

Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: KEN TO (CUONG VINH TO)

Interviewer: Justin To

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JT: This is Justin To with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project at the University of California, Irvine. Today is May 31, 2015. I will be interviewing Mr. Ken To at his home in Orange, California.

JT: What is your name?

KT: My name is Ken, last name is To, and my Vietnamese name is Cuong Vinh To

JT: And what is your date of birth?

KT: July 9, 1962

JT: Do you remember your place of birth?

KT: Yes I do, I was born in Phan Thiet. The small city up north of, north of Saigon. Driving takes about four hours.

JT: Okay, what are your parents' names?

KT: My father's name is To Huu and my mom is Lam Quy

JT: Can you describe them?

KT: Like?

JT: What do they do?

KT: My family at that time is not that rich but is not that poor so we doing okay. My dad is a businessman and my mom just a house-wife at that time.

JT: Okay so, where did you grow up?

KT: In Saigon, which is the city of the south Vietnam but I was born in Phan Thiet and then my parents brought me up to Saigon and I was raised up there.

JT: Can you describe Saigon? How you grew up?

KT: Well, Saigon is a big city and pretty much all the activity and everything is like import everything; it's a big city and pretty much at that time is good for business. Everything at that time which I'm trying to tell is before, this is before South Vietnam become a communist or the communist took over which is before 1975.

JT: Okay, do you have any childhood memories?

KT: Well I'm trying to remember. There's nothing that (pauses) the childhood pretty much like every family because I was, I mean at that time I really can't remember but my father passed away early when I was like about 8. So at that time I couldn't remember that much. All I know is my, you know, my dad had just passed away and I was too young at the time so that pretty much until pretty much when I was 13 by that time that I started to grow up like a teenager at that time. Just before that, pretty much went to school like other kids.

JT: Okay so, you talked about schooling. Can you describe your schooling in Vietnam, what kind of education level did you have?

KT: Okay, pretty much even though I was in VN I studied Chinese. and pretty much from young kid I was about starting about 4 or 5 years old and pretty much I started Chinese from there until I was about 13. So I don't, even though I lived in Vietnam, but I didn't study any Vietnamese, only in Chinese and to be specific spoke Cantonese and Mandarin so that's pretty much it, but also because the place that we lived in Vietnam at that time, at school we're forced to speak Chinese because all the teachers and all the friends, most of them were Chinese. But when I get home, some of the neighbors were Vietnamese so I could pick up a little Vietnamese, but I don't

know how to write. I only know how to write in Chinese and speak Chinese the most at that time.

JT: Okay so, moving on to family and kinship. Can you tell me if you remember anything about your grandparents/parents when you were a child?

KT: Well, again on my father's side, my grandparents passed away early so I can't remember I was maybe 2 or 3 years old so I can't remember anything. Only my dad and my mom, that's it, at that time.

JT: Okay, so how many siblings do you have?

KT: You mean brothers and sisters?

JT: Brothers and sisters, yeah.

KT: I have one younger brother and two younger sisters.

JT: What are their names?

KT: The younger brother is Timmy To and his Vietnamese name is Tien – To Vinh Tien. And my next sister will be To Buu Linh, and her English name is Pauline To. My youngest one is To Buu Oanh and her English name is Rachel To.

JT: Okay, what do you know about your family name? Like the To.

KT: Well, I tried to remember it from my aunt and my mom that it was passed down. The To was actually from my grandpa and he was born in China. One of the counties, and I know that he, at that time, that China was very poor and a lot of people don't have food and can't survive so pretty much my grandpa tried to get down to Vietnam to survive and try to find somewhere to work and to survive and at that time, he met my grandma. And I heard that Grandma is Vietnamese and they got married and I got my dad. My father was born in a small village in South Vietnam; the name of the village is called Ben Tre. That is a small city too, it just at that

time, again I heard from my aunt that he was doing business like importing rice but he had to ship by a small boat up to the city to raise the family. So that's pretty much what I heard from my aunt. So pretty much, again, I heard that my grandpa doesn't speak Vietnamese well but he married a Vietnamese wife but they lived pretty good for a long time. But I remember they passed away in about 1964, when I was 2, so I don't have any memories about grandpa.

JT: Okay, which occupations have your family members held in the past, can you talk about what your dad did?

KT: Okay, according to my mom and my aunt, he was very poor and went to school and just graduated high school and then college, probably in Vietnam, it's just enough to know how to read and to write basic. So at that time when he was trying to find a job, it's just like what you call a janitor, cleaning, you know, office cleaning. So he got a job there. According to my aunt, her husband referred him to get a job there as an office boy and then he worked there for a few years. But he's pretty smart, he picked up real quick, so the owner of the office, the company, gave him the promotion and gave him assignments to do and to take him here and there to visit some other businesses – other members – associated with the company so from there he picked up and got trust from the owner, so the owner let him represent the company to go out and negotiate with other businesses and at that time, I remember, when he got promoted, the company was doing about some kind of nets for fishing and they imported from the city and some of them imported from the outside like Singapore or Hong Kong, or Taiwan. They imported and they shipped it down to the small county or village so people could use those to catch more fish, or something like that.

