Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: TRUNG DUONG
Interviewer: Rex Wang
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RW: This is Rex Wang and today is May 19, 2015. We are currently in Irvine, California, and I am here today to interview Trung Duong for the Vietnamese American Oral History Project. First I’d like to ask, what is your date of birth?

TD: I was born in the spring of 1973.

RW: Where were you born?

TD: I was born in Saigon, Vietnam.

RW: Did you live in the city in which you were born? If not, Where did you live after you were born?

TD: Yes, I lived in the city up until 1983.

RW: Can you describe the area a little bit for me?

TD: It’s in a, I, would say a middle class neighborhood the reason I say that is because there is no hut or there’s no house that’s made of mud made or any palm leaf. It’s made of bricks and mortar and it has gates I would say it’s a nice neighborhood.

RW: Did you like living there?

TD: At the time, I have no choice I didn’t know any better so, yes I did.

RW: What did your parents do for a living?

TD: During the Vietnam War my dad was a tugboat captain and my mom was a teacher.

RW: Can you tell me a little bit about them?

TD: Yeah, they both migrate south from the north after the split of the country in 1954 they didn’t move directly south from Hanoi down to Saigon right away they stopped along Long Hai,
Da Nang before they finally reside in Saigon and my dad, like I said, he was a tugboat captain during the war. After the war he was in concentration camp for 5 years after the war my mom was continue her teaching career.

**RW:** Did he ever talk about the concentration camps?

**TD:** If I ask, yes. He say once in a while his experience, I mean it’s rough in the concentration camp but like anything else, it’s sort of like jail he was being put in jail and has to do hard labor. Was he mistreated? He didn’t think so. It was just they had different ideologies and his was different so they have a conflict, but he did what they ask him to do and they just left him alone.

**RW:** Did he despise the Vietnamese government at all because of it?

**TD:** He, I mean, to a certain point yes. I guess after immediate effect sure, but now he’s saying it is what it is. You lost a war and you have to put up with that. He couldn’t deal with them so that’s why he escaped Vietnam.

**RW:** How your family was financially?

**TW:** Financially? I can only tell you up until when I was 10 and that’s in 1983. During the war, we were fine. I think we had everything we needed. But after the war, like everybody else, life was tough. I don’t think we have any money. We lived with my grandparents after the war my dad was in concentration camp for five years so I just stay home with my mom and my sister and then my grandparents and my uncles and aunts we have enough to go, you know, get by. Food wise it was scarce, not a whole lot of food, so financially not very good at all.

**RW:** Did you have any siblings growing up?

**TD:** Yes, I have a younger sister who is just one year younger than I.

**RW:** What kind of activities would you do with your sister?

**TD:** You know, I left when I was ten and she was nine and while growing we just have sibling arguments. We fought like kids we just fought, I don’t think we played much together. Yeah, and I can’t recall doing much activities with her when growing up because after ten I left and I didn’t see her for a good five six years, so there’s a gap there and we don’t get to do things like you know, siblings that live together up until the adult age.

**RW:** So would you have considered you guys to be close?

**TD:** Now we are but back then I don’t think so.
RW: Can you tell me about your childhood?

TD: My childhood, I can remember, up I mean starting at maybe five or six, I was lucky enough to go with my mom to go visit my dad in the concentration camp and I say lucky is because I get to see my dad, my sister didn’t get to see my dad during the time he was in concentration camp. And go seeing him the experience was just tough. I mean, you have to get permit just to get out of the city. They ask you where you’re going you have to tell them where you’re going. We have to ride the bus to go see him and about that time I was five or six, starting about seven I was helping my mom out selling food in the cafeteria at school so while she would be teaching and during breaks, I would be helping her out with selling food in the cafeteria to make ends meet and then at night time we would a little push cart selling bakery on the street. I was doing that for a while, and then between seven and ten I was, besides school, I was helping out my uncles and my aunt’s side on my dad’s side selling cigarettes on the street. It was an interesting childhood growing up in Vietnam.

RW: What kind of foods did you sell in the carts?

TD: Just bakery, sweets and even though we’re selling those, we can’t afford to eat it and I remember sometime I wanted so bad, what I did was just prick a little bit of the cream off the cake and I’d eat it and when people come buy it I just sell it like that. So yeah.

