Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: SALLY TRAN
Interviewer: Chantel Quach
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CQ: This is Chantel Quach with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine. Today is May 18, 2015 and I will be interviewing Ms. Sally Tran at her home in Eastvale, California.

CQ: Can you please tell me your name?
ST: My name is Sally Tran.

CQ: Where and when were you born?

CQ: Can you describe where you grew up for me?
ST: I don't remember where I grew up. I only remember when I was probably, maybe when I was 4, that's about it. Maybe a little bit in the countryside, but nothing significant - just based on the pictures.

CQ: You don't remember the house or the neighborhood?
ST: I don't at all.

CQ: Can you describe your family members?

ST: There's 6 of us, siblings. I am the youngest out of 6, actually there was 7, but one died at birth. So she would have been the second to the oldest so I would've been the 7th kid. And then I have two parents, you know, mom and dad. So a sister, a brother, a sister, a brother, a sister, and myself.

CQ: Can you tell me their names and ages?
ST: Oldest one is Tricia Tran and she is born in 60 - what is it - February 17, 1969. The next one is Cory Tran and he's born on November 11, 1971. The next one is Tony Tran and she's born September 30, 1972. And then Tai Tran, August 14, 1973. And then Helena Tran April 5, 1975 and myself [1977].

CQ: Can you name your parents and where they were born?
ST: Guong Tran is my mom. She is 69 right now and she's retired and she's born in Saigon, Vietnam also. My dad is Thu Tran and he is born 1940, which makes him - 74, 75. He's retired and he was born, also, in Saigon, Vietnam.

CQ: What did they do for a living?
ST: Well, my mom never really worked until my dad - When my dad came over, he actually worked in a restaurant learning how to cook in Pennsylvania and then we moved over to California and then he still worked in a restaurant learned how to cook. Years later, he actually opened a Chinese fast food restaurant and that's when my mom helped out, but until that day and then he retired. So it's always in the restaurant industry.

CQ: Even in Vietnam?
ST: In Vietnam, no. I believe he was in the war in Vietnam and that's all I know.

CQ: You mentioned your sibling's names. Did they always have American names or did they have Vietnamese names?
ST: Yes, they always had Vietnamese until we became citizens starting when they turned 18. So, pretty much my oldest sister Trinh Tran was Tr - I'm sorry - Tricia Tran was Trinh Tran, and then Cory Tran was Thanh Tran, Tony Tran was Thao Tran, Tai Tran is Sean Tran, and then Helena is Hanh Tran, and then myself Sally is Nha Thi Vi Tran.
CQ: Do you have a significant childhood story that you remember or that somebody told you?

ST: The only childhood memory that I remember that I was told is my oldest sister and I was probably like about, maybe 3 or 4, that she used to - she was the only one who took care of me because I was the youngest, she was the oldest and she would wash my ass either after I pee or poop with her feet and she would just pour water over my ass and always would just wash it with the top of her feet and she said that I would always just always like tell her like, you know, "Do it nicer, do it slower! It hurts, you know. Be more kind, be more gentle." That's the only memory that we would talk about that she remembers of that I remember of.

CQ: That's the only story you remember or that anybody told you?

ST: That's about it, I mean not until I came to America. But everything in Vietnam wasn't really talked about too much.

CQ: What's your earliest childhood memory in America?

ST: The earliest is probably - let me see - probably coming to America, where we actually got out of a bus from the plane. From the plane we landed - I'm gonna start crying - (laughs) so from the plane we landed and then I just remember we got on a bus and then somebody gave me a toy and that was it. It was like oh my god, it's different.

CQ: What was different about it?

ST: Like, they gave me stuff. I had stuff for the first time. I had a dog, I had a blue dog. They gave me a blue dog. I got on the bus and they gave me a blue dog.

CQ: Was it a stranger?

ST: Yeah! Well, everybody was a stranger. This is the first time we were sponsored to America and so somehow they put us in a plane and when we landed we just had to follow wherever they were taking us, got on a bus, and people were just giving us toys and that was like first and like, you know, first memory of coming to America and then I - and from there on I still remember, they, you know, from there on, they brought us to a house and I still remember, of course they didn't understand anything, but there was a translator and she said that this is where you guys are going to be living. From there on, things just started coming. We started getting things, clothes, and everything is new to me, but everything's been donated, of course.