JT: Okay, so what did you mother do?

KT: Well, (chuckles) again, she's just a housewife and she just stayed home and raised the four of us. When my dad got the job promotion and he start to pick up and he made some good money – not pretty rich, you know, like the other but our family is pretty good. We don't have to – My mom doesn't have to work, she just stayed home and raised four of us and even though we have a nanny. So after she graduated from school, which I mentioned again, my dad and my mom met and high school, like– what do you call – high school uh-sweethearts. (chuckles) That call. So and then they got married, but again after that she just stayed home, be a housewife, and raise the four of us.

JT: Okay, can you tell us how your father died?

KT: Umm, he was in a business trip um to down south to one of the city, the name is called Can Tho. He was on a flight with six members of the company – represent the company and went to a business trip and again, is regarding the net for fishing stuff and they have a big– talking about that accident. As for the plane, it crashed. Again, I was young and I didn't know, I didn't pay attention and they – of that news – but until I grow older and I asked mom and my aunt – he supposed to be (pause) on – well, actually he's not supposed to be on that trip. The reason - my mom told him that, you know, “You don't have to go, you should stay home” and you know, because we have, I believe at that time, we have a family – have a wedding or something – that he should, you know – my mom told him to stay home and that we should go to the wedding together, but my dad told her that this is a opportunity – this is a good chance so he can make more money. So the owner, asked him to replace him – it was supposed to be the owner that went to that trip but because my dad and he trust my dad and he asked my dad to represent him so, that, at that time, when he down – get down to Can Tho, it was the plane was crashed with a helicopter. And that helicopter is American, they both American and they both all pass away

because of that accident, so – and that is 1970, I believe that is the year, yeah (counts on fingers) so we talk about 45 years ago.

JT: Okay, after your dad passed how, how did your mom take care of the family – How did you help take care of the family?

KT: Yeah, that was unfortunately but fortunately my dad left over – because now he has like a (pause) they call - the company able to give a part - like a share owner to my mom, so at that time, every month, the company still make money and because of my dad that, you know, the owner still alive, so he willing to give part of the owner like a co-owner to my mom – so every month they just give her like a base salary to raise the four of us. Um, and also asked her to come to work so she can get more income and to raise the family.

JT: Okay so moving on to wartime and post-war experiences. How did the war in Vietnam affect your family and community?

KT: Well, the community I don't know that much because at that time I'm still young and I don't – pretty much at that time I just try to stay in school and learn more but for family, again at that time, I was only maybe 13 so, at that time there's no – does not really effect unless that some family they have like if they join a soldier for - then maybe it will affect their living. For us, my mom and my dad's not there at that time, so we still young and it doesn't affect that much, but one thing that – from grandpa, from my grandpa on my mother's side, that because he – they have experience with the communist before so they try to ask my mom to let the – let's– if anything happens, let's have the boys try to leave Vietnam first, if anything happens and this is the time that back in 1975 but it was before April, April the 30th, because that is the day that the – we call Communist get into the Saigon city.

JT: Okay, so can you – did you – were you still living in the same place during the war?

KT: Yes.

JT: Anything change?

KT: Mmm no, it's just the – some of the local mmm that we know, yes they will ask you something that, you don't want to, but you're forced to do it. So starting at that time, now this is the time that you – are we trying to talk about after April '75 or before '75?

JT: Um, at the – at the time, anything?

KT: Well before April '75 – 1975, everything is normal even though my dad passed away and we just live, again, because we have enough money to survive even though my dad passed away at that time, but after April '75, and I remember, on the day, we tried to get out of Saigon, the Vietnam, and I still remember that we tried to get on – go to the Embassy of Korea. And we tried to – we hoped that there's any plane we can get on and try to get out of Vietnam at that time – 1975, so pretty much a lot of families tried to get out, because a lot of people that even though – also a lot of people also they have bad experience with the Communist before. A lot of people from north Vietnam and they went to south and that's why some rumor and even though some of them – some of us haven't experience with the Vietnamese – I mean Communist, so. But we tried – a lot of family, rich or you not rich or you poor, but every family tried to escape because they said they already experience with the Communist so any chance they will try to escape. So after '75, we still live same place, but pretty much a lot of things changed. They won't allow to – students to study – by the way before '75, I studied Chinese and half English too, but after '75, um they won't allow school and teachers to teach any English, only Vietnamese – not a lot of them will allow Chinese as well, only certain schools that – some of the small city in we call it Cho Lon, “chau lon.” And now in Vietnam, as of now, they still call it Cho Lon – it's a lot of big Chinese community over there and if you lived in there you don't have to speak Vietnamese too,

cause a lot – you can go out buy food, buy anything and speak Chinese with them and a lot of people can understand you. So, not after the '75 they forced everybody else – students, have to learn Vietnamese. So at that time, and that's why I picked up some Vietnamese after 1975.

JT: Okay, did you come in contact with or have any relationships with American Soldiers?

KT: At that time, no. Um, our family doesn't work for Americans. Even on my father's side or my mom's side – my mom's side maybe. My grandpa have some kind of business before doing business with French, but not with Americans.