RW: Can you describe your household and the daily activities your family would partake in?

TD: In the morning, my mom and I and sister would go to school. School in Vietnam is only half day. After that we would go home we cook, we cook every meal for lunch and dinner. Even though we live with our grandparents, we don’t eat together. Just the three of us. And then after that, we wash our clothes and then by about four or five, we start preparing getting the bakeries and start to go out the street to sell the bakeries.

RW: Did your grandparents live with you?

TD: Yes, the grandparents we live with was my maternal grandparents.

RW: And then your paternal grandparents lived somewhere else?

TD: They live somewhere else. They live about an hour bike ride away. Put in perspective, now, I think it’s only like five miles away. But it would take an hour bike ride just to get to their house.

RW: Would you visit them often?
TD: I would visit them about once every two weeks. And that’s like a treat for me to go and visit my grandparents on my dad’s side and I was lucky enough to meet my paternal grandpa. He passed away before any other grandkids were born, so, myself and my sister was the only one get to know him.

RW: What would you do at your grandparents’ house?

TD: At their house I would just play around. That’s why it was such a treat to go up there. I wouldn’t have to do anything. I would get to play out on the street with the neighbor kids. My maternal grandparents house, I wouldn’t get to go outside.

RW: Can you describe your family traditions?

TD: What do you mean family traditions?

RW: Is there anything you guys do in particular to celebrate?

TD: No, because after the wartime it was just tough. Everybody, not just our families, everybody else. We don’t really have a tradition. We would go to temple on a weekly basis. I don’t remember which day whether Saturday or Sunday but I remember going to temple on a pretty regular basis. Not just my mom but with my maternal grandparents too.

RW: So were you religious then?

TD: Yeah, I mean my family they are Buddhist both my mom side and my dad side they both Buddhist. The interesting thing though is on my dad side even though we’re Buddhist, we live in a neighborhoods where everybody around us is Catholic and the funny thing is they never once come and ask my grandparents to convert to Catholic so I thought that was interesting. It was kind of cool of them.

RW: What did you do in the temple when you went?

TD: I was young. I don’t know much I mean they were just praying. For me, I have no idea what they’re praying about and for me it was kind of scary cause when you see those statues it’s not very friendly statues. Beside the Buddha it’s fine, but they have these guard statues that look kind of scary and I was never too fond of it.

RW: How did you celebrate Tet?

TD: Tet, growing up was one of the things I remember the most. On my mom's side, my grandparents they would cook bánh tét the sticky rice, and they would make a lot of them. I don’t
think they were making to sell, but they were making them to give away to friends and relatives and we would stay up the whole night cooking it and it’s a long process. I don’t know why it took so long, now my wife does it so quickly, the same thing but that’s one thing staying up the whole night cook bánh tét. And then on Tet, when I was growing up, they still have the fireworks. The pop, not the fireworks that we have here, but these are the noise fireworks the red one. And it was fun playing with those during the Tet festival. We would light them up the whole row, if we had money we would play the whole row. And once a row is done, kids would run around and try to pick up the one that didn’t lit up.

RW: Did you mainly celebrate with your family? Or would you also celebrate with friends?

TD: You know, I don't' think I ever met any of my parents friends. So they are all mainly family whether my mom’s side or dad’s side it’s strictly family.

RW: What was school like in Vietnam?

TD: School was hard. I was the son of a teacher, but my grades were poor. And I was never a good student I think I would just average student. I did skip a grade so I was one grade ahead of my age. But you know, you sit in the classroom. You don’t lay back you sit upright and you don’t talk, you want to talk you raise your hand. And you know, basically, it’s different than here. The student are very polite towards the teachers and they don’t mess around in school but I remember I was in school up until fifth grade in Vietnam and it wasn’t easy.

RW: Was school considered a privilege over there?

TD: At that time I mean there was a lot of kids didn’t go to school because they couldn’t afford to go to school. It didn’t cost money at the time to go to school but the only reason if kids don’t go to school is cause they need to go to work to help out their family. I didn’t have to do that. I guess I helped my mom out selling in the cafeteria during breaks and lunch hours. It wasn’t too bad.

