okay? So he’s about to [laughs] I don’t know if the mass is finished - you have to, okay, he’s still a priest, he have to have permission from his superior to leave the country with the family and then my brother who is working with the, now US Embassy in Saigon, he was in Saigon only for about 3-4 weeks because we all arrive that March, in middle March or something like that. Only three, four weeks in Saigon. So we have to come up with a plan because different people, I’m from my uncle, and all the family and brothers sisters live my uncle house, my brother and his family live in another house, and the priest is live in another house, we have to decide where we meet all together on the same bus to go to the embassy, because April 27th, although a lot of people surrounding. And then I was on the Saturday night, I was in jail with my two younger brothers.

TVD: So you spent your last night in the country in prison. [Both laugh]

TP: In prison! Because my uncle, my Bác he forgot, or he didn’t care to notify the local police, that, hey, we have our nephew come from Nha Trang. So I have no paper so put me in the - that’s why when the, the Vietnamese say when “có sổ xuất ngoại. Sao gì cũng đi được.” [Both laugh]. I remember on the Sunday 27th, everybody, just let us move when they release us in the morning, and everybody get in the right place, the destination point, and then we all go to the U.S. Embassy. And from there the U.S. Embassy able to get us into the airport. From airport then we flew to C141, the military cargo plane, and you sit on the tarmac. I think just about six, seven hours flight to Guam. At in Guam we see all the tents are already been built. I remember, the name is R.O.T. – is any other Vietnamese mention R.O.T. in Guam?

TVD: Not that I recall.
TP: That’s the first tent city in Guam, because we were one of the first. There were probably some people probably people left Vietnam in April 15th, but we left on April 27th. And as you know the South Vietnam fell on April 30th but we heard the news when we were in Guam. And I remember tears, we all cry because we all know that there’s no way we can get back. Because at the time, even though we know, everyone no way believe south Vietnam would that fall fast, there’s so many rumors and, I was only 20. But you felt the shoulder now on the family. Ok so, in my family in terms of boys not married, my older brother he’s is a priest, but he has his obligations as priest, now you looking at the next boy is me, because I have an older sister, and the older sister stay in Vietnam. So when we came to this country, the first thing is obviously we have to work. But everybody like that. I think it’s very normal. The minimum wage at the time is $2.10. It’s a minimum wage. And we remember when we first arrive in Dallas in July, extremely hot and humid. We thought Vietnam is hot, but no. Texas is hotter.

TVD: So actually, you went from Guam through the U.S. through Camp Pendleton right? In 1975.

TP: Yeah. We stayed at Guam for about a week, and at the time, there are wave and wave of Vietnamese refugees come in Guam, so they have to take the earlier people from Guam to go to Pendleton. It’s good now, it’s not a C141 plane, but I think the U.S., the American government, was renting these Boeings, 747 I guess, yea, 747. Flew from Guam to Hawaii, stop in Hawaii, three to four hours refueling, and from Guam to Camp Pendleton. Now I don’t remember where we landed. I’m sure not L.A.X. [Los Angeles International Airport], we don’t where is L.A.X. [Los Angeles International Airport]at the time. Oh! Maybe El Toro.
TVD: El Toro?

TP: Yes, El Toro. And they put up on the bus to camp Pendleton. And I remember yellow grass. We call all the time, yellow grass. You know in California when we go up in the hill, just a yellow color. It’s not green. cỏ vàng, and rows of military tents. And the U.S. [United States] cửa Trường Quân Lực Chiến.

TVD: Marines?

TP: Marines gave us the military jacket. Because for us it’s cold in May, but at night in Camp Pendleton it’s really cold. So our family was assigned to camp 4: Trại Bốn. I remember Camp Pendleton has about eight trại. Tám trại. We were in camp 4, we spent about two months, and most of the time in there is looking news, looking for friends, working to fill up paper, waiting for sponsor family, go to some class on English - even though we took English when we in the French educational system but we learned English from the French, so very different English from the Americans [laughs] to learn that.

TVD: Do you remember what other types of classes you had to take?

TP: Mostly E.S.L. [English as a Second Language], type of, English conversational language, which is greetings, and things like that. You start to learn how to stay in line, queuing in line for the cafeteria, for food. In Vietnam we didn’t learn how to stay in line, now we learn how to stay in line [laughs]. I have play soccer: đá banh. Relatively too young and looking at the pressure, looking at my parents say, “What do we do now?,” because we are a large family and now - as I mentioned earlier, there are our family and then other families also, somehow under priest, so they also hang out to our family. So our family became pivotal point for them, everybody look at my brother as a priest to
really take care of thirteen families, they all Catholics. So when we move from Camp
Pendleton go to Texas, we came together, and we still keep close touch with all the
thirteen families until this day. And three years ago.

TVD: So this is your own parish that came from Vietnam to Camp Pendleton to Dallas?
Wow.

TP: Yeah, come back to Dallas. And three years ago, or four years ago, we had every
members including children and grand children of these thirteen families to have a big
reunion in Texas about four years ago. And then when my father passed away fifteen
years ago, his body was moved back to Dallas, and we consider Dallas as our new
ancestral home. At his funeral, the lot of Vietnamese people because everybody know
about our family, were the first. I guess because of the brother he’s a priest and
everybody try to follow - and Vietnamese people if you are a Catholic, you tend to flock
around the church. If you’re Buddhist, around the pagoda, so the priest serve as spiritual
leader but also as a pivotal point for everyone to flock around it. So that’s why we have at
least thirteen families. Still keep in touch with them and every time there is a death in the
family, or a wedding or a birth, everybody knew about it. So it’s very, very special. So
that’s come from Vietnam, came to Dallas, and then when we moved to Dallas, we talk
about work hard. $2.10. And tax is extremely hard. So how do we make money? We have
to make ends meet. Because even though we have sponsor but we don’t want to, they
give us all the initial food and clothings, they look for us for place to rent, place for us,
apartment, but we have to be self-sufficient. So my brother, even though he’s a priest, we
all work in the city of Plano garbage collector. So we do garbage collector $2.10. To this
day, even though he’s very famous now - he’s wrote many books, you can Google him, Peter Phan - he probably says that my first job in this country was a garbage collector.