JT: Okay, do you have any opinions about the American soldiers in Vietnam at the time?

KT: Nope, because again, our family doesn't have any interaction with the Americans a lot so I don't have that experience.

JT: Do you know anybody that was ever captured or held by enemy forces during the war; re-education camps or anything?

KT: Um, some of my friends, but after I left Vietnam I haven't heard anything so I don't know that much. I only – after that now I only – years go on then I only see on TV or on radio, you know from radio, and some of them, they talk about the camp – something like that. That pretty much so, and again, because our family doesn't have anything with – associated with the Americans.

JT: Okay, was anybody injured or disabled as a result of the war?

KT: Not with our family, yeah.

JT: Not with our family, okay.

JT: So where were you during the last days of the war? So right after the communist came in and took over?

KT: Um, we still live in the same place in Cho Lon, and pretty much for us, our family because again is pretty – like a normal- because we don't have anything that or did bad things with the Communist. So at that time we don't have to worry about when they came in during – we still say hello to them even though a lot of older generations, they don't like them at all when they, you know, got to the city. Some of the video also mentioned about the tank, the Communist tank and they just drove in the city with tanks to get into the city of the Saigon. And at that time, there's nothing that major or happen to our family, so.

JT: Okay, so you mentioned you were trying to go to the Korean Embassy to try to escape that way; were you successful?

KT: Mmm, No. Unfortunately uh when we got there the gate was closed and the security guard said that everybody already left and the last flight was (paused to think) April 29, so we didn't – so we were forced to go back home, so we didn't try to – also when we got home we did not try again because my mom didn't feel that it will harm or the communist will hurt us because we don't have – we've got nothing to do with uh the war or anything like that or we related to any American or - so she think that we should be okay, we should be safe so she didn't try it – otherwise some of her friends mentioned to her that she would have come down to the port, called at that time - I still remember the name, called Bach Dang – it's like a river but it's made for a lot of shipping and for cargo doing business import/export, so at the time there's a lot of big ship out there and a lot of people trying to get on the big ships and try to get out of Vietnam. But again, my mom did not think that they will do anything to our family because we are not related to the Americans and we are not the uh Republic- at that time we called I think the soldier for South Vietnam, so my mom said I think we should be safe so we didn't plan to go

JT: Okay, but when you planned to go, how did you escape Vietnam?

KT: At that time, after pretty much – after 3 years, and this is, I believe my mom and then also the company that she worked for – the owner and a co-owner and asked her if she want to come with them because they said sooner or later, they know the communist will take the company without, you know, how do I express this (pauses to think) – they try to tell everyone that everyone should be equal, I mean if you're rich you have to share with the poor, at the time, the owner and the co-owner tried to ask my mom and they said they planned a trip and try to escape, if she want to join, then she have to pay to the owner of the boat and also they have to try to buy out, we call, buy out the guard of the port that we're trying, you know, set up and plan. So after three years and plus my grandpa, which is her father, again because they know they got – by the way, he have experience with the Communist so he would ask my mom saying, you should if you have the chance, then get out of Vietnam. So, so that is (long sigh while scratching head) after we lived with the communist, again, because again, the family doesn't have anything to do for the Communists, they you know, to get, because – they try to get the rich people, the people with a lot of money left with a lot – own a lot of real estate. Those are the people that tried to get out real – (chuckles). So, 19 – I believe it's 1978 (pause) in I would say - let me see – I try to remember, I thinks it's October 1978, so my mom will pack and ask my uncle and my grandpa and my nanny to stay back to keep the house that we still have the house – by the way we have a three-story house that's pretty nice compared to the neighbors – at that time she took four of us, we went down to a small city by a bus and we tried to dress pretty casual, and we did not bring any money (chuckles) not a lot of money, just carrying – I think she only carried like a hundred dollars, US dollars at that time, I believe -

JT: What was the reason for only carrying that much?

KT: She think that when we get to the United States, that she can, you know, start the new life, and we're gonna work, and get, you know, hopefully – cause everybody at that time cause in Vietnam, a lot of people saying that if you have a chance to go to USA, to America, the life is a lot better and you can make money, good money. And my mom also planned that if the escape is not – didn't go through, but at least we can come back and we'll still have the money to survive that's the reason she only carry – not a lot of money, um -

JT: Okay, so you we're on the bus going to a little city?