CQ: So backtracking, can you tell me when and how your family came to America. So the journey?

ST: So the only thing that I can remember was - that I was told, not really remember - was my mom grabbing all of us and saying that we're going somewhere and we all got on a boat. It was late at night and then we were just gone. I still remember, you know, we were - my mom telling us that - we were gonna go somewhere and we were stuffed in a - I guess - I actually can't remember where, but we were just in a boat in a dark room and we were all there and my mom just always said "stay here" and then she would, occasionally, say she'd come back, she'd give us food and she'd leave, she'd come back and she gave us food. From there on, we arrived at some island and that's where we stayed and, of course, I was told that that's Indonesia and that's at a refugee camp, but at the time - now I remember - it's at an island and we're staying somewhere else. I was probably around 4 or 5 at the time.

CQ: Do you remember the name of the camp?

ST: I don't remember the name of the camp, but I can find it,

CQ: So, in Indonesia, do you have any memories from there?

ST: Yeah, I actually do remember. There's actually pictures of us too, like, still being - because we were in school. So I was about 5 now and so we attended school every single day, just a bunch of kids just all in one room and we would get awards, like usual. It was just a campsite where you would just go to school, go back home, and everything is very tight-knit. It was just an island, like I don't remember any buildings. It was just campsites, but made out of small apartment-looking - and I can find pictures actually. I just remember it was our daily living, like - I didn't know any better - like that's how we lived, you know.

CQ: Can you describe the surroundings or the environment?

ST: Yeah, I actually can remember a lot. Everything was very tropical. Everything was very simple. There was no dirtiness or chaos, to me. It was just people just living and it was just kids going to school and there's not a ton of people, but everything was just either your little place to live or trees, and then bridge, and then water. So, it wasn't like developed at all.

CQ: What about the schools? Who was teaching it?
ST: I don't remember who was teaching it, but it's always a bunch of kids in one room and then one person that teaches all the grades. So it wasn't like a school either, it was just a pace that you could learn because that's what we're supposed to do and then I remember we walked through the forest or through the greens just to be at some church, but it's not really church. It was just a place where they pray and then back to the campsite again, just greens.

CQ: So did our family have money that you brought with you?

ST: I don't know. I never knew all that. I never understood all that. Until this day, I don't even know if mom and dad had a bunch of money because my dad did collect a lot of money to get people on that ship because he was the owner of that ship, so we escaped.

CQ: So, you said your dad was in the military though, right?

ST: Yeah, he was in the military and he said that he was doing more office work than on the field work.

CQ: Do you think his connection to the military allowed for you guys to have that boat?

ST: I don't think so. I actually remember that he had connection to some lady that had a boat and he bought it off of her. That's what I remember he said. He bought a big boat from her and he was able to get a 156 people on the boat that night. So I assume that he would have to collect money to get people on there and we just left.

CQ: Do you remember if you left before or after the war ended?

ST: Oh, it was definitely before. I was born in 1977, the war ended in '75. We didn't come to America until '84, so I was in Indonesia for a year and a half. So if you backtrack that, coming to America was in '84 going into '85, so I was in Indonesia '83, so I was 4 to 5.

CQ: So you left in 1982/1983?

ST: No, no, no. Leaving is like, it takes like a week, maybe. I don't even know how long from Vietnam to Indonesia that is, maybe like a couple days. So pretty much '83 to '84.

CQ: From Indonesia, how did you get to America?

ST: We stayed in Indonesia campsite and -

CQ: When did you decide to leave?

ST: It's not deciding, it's actually our names are posted on this thing. I don't know how it works, but everybody gets sponsored to America or maybe to Canada, or maybe to France or anywhere, you know and I remember my parents telling us that we were sponsored and we're going to America and this was sponsored by a church in Pennsylvania and they wanted - I was told - that they wanted to sponsor a huge family because they want to, pretty much, put their name on the newspaper. They want to put the family's name on the newspaper, it was more significant to have a story of a family of 8. So we were the biggest family there and so they took all of us. Yeah and they sponsored us over, they provided everything, out flight and everything. So they flew us from Indonesia, which I don't remember any of the flying part, I just remember we got there on a plane and then we got down and then it was just bombarded of just white people, strangers.