TVD: And back then it was probably not those fancy trucks but you have to do it manually. [Laughs]

TP: We have to do it manually and it’s really, because if you are a monk or priest in Vietnam, it’s a very high level, it’s a well-respected position. You don’t see priest go out and pick up trash. But he did that. So we did that. And we also do gardening work. I have about two months to work like that. Because the university the fall semester starts until September. So during those two months, we have to, everybody – me, my brother he’s a priest, my sister works in American family to help with an elderly person, and my younger brothers are working together, and everybody needs somebody to mow the lawn. So the neighbors very helpful because even though they can mow the lawn or cut the grass themselves, but they would give that job to us, cut the tree, trim the trees, all those things. Until September. So my brother now teach. At the time, you have to start from the low level so he’s an instructor first before he can get into assistant and associate and all - so he teach and I think they pay him something like $700 a month. But the good thing is that they were able to give me a grant to stay in the dorm at the university.

TVD: So same university he was teaching at.

TP: Right, same university teach at. So, I have that. So I study, but then on the weekend I would come home and working, so we work now as a janitor at the McDonald’s, $2.10 also [laughs]. For about a year I was able to get a job at U.P.S., United Parcel Service. But the job is from three o’clock in the morning until seven o’clock in the morning. And what we do is we knit-pack these packages people sent and divide them out by state. So
they have these rail on the truck, they have many U.P.S trucks, and then you have to look at the zip code, “Okay, this go to Arkansas,” so you have to this truck go to Missouri, you divide like that, all by hand. You have a conveyer of these boxes, the zip code and the state and then you have to divide you have to continue, you have to, like that. And then come home at seven o’clock, take a quick nap, have a shower, and then go to school. Because they give us the room for only one year, so after that I have to move home, then I work. Looking at the life of a young man at the time, it’s study, work - but we know education is the key. You have to have your education. At the time, there’s only a few fields. In Vietnam my degree is to go to medical school, it’s science and biochemistry. But we no looking at that here – I’m just hold big family’s shoulder, so we have to just focus on which we can just get a job right away. That’s why get into computer science. And I know some friends they got into other kind it’s petroleum engineering it’s is very hard, and those are the student from Vietnam, but before 1975 they came in maybe ‘72, ’71, they already have a chemical engineering degree and work in petrol in Texas. And IT, information technology, just start to pick up. So that’s why major in computer science, and very easy to get a job after you get a degree in that. So you work hard in three years, you study, you work. But during the weekend, the spiritual life is always so important. Church is play such a important in the life. In the church or pagoda, in the Buddhist, they have their group, and the Catholic. In Vietnamese culture, spiritually is always play important role. Catholic or Buddhist, so that Sunday is family time, church time. So all the thirteen families they all get together say mass together, eat together.

TVD: Ok so to continue, I wanted to ask you about that spiritual life that you are referring to. I know that your family is Catholic, your brother is a priest, can you maybe
talk more what it was like growing up Catholic in Vietnam, and if there are similarities and differences in the U.S. [United States]?

TP: This subject maybe takes a long -

TVD: That’s a whole other interview [laughs]!

TP: Takes a whole other interview to discuss but the Catholicism in Vietnam as you know, Christianity or Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam back in 17th century by the Portuguese missionary priests and then the French. And unfortunately because, due to political reasons or what not, our kings at the time were thinking that the religion was associated with the French government, and have a lot of persecutions and things like that, happen for the last 300, 400 years a lot of people die - and our county, rather than take on a strategy of open door policy like Japan or Thailand, we embark on a closed door, and there were mistakes made. The Catholicism in Vietnam is very much in it’s village. If you have a chance to go to north Vietnam or even the part of southern outside of Saigon, Hô Nai, if you travel on the highway one (unintelligible) and you pass through these villages, villages after villages, each village is like, there is a church with it’s gothic cross. The village life for Catholicism, but same thing I think for Buddhism, each village you might have a pagoda or church and the life all the village surrounded around the church or pagoda. For example, at noon time you have the church bell ring. Just to remind people it’s noon time and it’s time to say a prayer. At five p.m. you might have a bell ring from a pagoda, five p.m. in the evening, and then six o’clock you have the church bell ring from the church. So the life in the Vietnamese society very much rural, agricultural society, people we work in the field in the morning, noon time we go home, so that’s why we have noon bell we have lunch, lunch is big meal in the Vietnamese
culture, and everybody take a nap, siesta, and then go back to work in the field, and then
go back home back to the village around five p.m., 6 pm. Tiếng chuông chùa. You have
tiếng chuông chùa around 5 pm or tiếng chuông nhà thờ buổi chiều. So that’s where the
whole life, is peaceful, is very calm, very peaceful, very calm, because everyone
surrounds that, around the church. Now, in the church, the priest is very much everybody
listen to the priest. The priest is a symbol, not only in the church life, but also in social
life. And the priest is an educated person. He spend many, many years in education,
probably speak a language that he knows, he knows organization skill, management
skills, so the priest act not only as a spiritual figure, but also as a leader in the social. And
I’m sure in the Buddhism it’s the same thing, the monk act as a spiritual leader and social
leader for the family. Now, when we come to this country, we see that the older
generation - if we using this time 2013, now I’m 58 - all the people that are before my
generation, like 70 years old, a lot of them have already passed away. And in this
country, in the Vietnamese Catholic communities, we have the church but a lot of these
church are now old people. Maybe my generation will be the last that you see in the
church. Except for certain communities, like in Louisiana or Garden Grove, that you see
because the Vietnamese community the younger youth still get involved. But in other
Vietnamese communities like outside, you see that mostly just the older people. Unless
the Vietnamese Catholic Church have to transform, so it cannot be very much like in the
old Vietnam, they have to adapt to the ways of the American parish, the American church
are doing. Meaning, have to engage people more. The priest now does not take a
leadership role, but more like a coordinator. The priest is a spiritual, but not so much of a
social. So the lay people, not the priest, have to take more leadership role in the church.
In that way, it will attract the younger people. For example, my kids, my children, they don’t go to the Vietnamese because they don’t speak Vietnamese. Some of the Vietnamese mass very much traditional - it depends upon some parish, some parish, some Vietnamese church are more open so they attract more younger people.

TVD: So the model that you were describing earlier in Vietnam from sóm dào hay họ dào, right?

TP: Right, that’s what we call the village. The whole village is very much like a Catholic sóm dào or họ dào. Parish, right.

TVD: So that’s kinda the thirteen families that you gathered around you when you were here?