KT: To a little city, and we had to stop two or three different cities to get to the point that we meet a lot of people. Starting that time that I realized that I think my life will change because starting that time, we don't go school anymore and by the way, probably at the time, I would be – how old am I? – I was what, 13 about 15, I believe, yeah that's about 15 and we went down to a small city and we met a lot of people there which we don't know them, and we tried to get on the boat and at that time I got introduced to a co-owner of the company, so at that time my mom didn't mention anything about that she had to pay, she just told us that Grandpa told me to take you guys try to leave Vietnam, that's pretty much it. So starting – we tried to get on the boat and I didn't realize we have like about total three boats that's about I would say (measures with hands) 120ft, about that long but they carry about, I believe, I can't remember the number but I believe it's about 400 people. So we were like, getting in the boat with everybody with only a spot about his big (measures a cube with hands) just like a box, so you can squeeze as much people in and when - I still remember that time when the boat tried to start the engine and leave the uh the port, and I still remember the – some of them carried a gun, I believe it's the guard for that city and they tried to leave – I mean let us out at that time. Total is about 3 but unfortunately (chuckles) the boat - somehow the engine didn't work well so we had to stop and we had to

come back and repair and we find out that there's holes at the bottom of the boat so we had to repair and we tried to get a new engine too, so we had to stay back about a week. And that time, we start to experience with the – how do you say it? – with the poor people, they don't have water, no money, and they're starting to starve and at that time because we almost run out of money and we didn't – because my mom thought that okay let's get on the boat and then take probably about two or three days and we get to America and she didn't think that the escape's not that easy and that it takes a lot of time, I mean a long time to get there. So, at that time, after they fixed the boat and I think it takes a week and we had to live in a farm and it's a house but it's for horse, the horse still lived there and he's pretty stinky and pretty smelly (chuckles) and we had no water um, for shower so each person allowed only a can of coke for a shower for the day, so at that time, I starting to realize that “oh no” I mean this is not the life that we want to live and - but my mom said “Just be patient, let them do. And then, you know, we just follow the people because we're not the only one so there's a lot of people with us, so okay.” And I said alright. So after a week, they fixed the boat, they fixed the engine and then we get out to the ocean again and we were out on the ocean, I would say at least four or five days. And then, there were three total that get out to the ocean and then when we (pause) about almost five or six days, almost a week and the water starting to run out and almost run out of food too. Because people at the time, they don't realize that they don't know how long and they just try to waste and then by the time about the 5th day, food start to run out and no water so at that time luckily, our boat – a big, I believe a ship from (pauses to think) uh I would say a Malaysian ship, but it's a battleship, but it's a Malaysian and they saw us and they pick us up, and at that time, we couldn't find the other – remember three boats go out together and we lost the other two, so only our boat got picked up and that time, they call another boat so they can ship us to an island. That is what they

call Pulau Bidong. And I believe a lot of people will know that name by now as a island and it's belong to Malaysia, one of the small – they call island now. So when we got there, they already have like about almost 10 or 12 thousand, already got there. So when we got there, we have no clothing and little money left, so when we get on there, and I still remember the number of the boat or the ship of the boat that we on and the people and – to make the story short, when we got there, there's about 10 or 12 thousand people and we have to stay there about 10 months and at that time we had to try to survive then – I still remember each of us only carried a gold chain, a small gold chain, and we had to sell it and to get some money so that's only thing and on that time, - the life that we lived there like, I mean – I still remember, I still remember for many years. In the mornings, my brother Timmy, he always walked out to the main office for the people that every day they have the embassy or some country that they come in to interview to have the people to immigrate– like an immigrant. A lot of people - that's why a lot of people going to Canada, to German, or any country that they, if they don't have relatives. Uh, Luckily my family have a family in California, US [United States] California, and we tried to contact and also at that time somehow the - one of the office for the lawyer somehow they got the information for my mom and they contact by mail and they write it to that camp and they tried to verify Quy Lam is that the spouse or the wife of To Huu? So, finally we got the information and then we find out that office of that lawyer and that office that contact us is the representative of the case of the six people plus the two other soldiers of that helicopter, there were related to that case and they had a settlement, mmkay. So, that office; the lawyer of that office contact my mom so they send, and at that point, they send my mom fifty dollars, US dollars – We were so happy at that time (chuckles). We run out of money we don't have any clothing, nothing, no food. So also, my sister, Pauline, and I, every two days we have to go up to the mountain, and we call hills

the mountain, to get the- what do you call - logs, okay. We have to chop the big tree (chopping motion with hands and carrying logs over the shoulder motion) and cut it about 6ft and we had to carry from top of the hill and bring it down so we can sell it, but of course we had to chop it in piece then we have to sell it, I still remember um, we sell those logs by 12x12 for \$10 dollars, yeah. So that's how we got money to try and survive. And back to the case that that lawyer office and then somehow they find my mom and then they send us money and then luckily my mom mentioned to the embassy of the US saying that "We have some not related but some associate with this office because of my husband's case back in 1970. So that's why we have the record of that." Plus we mentioned the name of our cousin which he escaped and he already out of the Vietnam '70 – 1977, so they already in US and lived here for a year.

JT: Is that the family you were talking about that was already in California?

KT: Yes

JT: Okay. How are you related? Cousins?

KT: Cousins, in other words it's my uncle's – well my aunt – my uncle's son. So, he's the oldest cousin and he escaped two years before us, so in 1977. Stayed there about 10 months and finally we got picked by the US and they allow us to join with our cousins because the - our cousins had mentioned our names too and they will sponsor like a sponsor us – our family to the United States, and I remember that is September 1979 when we got to California, USA.