CQ: What did you think of them?

ST: It was just like I don't know what to think - to be honest with you - because I didn't speak English. All I knew, back then when I was 4, was yes and no, so they told me or when they asked me "what's your name," I said, "yes" and when they asked me "how old are you," I said "no." So that was it and all of us were just in shock and all of us had never seen different. We've always been around Asians so it was interesting. We got down and we got on a bus and everybody was talking to us and touching us and looking at us and I just remember - you just - you just go with the flow.

CQ: So you landed in Pennsylvania from Indonesia and then, did the church put you -

ST: Yes, the church in Pennsylvania put us in a, kind of like, a town home, but it was a house though. But half of it was one person's family and the other person's family was on the other side. But the house was cut in half. So they put us in a house, we didn't have to pay for anything. They got my dad a job which was a, some kind of, you know, it was actually at a restaurant and that's how he started. He was working in a Vietnamese restaurant because it's the only thing that was Vietnamese, so put him in a Vietnamese restaurant so he can understand and they all put us to school and all our clothes, our stuffed animals, everything was provided for us. So everything we saw was new to us because we never had new - meaning like brand new - like we never had clothes like this, you know what I mean because everything was so sewn by my mom. So to have jeans, oh my god, you know, so it was neat.
CQ: Did your parents speak or understand any English?

ST: No, my parents did not speak English so every time that they send people over, there's always a translator. Every single time where they needed us for something or "okay, we're gonna send a nurse over and check all your kids," there's always a translator, always. So, on the bus, there was a translator also, they just go with the flow also. I just remember there's always a translator.

CQ: So did your mom work too?

ST: She never worked because there's 6 of us, so she was always at home when we got home from school. She was always at home just cooking and cleaning.

CQ: Do you remember when they decided that you would be going to school or did they just put you into school automatically?

ST: Actually, they just put us all into school automatically. The season started, so I just remember - let me see - so I started first grade in '85, so I was about 6. I flunked first grade so went back to first grade again - so '85 and then '86 - so two years and now I'm 7 years old in first grade still because I didn't understand any English, it was so confusing. All of us didn't understand English, so by the time I'm in second grade, I was already 8, 8 turning 9, okay! Everybody in that grade is turning and it's like - uhh - I was the smallest so it never mattered.

CQ: So do you remember taking ESL classes?

ST: Oh yeah. I had a translator in elementary, all the way. So we had ESL, and then I had a translator and they - what do you call - like a tutor. Her [the tutor] name was Ms. Candy. I always remember that name because it's candy (laughs). She would come to the house and she tutored us.

CQ: Do you remember how you felt taking those classes? Was it frustrating? Was it easy?

ST: It was never frustrating for me. Everything was new because I was the youngest, so everything - I was young - so everything was an adventure, everything was new, everything was exciting and because my personality wasn't passive so everything was very like "okay I want to learn, okay I want more."

CQ: Can you describe what your school experience was like from elementary up until high school?

ST: It was never frightening. That's one thing I can admit. Elementary was never frightening, I had a wonderful time. I still remember so many times on the playground, you know, being really aggressive, jumping off the swing set and then the swing coming back and hitting me on the head and then blood would pour down my forehead and I was in 3rd grade. To me, it was no big deal. That was in 3rd grade and that was my most significant memory.

CQ: Do you remember making friends?

ST: Oh yeah. I do remember making a lot of friends and now I am actually friends with 3 of them again on Facebook from 3rd grade. So that's pretty neat.

CQ: What about cultural differences?

ST: Never felt the difference. I never felt like an outsider, even though I knew that we're different, but I never felt that way.

CQ: So the food or values?

ST: At a young age, I never felt the difference. I just knew that I was elementary and here's corn dog, you eat corn dog.

CQ: What about in high school?

ST: In high school, I was now more of an American. There's not really culture difference in high school, but I knew the culture was different. I'm now aware of the culture being different, but I don't feel different, at the time.