TP: When we arrive in Dallas, the very first thing is – that’s very much the Vietnamese way in 1975, remember we just arrived to this country so all our custom and tradition still very much in Vietnam. The very first thing you have to do, what? Is to try to build a church. So I remember then my family home serve as that parish church. So every Sunday then, the whole thirteen family they would go to my house, and the living room was transformed into a church. So my brother would say mass, and then everybody eat together, and all the leaders, all the elders, like my father and all the other thirteen families, they all discuss where to buy to build a church [laughs]. So maybe in the first year that’s all they do. They work hard to feed the family, to feed the kids, but also they think about where to buy the church. Sooner or later, you have the first Vietnamese Catholic Church in Dallas, that was this thirteen Vietnamese families - tiny, but then just growing and growing. We have not been back in that church because now there are other priests, and I hope they will transform to adapt more, because otherwise they will lose to
the young people. But just like anything there’s a transformation. In 1975 still very much the same - and every Sunday start from the home, which is my parent’s home, and then for about a year they have a building, and they all donate, and they ask the help from the Diocese in Dallas, not help but lending the money because we have to pay back, with extremely very low interest or zero interest, so that’s how they do. The Buddhism in this country, because the reason I know more about that is because Susie was Buddhist, she was not Catholic. And I have to tell you the whole story about that too. So because the Buddhist there is no systematic support system, because we are in the United States, there is a parish, there’s diocese, archdiocese, and there are U.S.C.C. [United States Catholic Charities], there is a support system there. In Buddhist, sometime you feel sorry for a Buddhist monk, he has to relay 100% on the donation from the Vietnamese Buddhist families. Although some of them do very good, like Chùa Huế Quang, right? It’s a huge pagoda.

TVD: They just build the second wing! [Both laugh]

TP: But there is no support system for them. This is very interesting. Susie family is a devout Buddhist family. Mom is from Huế but her father passed away in ’72, three years before ’75, in Vietnam. So her family is very, I let her to tell, but single mom and seven kids here, because there are nine of them, but the elder brother and one sister stay behind in Vietnam. So in ’75, the seven of them and the mom - and she was my mother-in-law and she passed away, bless her soul, she’s a great woman - 50 some years old she take care of seven children, just like our children, they had to work hard. Now my parents know her parents in Vietnam because we come from same town, Nha Trang. But because she’s not Catholic my parents did not approve of the marriage.
TVD: In Vietnam?

TP: No here. Her family came to Fort Chaffee, we from Camp Pendleton. But then her family came from Fort Chaffee to Dallas, we from Camp Pendleton to Dallas. And there two things I tell you about spiritual life among the first Vietnamese people come here, the second thing is social life, very important too. Like for example in ’76 the Vietnamese community in Dallas, both Catholics and Buddhists just Vietnamese, we organized the first Vietnamese Tết in Dallas. So the social life is in our Tết Trung Thu. Tết. And then weekends we play soccer and so on. How I met Susie – because in September, in the fall season, my younger sisters, two of them, and Susie and her younger sister they have to go to intermediate high school. I took my sisters there and acted also as a translator in English, even though my English was not as very good [laughs] and I was 20, she was 15, 16, Susie.

Audio [Track 2]

TVD: That’s a lot younger at that age [laughs].

TP: You right. How you know that? Because in Vietnam, we date with the girls in the same class. We don’t date with the girls younger - in this country we don’t date people same class in this country, we date girls a lot younger than us. But in Vietnam, no! Ladies they get older faster than men. Now, I tell you funny story.

TVD: That statement could get you in trouble later on! [Both laugh]

TP: No, last year. Remember the French school in Đà Lạt?

TVD: Mm hmm.
TP: Only six girls, and about thirty all boys. I remember we were about what -19, 20 at that time. So that’s the time when you start to be mỏ mong. Romantic right? But in Vietnam, it’s not like here, you cannot even hold hands. The most is maybe you write some poems or you take some flowers and put into that, and that’s how you, all that. So six girls, thirty boys.

TVD: A lot of attention! [Laughs]

TP: Lot of attention from the boys. There was one girl, I wouldn’t call that first love, but like puppy love. And we all from ’75 to just until last year, we just wondering what happened to all these six girls, six ladies. Because in my class now there are three other men, in Dallas and Louisiana, and sometimes we email each other, do you have any news for this-and-this-and-this, and we still remember the name. So finally last year, somehow we get through Facebook.

TVD: Not Hội Ái Hứ, something or other? [Laughs]

TP: No! [Laughs] Because our French school is more. It’s a big high school in Vietnam. If it’s a big Vietnamese high school, yes you have Hội Ái Hứ. We don’t have Hội Ái Hứ. [Laughs]

TVD: But you have Facebook now! [Laughs]

TP: But we have Facebook! A guy in Australia, same class, got into Facebook. A guy from New Jersey also got Facebook, he then connected us, and then we found one girl. Just last year. She happened to be living in Garden Grove, all these years and I have no idea. [Both laugh] But now she’s like a lady, she’s semi-my age, but she’s like a sixty-some years old lady. They act, and their physique, and they act, older! But men probably we stay younger because we drinking wine. And then from her, we get into the girl who I
have puppy love. Very sad story, very beautiful, but very sad story. She’s the one that I really always cho coi bài. I help her with math, I help her with physics, or chemistry test. I help. But then we lost in February when we all left the school, I mean lost touch. In ’75 I just learned she had to marry much younger dalla from the north, because she was the elder daughter in her family, and her family was very wealthy. But in ’75 they lost everything. Instead of going into a new economic zone, vũng kinh tê mới đồ, she very much like sacrifice and got married to this older colonel, or dalla from the north. She was only maybe 20 at the time, have two boys. But they have no compatibility, they have to divorce, then spend on her own many years, and finally she found a man in Saigon. Get married, have one daughter, very happy marriage but then he died of lung cancer. And about five years ago - all this story that we learned just last year, and now she lives in Dallas - she had to then agree to get married to an old American person. And that old American person, everybody thought that he would be a gentlemen, but turns out he is not. When he took her back, and her daughter - because the two boys they stay behind because they already got married - so just the girls – I think now she’s about 20 some years old so she was about 15, 16; five, six years ago – took them to Phoenix, no house, he kept them in the house, just like sex slave. They were able to escape, details, but they escape. Police came. So now they able to be in Dallas, I met her last year, we send her to California visit us and our family, told story to all our children and Susie, she then went with us to Utah ski together, but she doesn’t ski. But very sad story, now she’s by herself in Dallas. Now have to work on the nails. Maybe she’s a person you need to talk to because she has all the stories because she live, at least 30 years in the communist. From
a lady in the French high school with a promising future but all that was shattered in ’75. But very old. I understand now because she had to go through a tough time.