JT: Okay, um -

KT: And there's of course – In that ten months, I need to mention – within that ten months on that island a lot people – a lot of thing happened which I don't want to mention; good or bad a lot of people died on that island too, because the way they – the way of their living, which I don't want to mention because – it's not (shrugs) – and of course a lot of people they note too, think

they can go on television and or even YouTube now, they call it YouTube, a lot of people have that experience and they post up too, so.

JT: Okay, so while you were on Pulau Bidong, did you leave anybody behind or did anybody stay behind?

KT: For my family?

JT: From your family.

KT: No.

JT: No?

KT: The rest is my uncle or the other aunt on my mother's side. They left Vietnam a year after but they did not get on the Pulau Bidong and they went to the camp in Hong Kong. So for us, only five of us that – and I believe, I saw my friends but no relatives or anyone else, um-

JT: On Pulau Bidong?

KT: Yeah

JT: So after – How did you leave – end up leaving Pulau Bidong? The US embassy picked you and does your family in California sponsor you over?

KT: Correct.

JT: So did you have to stay in any of the camps?

KT: Besides Pulau Bidong?

JT: Yes

KT: Um, not live there but it's just like a stopover – maybe you can call it a stopover – we had to stop over, let me see (pauses), a few days in the capital of Malaysia, I think – I believe it's called Kuala Lumpur, at that time, I believe. It's still – yes, stay there. And uh, we had to stopover, and then we had to stopover another country I believe. I couldn't remember but uh, no we don't have

to stay in a camp, only the island, Pulau Bidong. I believe we call it a camp too (chuckles), it's a refugee camp.

JT: Okay, so you didn't have to stay at Camp Pendleton or anything?

KT: No.

JT: No?

KT: No.

JT: So, when you got to the US, how did you settle?

KT: When we got to the US, my cousin was – yes, came out, they came out and pick us up. So pretty much because we mentioned their name and they have a record and they, they let them know so the date and month at that we will arrive in California, which is we get to the LAX [Los Angeles International Airport], I still remember the LA [Los Angeles] airport here.

JT: So you flew?

KT: Yes.

JT: Oh, so you flew. Okay.

KT: Yes, from Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur. Yeah, so at that time, yes.

JT: So where did you first settle?

KT: When I – When we got, first got to US?

JT: Mhm.

KT: Um, when we got picked up by our cousins, so we settled with - in his house.

JT: And where is his house?

KT: In, I still remember, is Redondo Beach. Yeah, California. Redondo Beach. It's a small house but we have to sleep in the living room so at that time, for a few months. Still remember.

JT: When you first arrived, did you receive financial support from any organization, church or was it from your family, or your cousin?

KT: Um, well they – our cousin only helped us as a place to live, for that time. So they still had to work and they don't, you know, can't support us so luckily, at that time, my mom, at that time, actually my mom did not get anything, support from any (pause) -

JT: From any organization.

KT: Organization – Yeah, I don't think - only for the first two or three months. They give us, I believe, I think it is a hundred dollars or something like that, for food.

JT: Who gave you?

KT: The – I think the agency is called USCC, I believe. But they only helped us for the first two or three months.

JT: Okay.

KT: And then, I mean, at that time, so that helping us for, for settle, food, clothing, for a few months.

JT: Um, did your family settle in the same place or move around after?

KT: Yes, after a few months, we moved to – again luckily that we got contacted by that lawyer so at least we got some funds – some money from that lawyer.

JT: So the lawyer was still giving you money?

KT: The lawyer was still - Yeah, support us, and they (pause) and that lawyer from that office fight for that case and I believe they won the case, so we had a settlement at least. I believe that my mom mentioned, I think (pause) the settle is \$300,000.00. Around there.

JT: US dollars?

KT: US Dollars, but, they took 33%.

JT: Who took 33%

KT: The lawyer.

JT: Okay.

KT: So, I think left about, say about \$100,000. Remember, 1980 or '81, a hundred thousand is a lot of money, and again, we luckily and - that's why my mom always remember that even though her husband passed away, and I don't know that maybe they - she said that god - her husband still look out for her.

JT: So how long has the settlement - like, how long was the settlement; how long did they keep on giving you money?

KT: Um, I think a few months, and then finally and the - and also the lawyer call us and said do you want to settle that amount or do you want to continue and my mom said, we just got here, of course, we don't know anything about - how the society, or how it's so new and - we don't know, 'kay? So, um, we met a friend, and the friend just advise that if you want you can settle now so you don't have to drag it for longer, and because you don't know what's gonna happen. And at that time, of course, my mom said, well, I mean we can - still alive and come over here and then now where we stay, we can survive and got to this place - whatever we can get we just go ahead and take it. So that is the final, I believe it to be a hundred thousand, at that time.

JT: Kind of like a lump sum?

KT: Lump sum - correct, yeah.

JT: I see, so you mentioned that you didn't know how society works, what were your first impressions or early experiences in this country?