CQ: Do you know why?

ST: I don't know. I think a lot of it has to do with I don't look like them, I don't have what they have. You know. I didn't
wear the better clothes. I just had enough, so I just blended and I think my personality just out-shined everything else because I was a high-achiever back in middle school, especially (laughs), 4.0 all the way until high school. I was always achieving in everything, so that, to me, was more significant than not having what they had and I didn't care.

CQ: Do you have a favorite or significant memory from high school or middle school?

ST: I do actually. All of middle school so - let's see - came over to America, started 4th grade - actually I'm sorry - came over to California, started 4th grade. So left Pennsylvania at 3rd grade, so 4th grade in California when I started first time, they called me out to ask if I could be a tutor for this Vietnamese kid who just came over to America, so that's my 4th grade experience. So 4th grade, 5th grade, I was very academic, really high, sports the same thing, track, I was bad ass. And then all the way, 6th, 7th, and 8th, I was MVP for volleyball, so very high in academic and sports and in yearbook for 3 years, voted most likely to succeed by 8th grade. I was in everything. My favorite memory, probably, was always being involved, always being involved. I never felt that I was lacking stuff, even though my stuff - I look back and I compare back - I didn't have stuff, I've always had enough. I never had a new backpack every single year like every kid.

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CQ: Do you have a favorite or significant memory from high school or middle school?

ST: I left Pennsylvania when I finished 3rd grade, so 4th grade which is 1989, was when I went to California. My dad decided it was too cold in Pennsylvania for him because I still remember every single morning he would wake up, cook hot water and pour it [on] his car just to have the ice melt. For us, it was amazing because every single time that it snowed, the radio would say school is cancelled so we'll just get dressed and go play in the snow. So when we left in 1989 to California that was it. That was the beginning of sunshine.

CQ: Do you remember where you first came to in California?

ST: In Rancho Cucamonga was where we first [resided]. That was the first time we were off of welfare and it was called "Section 8" where they help you with your housing. Pretty much, I still remember back when I was younger, we only had to pay 4 dollars for the house that we were living in. We had food stamps, but right when we came to California in 4th grade, I remember my dad and my oldest sister saying that we're okay now and then my dad found a job with a restaurant, he said that we'll make it. Our rent, at the time was like, 850 [dollars], so he says that we're going to be okay and it's time that we should let go of the housing and the food stamps and the welfare. That's why I am who I am today because I believe in all that stuff, to help the immigrants with welfare and food stamps and Section 8. It's, to me, the ones that want to be here, that want to try hard, use that and they take it to the next level. Not just the one that collects it for the rest of their life. That was one story though, that I am so proud of to say though, that we got help from America and then we let it go when it was time.

CQ: Your dad had saved up money from working and you were able to get off welfare because of that?

ST: I assume so because my dad was a hard worker and my mom was a saver. My mom saved everything.

CQ: Now, you're in Rancho Cucamonga and you started 4th grade. How long did you stay there for?

ST: In Rancho [Cucamonga], all the way until, towards the end of my sophomore year into my junior year - actually I take it back - all the way [through] my junior year.

CQ: And then you went to?

ST: I went to Chino Hills, which is when I started Ayala [high school]. So for a year, we moved here [Chino Hills], but I still went back to go to school in Rancho [Cucamonga] to go to school for my junior year. It was such a drive from Chino Hills to Rancho, it was a drive. Because all my sisters and brothers, there were four of them that went to Cal Poly Pomona. So for 12th grade was when I decided okay, I'm gonna stick it out and just go to a new school in senior year. That was dreadful, that's when my grades were like crap because there's no point left, your friends are gone, there's nothing left.

CQ: So you spent your senior year [of high school] in Chino Hills?

ST: I spent my senior year in Chino Hills at Ayala High School.

CQ: Did you have to start over?

ST: It wasn't starting over. It was like, there's nothing left, like I finished school already kind of feeling. Now, my senior year was only 4 classes, left by lunch time, went to work afterwards, and just made some friends, but nothing significant and just waiting for college.

CQ: Do you think moving around had any effect on your social life?