TVD: Yeah, she’s gone through a lot.

TP: But the other lady she’s doing good in Garden Grove. [Both laugh] Why we say this? Because in Vietnam we tend just to date. In this country, it’s like younger. You are younger than your husband right?

TVD: A couple of years.

TP: Yeah! So Susie is older, four years. Where was I?

TVD: So you met at your sister’s school.

TP: Oh! Sister’s school as a translator, and she look at me and she say – I don’t remember what I translate because my English was not that good also but I was able to help them with registration forms, to enroll into school at the time – and then it was probably just love at first sight or something, we got married very early ’79 - December 15, 1979.

TVD: And how long had you know each other?

TP: Four years.

TVD: So you met in ’75 and got married in ’79.

TP: Oh! But I told you this story I forgot. She’s not Catholic.

TVD: Yeah?

TP: And she said, “I don’t have a faith, I cannot convert.” And I said, “That’s fine.” My parents refused to go to our wedding, our wedding was in Chinatown, Los Angeles. Remember we got married at the Catholic Church in Burbank, and my brother he’s the priest. At the time now he’s already the professor at University in Washington [District of
Colombia], not Georgetown. That’s the Catholic University of America, C.U.A. And my elder brother representing my parents. So the priest flew from Washington [District of Colombia], and my elder brother flew in from Dallas representing on my family’s side. Now my mom support the marriage, but because of my father, in Vietnamese family she gave me money, she gave me $2,000 of her own saving without letting my dad know. But after we got married, five years later, Ryan was born. And when Ryan is born, she then convert by herself. So when the old Vietnamese priest, and he is very open-minded, and my brother is very open-minded, he said that’s fine. We said that’s fine, you should not ask people to convert. Although some other Vietnamese priests would not allow the marriage to take place in the Catholic Church, ours was in the Catholic Church. So we had to ask for acceptation, you have to have permission, from the Bishop. And this is ’75, ’79, how many years ago, not that long ago, it was that strict!

TVD: So your parent’s only objection was the fact that she was not Catholic? Was there any other objections to her?

TP: Just that. The religion. If you look at the wedding photos, you don’t see my parents. Only see my brother representing. But give credit to Susie mom. Susie mother very open-minded, if she’s close-minded like my parents, we wouldn’t be able to get married.

Because she can demand my parents have to be there.

TVD: Very Vietnamese.

TP: Yea very Vietnamese way.

TVD: Because they think of it as unlucky.
TP: Yea but she’s very open-minded. But five years later when Ryan was born – oh, during the five years I could not talk to my parents. I talk to my mom only, I could not talk to my father, I only talk to my mom.

TVD: So he somewhat disowned you.

TP: Right. And then after that, Susie then became his favorite daughter-in-law. She’s so close to my father and also my mother. But my father even more than my mother, very close to Susie. So the whole thing is you work through, tradition and custom, we always say the lord is make to serve humanity, not the other way around. That’s why we have to say, adapt. But many story like that, in Vietnamese, when you talk about marriage.

Different religions. Because it’s so based on that spirituality.

TVD: Then what gave you the strength to defy your father, and do what you wanted?

TP: I’m lucky, I don’t know! I think Susie gave them that strength. Because you right, very hard to stand up – I guess maybe part of this is because this country after four years – if in Vietnam I don’t know I could do the same thing or not. I don’t know. But after four years, I already have my job and everything at that time, I became independent also, and part of my thinking always like that. I’m very liberal. If you look at our kids it’s the same thing, I just let them choose – if you want to do environmental law, but that’s what she loves. But we learn a lot from her. In our restaurant, for example, everything recycle. When we go to the hotel, she always make sure all the light we turn off, so we become conscious of the environmental issues, so that’s good.

TVD: So if you can go back for me for a little bit, because you had talked about your family’s life in Dallas and you were working really hard going to school and struggling
and getting paid minimum wage at $2.10 an hour, when did you leave Dallas, and was it your family’s decision to move or did you move on your own?

TP: The reason, Susie family only stay in Dallas for a year. And so her family then moved to Los Angeles. I’m still in University, so when after I graduated and got a job with E.D.S. [Electronic Data Systems], and also the family is also crowded. All my younger brother sister still live there. I actually asked to send me to San Francisco because they don’t have a branch in L.A. [Los Angeles] but E.D.S. [Electronic Data Systems] has a big branch in San Francisco.

TVD: And E.D.S. [Electronic Data Systems] stands for?

TP: Electronic Data Systems. That’s a Ross Perot company. And they develop all the computer systems to handle the claims, insurance claims, processing for Blue Cross. Blue Shield. The insurance company, health care. So I remember, interesting, in the interview, at the time, at the time E.D.S. [Electronic Data Systems] was known to only hire ex military people. Like people you spend years in air force or navy or marines or army because they want to get those people with the military background so they can train them to become software engineer, system engineer. I was one of few first, number one, that they hired directly from university, I still have, you see my picture I still have long hair, hippie.

TVD: You were a hippie?

TP: Yea! [Both laugh] And also Asian. Not American. So those are two firsts. But when they interview, they talk about life stories, you work really hard. They looking at the transcript of the course we take, and all the grade, and so on. They offer me a job on the spot, you know how much they pay at the time, $1,200 a month.
TVD: That’s a lot!

TP: That’s a lot! Twenty-some-thousand a year. [Laughs] From $2.10 in ’75! And you’re talking about ’78? That’s a lot. But they have to wear a uniform. First of all, no beard. The hair have to trim. They say, we hire you but you have to cut your hippie hair. So have to show the ear. And I remember, they say, you have to buy decent suit. I’m a hippie! My concept of a decent suit is just a tweed jacket. Back in ’79 you remember the style, all we have a patch at the elbow, like a university professor?

TVD: Mmhm!

TP: You know? We always wear like that.

TVD: I have a blazer like that. [Both laugh]

TP: You see my picture! Hippie. So I show up in the office in San Francisco, hair already cut short. And you have to wear a white shirt. White shirt, and the tie have to be conservative color. Black or blue. But the jacket was a tweed jacket with a patch in the elbow. So my manager told me, “No, no this not conservative suit.” I said, “This is conservative!” [They said] “Nope, have to go home and buy a conservative suit.” Very strict. Always if you put your hair long, the manager come in and say, better you have your hair cut. No mustache. No beard. That’s like, just like a military. But very successful. But we learned a lot. I mean, eight years. You learn a lot about the company. And that’s was one of the things that helped me to build my company in 1988. So from ten years, work for E.D.S. [Electronic Data Systems] eight years and then two years from Wells Fargo. But I was the youngest person they promoted to position V.P., Vice President.