KT: Well, of course um, even though I have a little of basic English back in Vietnam, I couldn't catch up with - what's here (chuckles) is total different. Even when I got here, I believe I was 16-

17. So, in the morning I still – I had to attend the high school as a 11th grade, I think at that they call junior high. And at night, I still have to go to, like, adult school, because they send me to a place and learn more English, because as a ESL [English as a Second Language]. So for a few months and then we stayed at Redondo Beach, and I still remember almost a year. And then, pretty much after we, my mom have the settlement, from that lawyer, she listened to a real estate agent saying that you should buy a home to invest and she - cause I believe when we got here, it's about a year, year and a half. And of course, she doesn't know – she's just a woman and she never been in a business before and Vietnam she was a housewife so, and at that time we were young and we doesn't know anything and when we got here, whatever she said we just listened to because she is our mom. I believe she listened to a friend that introduced that is a real state (clears throat) agent and he took our family to see a home in Costa Mesa. I think that is the first home that final – I think we purchase and I still remember. I believe at that time that home was cost about \$120,000 for a four bedroom, two bath, and a swimming pool. I know right? At that time cannot afford a lot of people cannot afford, especially when they came to the United States just for about two years – a year and a half or two. But we did, we purchased that home. But unfortunately she didn't know that she had to work and to make the payments because she only put [money] down and then the rest, of course, we also always blame I mean – until now, our – me, my brother and younger sister still blame it on the uncle that, you know, because our uncle is the one that always wants to do business, do this, and do that so pretty much all the money we got from the lawyer is all spent up – you know, all gone. At that time, and she had to find a job and she still remember she only make like 3 or 4 dollars and hour, and a month she only got \$700 a month.

JT: What was she doing?

KT: She doing assembly, some kind of work.

JT: A factory?

KT: Work in a factory, yeah. And I believe at that time, the payment for the mortgage at that time, only \$750. But, I mean, for her, by herself and we, we didn't work we still, you know, go to school so she couldn't afford the mortgage and I believe at that time – also I need to mention that my uncle on my mother's side, they also arrived to US too, a year after, so they – and somehow they talked to my mom and they lived with us, at that time, and they said they gonna live with us and pay the mortgage, but unfortunately it didn't work out, so – force my mom to sell the house, so we sold it. And we only owned like about less than two years, so we sold the house.

JT: What did you do after?

KT: Um, after that, we sold the house and – after we sold the house she had some of the money back and again she listened to the uncle to purchase a – yeah, purchase a small mini market, I believe it is 1985, '79 yeah (pauses to recall in head and count on fingers) – actually we purchased a small store, a mini market, within a neighborhood in Orange in 1983.

JT: What was the market called?

KT: Palm Market.

JT: Palm Market. Okay.

KT: Yes.

JT: And what were you doing with this Palm Market?

KT: Well, 'cause I'm the oldest, so even though I went to school – I did graduate school in Costa Mesa back in 1981. So, '83, my mom tried to purchase – I mean she purchased a small liquor store in the neighborhood, and I still remember it's about \$45,000, because that's how much she

got left after she sold the house. So, um, and from there '83 we build the store up. We kept the store for a long time, until 1997-98.

JT: Okay, so in America what were some of the challenges that you experienced?

KT: Challenge.

JT: What was hard? What were struggles? Any discrimination? Any – Any Barriers?

KT: Um, luckily – I have to remember, let's see. Because on my grow up from the time, I don't go out a lot because I get stuck with the store because I'm the oldest and pretty much within – around the neighbor and some of the small Orange, you know, the city. So in the morning, just open the store and then at night, 9 o'clock we close up the store so I don't go out there a lot. Um, in the meantime I tried to study more about English too. Pretty much I watched the store to help my mom, and my brother and two sisters, at that time, and they go to school and they graduate and I – well you can say I get stuck with the store about 12 years. At the time, I didn't have the chance to go to college – to finish college, um, but I think back and compared to other people or you can call refugees or boat people, they mentioned – our family is pretty lucky to experience not a lot of bad, tragic or anything happen to our family. The only thing that I would say about your – should I mention about yours?

JT: You can if you want.

KT: Okay (pause) after (pause). I would say, 1987 – but anyway it was when first year in college that- which is Orange Coast College, which they call OCC, and I met my wife, which is your mom. So we went out for a date and back 1980 (pauses) 2, yeah I think -

JT: So about a year before you got the Palm Market?

KT: Correct, yeah a year before we got the – yeah, I met your mom a year before we got the Palm Market. So we got married.

JT: When?

KT: 1987, mkay, and that – even though, um I met your mom back in '82 and we went out for a date even though after we – after my family got the store she also helping us to build the store too. And also, after five years, we got married. So again, our life is not as bad as people think, but the thing is a lot of detail that I don't want to mention Especially the old time, a lot of thing happened after the Vietnam fall. Probably a lot of people already know, again, even though there are a lot of things worse than us that happened – worse than us. So, pretty much until now, and – Oh and one thing, after we married and we had you, well we had your brother first, then we had you.

JT: In what year? When was my brother born?

KT: Your brother was 1992 -

JT: No – (chuckles)

KT: Oh sorry, it was you, and your brother was 1990 and you were 1992, right?