TVD: Of E.D.S. [Electronic Data Systems]?
TP: No of Wells Fargo.

TVD: Wells Fargo? So you worked for the bank for two years.

TP: But in the I.T. [Information Technology], computer department. As a V.P. in charge of the strategic architecture system. In two years, I develop the first A.T.M. system for Wells Fargo – the A.T.M. system that you use today, A.T.M. – that’s what we did in two year’s work. Have all the accolade from I.B.M. I.B.M. came in looking at the system, become a model A.T.M. system for most of the I.B.M. banks. Interesting when I formed my company, the first customer of the company was not in U.S. [United States] - in Europe, in Dublin, Ireland.

TVD: What was the name of your company?

TP: Customer Focus International.

TVD: Customer Focus International.

TP: C.F.I., we call C.F.I. The reason at the time, banks do not focus on the customer, everything is organized around the account number. So you have a checking account, you have savings account, you have credit account, you have mortgage account, you have a few loan account, they don’t know who you are. Every time you have to say what’s your account number. So we then developed, designed, the A.T.M. system for the bank, a customer information system. We pull information, the software pulls all the information from the account, identify a customer profile, and this was in 1988. So that became a model. And when we build the company, I chose the name “Customer Focus.” The product we that develop called, “Customer Relationship Management Software,” so when a large bank came to (unintelligible) they check, they like the system, they say, “Who developed this system?” they look at me and my company, and with the I.B.M. backing,
they then sign the first contract. Because back then very conservative, there’s no way the bank in Ireland trust a small company in California do this for them. So they have check around, look at references. So in life, the story is, when we do good things, then next good things will come. Don’t worry about that one thing we learn from Ross Perot, I still remember, is that you do something because you love it, not because the money. The money is a byproduct of what you do best. So just focus on what you do best, and money, it will come.

TVD: You said you learned this from Ross Perot?

TP: Yea Ross Perot. That’s the thing, focus on what you really love to do, and what you do best. And then the financial reward will come by itself. So you do one thing at a time, so started the company.

TVD: Why did you wanna start your own company? It seems like you were doing well working for these larger companies, right?

TP: Right, I was the youngest vice president. But when I see the concept of customer relations management at I.B.M., introduce a new technology, relational data based technology, which is now Oracle is using. Vietnamese, we always have that entrepreneurial. Same thing we work to restaurant also. Vietnamese people we always - the survival? We never like 8 to 5 job. Like Ryan right now, same thing. Never work 8 to 5 job. They always dream, they always think. I think Asian, Chinese people, and Jewish people, same. At the time I have very comfortable job, high salary, to give up all that I take the risk of doing this – and two children at the time! And Susie stay home.

TVD: So you’re the main breadwinner.
TP: Yeah, and have to travel a lot during the ten years. So I’m a four million, for life, four million miles club with American Airlines [both laugh]. It’s not like the dot-com company. At the time in 1987 or ’88, because the dot-com boom, you can have just a business plan. No product, no customers and you can have venture capitalist put in $10 million dollars. It’s so easy like that. But in our story, ten years we built from 1988 until we merged with public company in 1990, ten years. In that ten years, we normally develop that product and build a distribution system, the software translated in many languages – Portuguese, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, not French. I went to French many times, I speak French with them, but because they know from U.S. [United States], they don’t want to do it. The French they have something in them about the Americans. But the Spanish, and Koreans, and Japanese, and all that. So we have customers in Japan, many! Running the software and we build distribution network. We partner Hitashi, Hitashi was our partner in Japan, they translate, they sell the software, we train them. In Korea same thing. I used to fly from Los Angeles to Tokyo every month. Every month we go there. And from there go to Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, go down to Singapore, and then back here. Sometime from Singapore fly to L.A. and then L.A. go to Europe right away, don’t even get home, just fly. Now in Latin America, we have customer in Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Argentina. We have customer in New Zealand, Australia, and in Canada. Susie travels with me for those places that are nice. Like we spend a few time in New Zealand, we love New Zealand. Australia.

TVD: Was she able to bring the kids along?

TP: In Japan. I think Paula came with us. I went first, and then -

TVD: They would come join you?
TP: I love Japanese culture. We would go from Tokyo, take the Shinkansen train down to Gobei, Osaka, and go Kyoto, back to Tokyo. And we have a lot of Japanese friends, and now we know them, they hard work. You know why the divorce rate of Japanese is higher in the older people than the younger people? The reason is the husband, high percentage, live far from home. They work in Tokyo, and they stay in condominium, apartments in Tokyo, together, sometimes like two to three guys. And only once a month they would take the train back home. They have long distance relationship. They may have one kid or two children but they don’t actually live together until they retire. When they retire, now they live together and suddenly they could not get along. That’s why the divorce happens because at the time they just work, work, and they come home just for a short weekend, and then back out again, so you don’t have conflict. When you live together, days in and day out, which is first. We go through that too. Because I travel a lot, that’s fine. But now when, we retire, and I retire very young.

TVD: But you’re not really retired, you’re still working! [Laughs]

TP: No, we did retire for ten years already. We sold the company in 1998. But I signed a contract to stay on for three years to help them to integrate the software, and training their people, and so on. We then go on and became the largest shareholder of the company, sit on the board. At the time now I know about how to run the public company. Because private is different. When you run the public company, all the S.E.C. [Securities and Exchange Commission] reporting, different. We bought Informing, which is very large. We position everything to sell to I.B.M. for one billion in cash. We sell one billion in cash but my portion is not one billion, no, small. [Laughs]. But very handsome. So that’s why we retire. 1998, about 2001.
TVD: So when you say “we,” you retired. Since Susie had been a homemaker?

TP: Yea I retired. So during those ten years now suddenly we have some friction also. Same like the Japanese people. When you work, focus on business, now suddenly – before, the wife makes the decision on everything about the children, and now you start to put your two cents worth – how about this and that – and suddenly there’s conflict. So you have to work through that. But that makes the marriage stronger.

TVD: And you’ve also gone through the long distance relationship too right? When Susie moved here.

TP: When Susie stay home and I traveled all the time.

TVD: Well earlier before you got married.