JT: Mhmm

KT: Okay. And, uh, of course- nah I don't want to mention that, but if you want to when you do your prepare, whatever you can mention that too, because you know what happened um, -

JT: You can talk about it, if you want. If it will help the story.

KT: The only thing that happened to us, our family is 1997, and I still remember which is you- somehow we find out you – the doctor- we took you to a doctor in CHOC [Children's Hospital of Orange County], as a matter of fact, in Orange right here and they find out that um, you have some kind of cancer, which we don't know, but it's called – it's not called leukemia, it's not nothing but, they called the name is Nerblastoma?

JT: Neuroblastoma, yeah.

KT: Neuroblastoma, okay. I mean, even until now, that word, I cannot define what is the – All we know is that it's some type of blood disorder or something like that or some kind of tumor. That pretty much is a big thing that happened to our family, that's pretty much it, but again, luckily time flies, and you get well so it's pretty much – that's a – pretty much about my life uh, the story of my life. One thing I still remember is that after you got that cancer thing, we forced to sell the store back in 1997, because we can't because – you, we need – and at that time your mom had to work full time for the insurance – to get the insurance to cover the difference of the cost. So we forced to sell the store at that time. And I still remember after the store got sold and I tried to go out and get a job – it's real tough for me. At that time I don't know how to use a fax machine, I don't know how to type. All I know is I stand at the liquor store pretty much counting the inventory and pretty much it – just like a cashier, I don't have experience or anything like that. And then, we got um, the store is sold and then that's it I have to find a job and when I get out there- when trying to get a job, it is total – even though I went to an interview and a lot of – they just need the experience and I just don't have it, so I tried to learn more and try to beginning of whatever. I said I can try. So one of my uncle's friends had asked for me to help because he said I can speak three languages.

JT: What were the three languages?

KT: Chinese, Vietnamese, and now I pick up more about the English. So – and he want me to help on a travel agency. So I helped him with a few months, about almost a year about doing travel agency. Which at that time, I still remember one time, during that job, I had a chance to went back to Vietnam. This was 1995, I believe that is the year the Communist just opened up their – how do you say it?

JT: The ports?

KT: Yeah, to open up to -

JT: Trade?

KT: Trade. Correct. And I still remember when I first land in the airport, and they called it Tan Son Nhat. It's so funny, and I still remember, that there are three or four – the soldiers – they still carrying gun, get on the plane and walk back and forth to check - that make sure that, that make sure all secure and everything. So, at that time, I'm kind of surprised and it's kind of quite an experience at that time. – I did stop by my old house, 1995, but they all changed. A lot of people already moved and some of them, they already – A lot of things change, I mean, after that many years.

JT: Okay, um. So after all that has happened, do you uh – How has the Vietnamese community changed?

KT: Here or -

JT: Compared to both – Comparing them both.

KT: Well, like because, I don't involve with the politics or anything like that, but I'm sure that there's a lot of people that live around in Orange County. Their parents or their grandparents – they get involve with the politics or the war at that time, some of them was soldier for the south Vietnam, and of course, some of those people and they don't agree whatever the Communist do or say, so they pretty – how do you say it, opposed? Anything is negative, whatever they say or done. Um, but, our family kind of live outside of that – we call Little Saigon in Westminster and Garden Grove, so pretty much, we – our family don't get involve with it a lot, and, because, um again, only on the weekend we go up there and we have lunch or dinner, and that's about it.

Besides that, we just work and we work for a company and pretty much we don't talk about the

Communists anymore because a lot of things changed already, and, for me, for my – my opinion, I think in a few years or future, Vietnam probably will change, it just depend when.

JT: How will it change, do you think? What do you mean?

KT: By looking at – cause, we saw – well, I read the news and TV, or news, any – I think for me, I still asking one question – “Why do the people live in the Communist country try to escape?” That’s the question.

JT: Why are they still trying to escape?

KT: Correct. Even until now. Or some of the Middle East or down – that are still under Communist – Lately, which country that they trying to- Try to get into USA as well?

JT: I don’t remember.

KT: Yeah, but anyway, that’s my question. I haven’t heard any country that is not Communist, that the people try to escape out – in other word, to escape to a Communist country.

JT: I see. Okay, now moving back a little bit. How uh, how did you become a citizen?

KT: Mmm.

JT: When?

KT: Hmm. I can’t remember but I believe it’s back in early 1980 something. Yes.

JT: This is before Palm Market, or around the same time?

KT: Around the same time, um, I remember – Yes, I remember it was about 1980 - early 1980 – ’80.

JT: ’80?

KT: Correct. That we, at that time we had to study, like American history. And we try to – it’s pretty much basic American history about Washington and at that time they only ask and – only

ask like a basic question about US history, that's pretty much it, but for me, is – we had to study, take a few days to try to remember the date and for Washington and pretty much the basic.

JT: Okay, so from there, how do you identify yourself in American society? Um do you call yourself Asian, Asian American, Vietnamese, Vietnamese American, minority? How do you identify yourself here?

KT: I will say for me – I will say um, Asian American, the reason is – First of all I was born in Vietnam and I live there at least more than 10 years but, I raised up here, I mean pretty much I grew up here with the American society, that's why I call Asian American.