TP: There were a lot of temptation too. Especially in Japan, Korea, in Singapore, there were a lot of young girls, the temptation, all that. I was making in 1996, ’97, when Vietnam just start to get into the world banking system and they go to Thailand, Singapore, for like symposium. I was speaking to and explaining about banking systems, customer relationship systems, how to structure all this. And we have in the audience a lot of Vietnamese. Initially, was the top level and then after, next year they sent more the technical people, so I know a lot of these Vietnamese banks. They didn’t know that I’m Vietnamese, because I go by Tom Phan, until break out sessions. Susie accompany me to Thailand, Singapore, Bali, New Zealand.

TVD: So it sounds like you have four children and it sounds like during the early years when your children were younger, you traveled a lot. Then you were lucky enough to retire early, but did ever feel you missed out on some their childhood? Being involved?
TP: Not in high school, when they in high school I already - in the elementary school, I missed that time. But when I retired, especially, not Ryan, but the twin daughters, I drove them to - they all go to Mater Dei, they engaged in lot of sports activities, they play tennis, swimming - and I’m driving them and go to tennis match. Tennis so involved with them at that time. It’s not 100% miss but some of the early part that I missed.

TVD: What made you decide to retire so early when you could have continued working, or open up another company?

TP: I guess when you work for ten years and you travel and work like that, really. I want to spend time with the families. So we travel. When I mentioned year 2000 when the whole family, not just our family, I mean, the whole extended family – it’s when we buy the tickets up because we sold the company already so we bought the tickets, brothers, sisters - and I remember 30 to 40 of us - we spend a month in Vietnam. And first time we see our sister again her family, our brother-in-law. We travel together from Saigon all the way to Hà Long Bay. And that was the only one was the kids go back to Vietnam. And I think they want to go back to Vietnam on their own. And then we travel with them every year, I mean we take them to Europe, we take them to Japan, we go to the trip in Vietnam, we take them to Thailand. So different places they all travel with us. Until about 4-5 years ago, Ryan just posed the question, mom and dad you have been retiring too long, let’s just do something together. And I asked, what? What do you have in mind? Because he’s in marketing, I was thinking – he knows I’m in high tech – he says, no, restaurant business. [Laughs]

TVD: So it was his idea!
TP: That was his idea. Really, it was his idea. I think because he’s different from me, he’s not have aptitude for computer or science, he doesn’t like that. But what he likes is the hospitality industry. He takes acting classes. To him, food is extension of the art.

TVD: Brings people together.

TP: Yea, so he’s looking at Vietnamese food. But our Vietnamese food has not been at the American scene, it has very much just been within our own community. We take him to restaurants all the time. Take them to Little Saigon introduce them to Vietnamese food. But they all from Dana Point. They say if they are Vietnamese-American and make them hard to enjoy the food in that kind of ambiance, how can we expect the younger American? But I was in high tech, this is restaurant business food. He said, don’t you want to bring Vietnamese food on the map? He said, mom cooks great at home. I told him, I said, cook at home is one thing, and cook in the restaurant is another thing, Ryan. He’s all marketing. And I’m thinking about operations. So finally, he frustrated because we more like, step by step. Just go to do market research, I told him, go to restaurant trade show, this was in 1997.

TVD: So he was really young at the time.


TVD: So he finished his bachelor’s degree in marketing.

TP: So we went to San Francisco trade show, go to Chicago trade show – all these national restaurant trade shows because we have to study the equipment. What kind of equipment – we have no idea. This was in the summer of 2007 in the Chicago trade show. He and I and Susie were sitting in the audience on the symposium three top chefs. And the topic is the emerging food trends in the country and they all talk about the
emerging is Vietnamese. And this is so cool, he just looked at me, “Dad, we are done?”

[Both laugh]

TVD: That’s how you got roped in!

TP: The reason is Japanese already every corner, you have sushi. Chinese even that. Korean they say is too garlicky and spicy. Vietnamese is very balanced, and at the time is whole idea about healthy diet. Have to be green, fresh, exotic flavor. Vietnamese hits right on every note. We are fresh, healthy, flavor, very balanced, not too much garlicky, not too spicy, the sauce is very light – hit on the note. And I say okay. [Laughs] So that was 2007. 2008 then we said, “What type of design?” Food is one thing but you have to create a total ambiance. Susie has to go through many – again we have some idea when we go to Southern restaurants, we said, we don’t want a put-down type of restaurant, we want noisy, we want open kitchen because then American won’t say anything about dirty kitchen in Vietnamese – whatever you see, that’s what it is. Have to be open kitchen.

That’s the reason for long table. That’s concept is open table, we have to introduce American to, you have to sit together. Just like in our Vietnamese culture, sometimes we say, can we sit with you, eat with you? Engage in conversation. It was four to five years ago. Now you see that every American restaurant always some long table, communal table. Has to be fun – some table long, some table high, some table dining [laughs]. Out of nowhere you cannot be like this. And then you have to say, “What type of color,” and Susie put together.

TVD: So Susie is the interior designer in the family.

TP: Yea, she work with a person too but lot of ideas. And then the whole thing, 2008, is building, takes about a year to build. And I’m always say open two at the same time.
TVD: How did you decided on the two locations?

TP: We want to test the market for the Southern part Orange County and the Northern part – it’s different. In Northern Orange County, Fullerton, Brea, they are more conservative, old money. Whereas here, close to Newport and Corona del Mar, new money, younger people, so we want to test the market. Which means we want to do next.

We want to do Chicago, Philadelphia. And then the big recession hit in 2009 and 2010. And we have been four years. This is about a million, and the other one is about $800,000 so we put about $2 million our family money to do this. Now we are looking for third one in Belmont Shore. But after these four years what we want to do - this is to make a statement about Vietnamese food. And one that makes easier to franchise will be, what we call ‘Little Phan’ like Chipotle.

TVD: More deli style? Like café?

TP: Like café but you serve yourself a kind of quick serve. Twenty dish on the menu, not event twenty, six to eight and you choose your thing in three step. You choose your carb – your starch, you choose your protein, you choose your vegetable, and here you go.

Starch is either pho, and bun which is cold noodle, banh mi, and rice. That’s your starch. And protein is meats - tofu, chicken, beef, but everything have to be natural. Choose your sides. So if you see a person that say pho - in our Vietnamese we never have broccoli, steamed broccoli in pho - but American, the trend right now, they want to customize their own dish. They want to customize their own dish. They want to see how the process they do it. So first they choose pho, okay I want to choose this beef brisket, but I also want to have bok choy. Fine, want bok choy? Boom boom boom. You pay, you out. [Both laugh]
TVD: That’s kind of like the Gogi, that opened near campus, it’s the Korean. It’s sort of the Chipotle of Korean food. Yours is the Chipotle of Vietnamese food. [Laughs]

TP: Right we want to be the Chipotle of Vietnamese food. [Both laugh]

TVD: Was your decision to open near two college campuses a conscientious decision you made? Or this is just by accident?