JT: Like a Vietnamese American?

KT: Correct. 'Cause of course, I still have some memories about Vietnam. Not a lot, but pretty much, starting 19 – after the Vietnam fall – April 1975, I think that is the time that I really, again, it's like my teenager age – starting to know and to get – I think it's called starting get older and know at least something.

JT: Okay. From there, do you think there are any differences between first generation here and second generation or younger generation? Like is there any difference between your generation and the generation after, here in America?

KT: Well, I think the first generation; I believe is probably our parents, or –

JT: We're talking about you -

KT: Me?

JT: Beginning with you.

KT: Well -

JT: You being the first generation.

KT: Let's say if I was – yeah I guess I'm the first generation and, some – some things is good, if you ask my opinion I would compare – some things is good and some things is not good, for my opinion. In the Asia, I believe, or individuals talk about Vietnam, you don't have that freedom like here. For example, in Vietnam I don't think we can bring up the president or the flag of the country to make joke or to make any kind of like funny story or anything like that. But here, they're allowed to. So, and again, some is good; some is bad, um -

JT: Do you think younger generations take for granted what the first generation had to go through?

KT: I believe so.

JT: Yeah?

KT: I believe so because either they grow up here or they was born here so they don't experience on the other side of the society, unless maybe, when they have a chance, maybe they go back there and live for a few years then they can experience the difference.

JT: Do you think it's bad that they don't know or good that they don't know?

KT: I would say, if they have a chance they should know, and they can compare because, again, some of things is for me, I mean - don't take advantage too much in the other side they don't even have a chance for you to get the experience.

JT: So, what are some important things that future generations of Vietnamese Americans should remember about their heritage?

KT: Hmm

JT: Anything important that they should remember? - Anything that I should remember – Anything that I shouldn't forget?

KT: Mm, well I hope the next generation, which is you – Hopefully you can keep some of my generation that – try to remember the (pause) – how do I say it or how do I express this?

JT: What do you want me to keep?

KT: The –

JT: Like the celebrations and stuff - or -

KT: Yes, and also try to remember your parents, or –

JT: What they went through? Understand?

KT: Yes. Mhmm.

JT: I see, I agree.

KT: Again, one thing that I can give you example – I believe for American, I don't know – On the Vietnamese or Chinese, especially, I mean for Asia – Asian, they always have a family part. For example, over here the society says when you 18, a lot of parents they want their children out, but in Asia, I believe the parents won't kick their kid out so – and again, sometime it's good, sometimes it's bad. Here they said let them go out there and experience their own life, early, and then they learn. But in the other side, our family tradition called – Yeah, maybe a tradition, they want to keep the children, the generation – next generation have good foundation first, and then go out, you know what I'm saying?

JT: Yeah, I understand

KT: So at least you build your foundation first, and then you go out get experience with the life out there. That's why a lot of Asian family won't ask their children out early at 18 or once you graduate high school. So, in here, in America, I don't know the percentage but a lot of kid, a lot of children when they out of family, then they have to struggle with living, they have to go to school, but in the meantime they have to go to work. So there's a lot of distraction if they want to

succeed, it's hard. Than Asian, if you build your foundation first (claps hand), and then you go out there and then you move out later on, after you have a solid work, income, so you can go with your own, that is for my opinion.

JT: Okay, so going back to traditions or customs that you have made an effort to preserve? What are those traditions?

KT: Normally for tradition, is pretty much um – we talking about celebration?

JT: What do we do every year that we – come from Vietnam and stuff?

KT: Okay, pretty much for my family, we try to keep just the basic and simple, because over here we still have to work, and you know, we don't have time like in Vietnam or – so we try to keep the New Year -

JT: What do we do on New Year's?

KT: New Year we probably we go up to the temple or we go to church, okay. And – or someone that we try to remember, which is like your grandpa or my father, the date that he passed away and we try to remember that date, so we normally invite family to gather together and we have dinner, so that's the only time, pretty much all the family member will meet each other. When that – we try to keep that tradition for Asian.

JT: Okay so moving forward now, what do you do now?

KT: As of now, I work for a company as an account executive for mortgage. After a lot of years that I struggle, (chuckles) finally I get some kind of – making okay income to support the family. I still remember when I start this work, this profession- it's back in 1998, and- which is, my wife, which is your mom, try to get me in, into the mortgage industry -

JT: In what year?

KT: 1998.

JT: 1998.

KT: And, I just start like a data entry, set-up, so I make like about mm maybe ten or - \$9 or \$10, pretty much. Until now, my income is pretty good, compared to a lot of people out there.

JT: So, for now, what do you do for entertainment? Do you have any hobbies?

KT: Mm, well pretty much my hobby is - I love to play ping pong, table tennis, and pretty much it, yeah.

JT: Okay, are there and other memories or stories you would like to share?

KT: I can't remember now - maybe - I can't remember; did I mention to you anything before that -

JT: No, I don't think so. I think you covered everything. Alright, thank you very much for allowing me to interview you.

KT: You're welcome.

JT: Thank You.

--End of Transcript--