TP: No. Ryan is the one who choose these locations. We didn’t know this location. We didn’t know it’s hidden. The traditional thing is always have to be foot traffic - high traffic, high traffic. This is not high foot traffic this is hidden. This is by only word of mouth come out. But it fits in urban living concept. This is neighborhood restaurant, but it’s not a restaurant, it’s like a bistro.

TVD: So your business is very much a family business all the way through?

TP: Yea in the software business, I’m the major shareholder but I have two Chinese - Taiwanese shareholders. When we sold the company, one of them moved back to Taiwan, and then right now he has a software company in China. And the other one is in Las Vegas. But that one have problem with his family and divorce, the money split. But the other one is doing good. Interesting is, before in my software, before 1998, mostly I do not deal with the Vietnamese community. All my customers, my employees and the people I associate with are non-Vietnamese. They are either American, white, or they are Chinese, because of the work. After we sold the company, then we start to have more Vietnamese-American friends. They are younger. Now all our Vietnamese we associate with are Vietnamese-Americans.

TVD: Well it probably has to do with where you are living right, too.
TP: Yea, where we are living and what type of job you do. Now because your job, since you are involved with the Vietnamese film festival, you’re more involved with the Vietnamese people more involved in the arts, more in humanities. I love to know more!

Because the people we involved with, they are doctors, but they are also fun, but I love to know –

TVD: But what I see about our community is interesting, a lot of doctors and engineers, and people who have gone more mainstream routes that are successful, also have a secret passion for the arts, they’re usually singers or artists. One of my good friends he makes beautiful visual art, and he’s an engineer by day. [Laughs]

TP: That’s true! It’s in the blood, it’s probably in the genes, in the psyche have that. And number two, also French educational system tend to be more – you love poetry, you sing the songs, and all the arts. And food is also part of the arts. You’re right. But I want to know more about the people in sociology, in women’s studies, or English, history – they are different. Like my brother, philosophy, theology, but he’s a priest. How about your parents? Tell me, I reverse, what’s your story? [Both laughs]

TVD: Wait, let me wrap up the interview first! I have a couple more questions. I think this one will be really important also for thinking about your children, and then your children’s children and farther on down the line when they want to trace back their roots and understand where they came from. One of the things we do know about the Vietnamese-American experience is the war, that many people had to leave their homeland, but less is known about how they rebuilt their lives. What kind of struggles they faced and how they became an American, really. So if I asked you what has that been like for you in the latter part of your life, becoming an American and really finding
your place here – what are some of those challenges and what are those triumphs? I heard a lot of these triumphs, I think you’ve been incredibly successful economically. But are there other types of successes too?

TP: There are many answers to that question line. Let me start by saying in 1975 when we first came to Dallas it’s a very first time a neighbor saw an Asian face. When we walk on the street, they ask, “Vietnam?” They know Vietnam because of the American involvement in Vietnam, but they never seen a Vietnamese, “Are you Vietnamese?” – [side conversation with waiter].

TP: So, oh you’re Vietnamese. And I have some experience back in ’75, when people look at you. So always a tough time to integrate. And then when Ryan was probably in fifth grade or sixth, kids call him ‘chink.’ So we took Ryan to karate school, tae kwon do - he was a black belt, he was fourteen already a black belt – knock the hell out of that kid. [Both laugh] We got called in by the principal, and this is a Catholic school down in Dana Point, St. Edward – and the whole story because he call me a chink, and that tall big American, but Ryan already kick the – so even him, they face that. Regardless, always we are minority. So how do Vietnamese-American contribute - even though we pay tax, but the fact is, the last ten years after I retire, we start to get back to our Vietnamese community. We are Vietnamese American – I don’t know about your sub-section – but the sub-section I’m involved with they are more, even though they are doctors, but they work in the Vietnamese communities only for Vietnamese. They don’t integrate into the American mainstream. Except maybe younger doctors who work in the American hospitals. Next is how to have a voice in the political system. I don’t think we have got that yet. We have a few congressmen but we are not at that - so to answer your question, I
think we are Vietnamese-Americans we contribute economically but politically we are not a force to – [side conversation with waiter] – But Americans I think they look at Vietnamese if they want to buy a vote or block, but we are small. Who is largest in Asian? Chinese?
TVD: They have been here the longest.
TP: Then Filipino, or Japanese. Part of that we have not been having somebody in the political science, we are mostly what we call, professional. Is my assessment correct, you are a sociologist?
TVD: [Laughs] I agree with you for the most part. But for yourself you wanted to remind the future generations in your own family to take away something from your life experience, to understand what it’s like to be a Vietnamese, have been grown up part of his life in Vietnam.
TP: Yea we are American but we always have Vietnamese-American in the front. More so because we are in Southern California. Do you really enjoy at the baseball game with hot dog like the American? No. The American pastime we don’t have appreciation for that yet. But there are Vietnamese-American in other state where around there aren’t so many Vietnamese – I know them - I know exactly in my family, in my nephew and nieces when I go back and visit them in Dallas, I feel that they are more American than Vietnamese-American here. They take their kids to go to baseball games, enjoy the hotdog, just like American. Can we understand? Do we feel left out? No, we don’t feel left out because we have the confidence of our economic success. And we pay tax. So we don’t feel left out, we are not ashamed. But deep down do we have the same sense of passion? No. But my nephews and my nieces they have the same passion. In other words,
they have been more assimilated into the mainstream because they are far from the Vietnamese, whereas, we are here. We have Little Saigon news, we have Little Saigon TV, we have Little Saigon radio, and even I turn on, sometimes, Little Saigon radio when I’m driving, but I have to roll up the window! [Both laugh]

TVD: There’s still a part of us that wants to remain Vietnamese when we are living among so many -

TP: We still have to have an identity, which means I don’t feel ashamed, I don’t feel left out, if you want me to go to football, I still can talk, not like international sport like tennis, but baseball, truly American, football. Or keep track of which college teams. And basketball, which college. We still know all this stuff. We can joke, we understand the joke. But before 1975 we speak English but we don’t understand the inside joke. That’s different, we speak English as a foreigner. Now we understand the joke. It’s different.

But do we really have a passion to be assimilated? I speak as a Vietnamese-American living in California, here – that’s no. That’s maybe the reason we have not been in the - you will see Vietnamese-American engaged in the American political system – those Vietnamese-American from other state. Maybe Philadelphia, some in Kansas. I could be wrong, but here, especially in Little Saigon, we are just amongst ourselves. And sometimes we have - what is her name, the congressman from Santa Ana, she’s Mexican.

TVD: Oh, Loretta?

TP: Loretta Sanchez – come by to buy vote. You tell me, I don’t know because I’m – but your generation, you’re are UCI, but you still Asian studies. And then how do we get into Asian, and Asian Pacific, which also equal Hawaiian and so on and so forth.
Audio [Track 3]

In Asian we have Korean, Filipino, you have Chinese, you have Japanese, and you have to compete within the Asian. Asian against Hispanic. American Caucasian [laughs]. You bypass Asian and you go straight into the mainstream.

TVD: I think in California we have a very unique opportunity to – a lot of times we challenge what it means to be American, in this state. There are pockets of conservatives and pockets that are more liberal, and of course, depending on class status and so on. Even if you look at the Vietnamese American community, the first generation was extremely politically conservative too. And now we are shifting, we are seeing people my age and even much younger who are now just coming out to vote being much more liberal, more democrats. So I think the landscape keeps changing.

TP: [Laughs] In our family always too, mom and dad always republican. The daughters always choose democrat for life. We always choose Republican our life. But you are right. And then talk about same sex marriage, lesbians, and gays.

TVD: There I think Vietnamese Americans have a far way to go.

TP: No, in my family we accept, we are open.

TVD: Even with a Catholic background?

TP: My nephew. Great. He’s a top piano player, my younger brother’s son. But he’s officially, not officially, gay. He’s out. Only 14. We accept it. We embrace. And then another nephew in California here, he’s very smart, he’s going to Santa Margarita high school now, and making a video about the problems in high school, people hit on each other, what is?

TVD: Bullying?
TP: Yea bullying. Against bullying. So even though he qualifies to go to medical - he’s a 4.0 GPA and qualifies to medical school, UC Berkeley, UCI, all accepted, but he decided he wanted to go to law school. He’s also gay. He’s 16. He’s coming out, we accept it, we embrace. All depends upon some family. 

TVD: How does the church – do they still participate in the spiritual life? 

TP: We always have the same to teach our kids. You condemn the practice, but you do not condemn the person. So, you ask me, I oppose the same sex marriage. But I will not oppose the person, because the person is not, his choice. It’s not like we can choose, it’s something just in our gene. We cannot plan a person. Right? But the institution wise, that marriage is institution. But if you have any social benefits because of that institution, because legalities of tax issues, then should give them the same kind of benefits, but you call it union or something, civil union, but give the same treatment. Civil union you cannot have the same benefit as a marriage, they have to have the same benefit from a social standpoint, economic standpoint. But from a morality standpoint, we use the marriage as an institution for man and wife. 

TVD: Can I ask you if you have these conversations with your kids - do you talk to them about your political views and your past? 

TP: Yea. We send them email, I call heart-to-heart talk from dad. I have a series of emails that email them, and when they subject “heart-to-heart” they know what is it. I just sent a few days ago. [Laughs] A few days ago long email “heart-to-heart.” 

TVD: Are there things about your past or your life that you don’t share with them, or are you an open book with them?
TP: Actually a mistake I share everything and that’s a mistake when I talk about the puppy love in high school.

TVD: Well you shared it with us too! [Laughs]

TP: I share with them too, I wrote email. The twins, Ryan and Jessica, have very acceptable and they said, “Oh wow, thank you so much dad for letting us know.” But Paula, the youngest one, very protective of mom. And I understand. And she said, “I don’t need to know this.” So Susie told me, you should have checked with me to say whether should send - so the lesson I learned is that now, I did not know I tend to be open book. But then it’s already a year, so start to heal already. Otherwise nothing happen. But she very protective, she doesn’t want, maybe that’s hurting - she’s the youngest, that’s how she felt.

TVD: And you have twins right?

TP: Identical.

TVD: Identical? So do twins run in your family?

TP: No. When Jessica was only ten months old, and we were in church one day and Susie fainted. Take her on Monday for the x-ray, MRI and they discovered she pregnant with twins. [Laughs] And Jessica was only ten months old, so when they out – oh, Jessica was only six months, total they only about ten months apart. Less than one year. Very much like triplets.

TVD: Wow. So that’s hard on Susie.

TP: Yea, hard – and we had to have nanny because I travel a lot. And we didn’t have any Vietnamese nanny, we only have Spanish nanny. Mexican.

TVD: So did the kids learn Spanish?
TP: Yea. Jessica spent, when she was a junior in USF, she spent one semester in Nicaragua, Chile, and she speak Spanish very good. We are very open. She’s a hippie. Jessica’s more like me.

TVD: Like you! [Laughs]

TP: I know. She’s more like me.

TVD: Are any of the kids married?

TP: No, not yet. Ryan is dating a lot. Mom would like to see a Asian.

TVD: So not strictly Vietnamese but any Asian will do. [Laughs]

TP: Ryan only dating American, that’s why she – some older too. [Both laugh]

TVD: So I know we’re past two hours already. But I wanted to ask one last question if there’s any message you want to leave for your kids, so they can hear at some point later on? There’s something you want to tell them.

TP: The thing is I would encourage really to go and listen or read because they digitize [mumbled] for posterity. Everybody has different situation, different character of life. Just like a pen with different colors, a myriad of colors. So go and read, not just from dad story, but all other people story and from there you learn because, just like they said, we have no future if you don’t know history. The history is the foundation for the future. So encourage them to go and listen. I think it would be fun. If you put any movie director, just listen to this story line, all these story line and just come up with something. I would say this is great material for people who want to make film. We need to come up with much more meaningful story. Not just war, not so much something we cannot deny, but there are so many other things. But thank you so much, I think this is great, not like an interview, more like chatting, talking.
TVD: Really great for me too!

TP: Sometimes emotional but bring back some memories but I think it’s good to talk out so thank you for this project, it’s great to know about this project. I will send you an email. I check with them - I did talk to four people and they love that.

TVD: Oh great, thank you!

TP: Dentist, doctor, engineer - they are younger. Some of them actually went to high school experience here. And Susie too.

TVD: Thank you and I want to say one last thing, which is happy birthday!

TP: Oh thank you so much! Thank you!

--end of transcription--