RW: What were some activities you would partake in school?

TD: Um, none. No time to do any activities. Besides classroom, there’s no P.E. you just go in, learn to write, read, and to do math and history. There’s break, but my breaks were spent with my mom selling food to other kids.

RW: What was your hardest subject?
TD: The hardest subject I think was the history. Just because at home, I was told one thing at school it’s different so it’s like, you know I was young, and I didn’t know who’s right or wrong. So I got a little confused between the two stories.

RW: What were your teachers and peers like?

TD: I don’t remember much I mean I don’t remember if I have too many friends. The only teacher I remember was my mom’s colleagues and she was nice to me but one thing I remember the teachers was that they didn’t mess around. If you screwed around in class whether if you screwed around in class either you got a bad grade or you misbehave they would say, “Put your hand out” and they use a ruler stick and they slap your hands. That’s on the mild side. If not, they use the yardstick and whoop you in the butt. That’s what I can recall about the teachers in Vietnam.

RW: Were you ever disciplined?

TD: About two or three times?

RW: Did you have many friends in Vietnam?

TD: Nope. I don’t. Maybe four at best. But I don’t keep in touch with any of them. I don’t know where they are I mean I just hang out with them on the holidays. My mom also teach part time and she would take me there to her students house and I would hang out with them while she was teaching so that’s about it. I don’t have any friends in Vietnam.

RW: Next I want to talk a little about the War in Vietnam. How do you think it affected your family the most?

TD: First off, it divided our immediate family. It sent my dad to concentration camp and it make my mom stay home and raise the two kids by herself. The thing was the only reason my dad went to concentration camp was because right after the war ended, the Vietnamese communist government saying “look bring enough clothes for three or five days of training and then we’ll send you home.” Three to five days turns into five years. I guess that’s one reason my dad didn’t trust what the communist was saying. And also, we have no opportunities to do anything and that’s one of the reason my dad decided to leave Vietnam.

RW: How was Saigon affected because of the war?

TD: I can only speak after the war cause before the war I was too young to remember anything but after the war. Even if you had money you can’t spend money cause if you spend money,
basically you have Communist everywhere looking after you. Not just you, looking after everybody. They’re spying on you. So even if you have money, you can’t spend it. You can’t spend lavishly and treat yourself to this or that material wise. The entire city was just pretty sad. But at least it’s still better than what I heard of the North even though they with the communist, but the people up North they have worse life than the South.

RW: Were anyone in your family besides your father involved in the war?

TD: My grandparents. Both of them. Just the male. The female don't’ do anything with the war. They just stay at home. Both my grandparents they were in the war. On my mom’s side he was a pharmacist. My dad’s side he was a transportation sergeant. And then a couple of my uncles on both sides of the family was in the military. Basically if you 18 you have to enlist and you know serve the country.

RW: Were they also sent to concentration camps?

TD: Because my grandparents they were older, they were exempt. But my dad and my two uncles all got sent to concentration camp.

RW: Did your mom mention the war a lot when you were growing up?

TD: Not a whole lot cause you don’t want to say anything about the war or about the government. Cause you just never know who can listen to you even though we live in brick and mortar house, we just don’t trust if there’s people outside listening in or not. So she didn’t mention anything.

RW: What kind of stories would she tell you if she did?

TD: I don’t know. You know, my mom just pretty much stay out of politics altogether. The only thing I remember is she was saying that she was growing up in her teens her and her brother were just walking around and she saw some flier that propagandas flier that were passed down you know, just passed down the street by the Communist. It looked so pretty and she takes it and she sticks it in her notebook and went home and then my grandpas like “Oh no you shouldn’t be having this because this is talking about anti South Vietnamese armies.” She got disciplined by my grandparents.

RW: So, when did you come to the United States?

TD: We escaped Vietnam in 1983. We stayed one year in concentration camp (meant refugee camps) in Malaysia and Philippines so we didn’t get here until October 11, 1984.

RW: Can you describe your trip from the Philippines to here?
TD: Oh, it was wonderful, you know being in an airplane. For a little kid 11 years old. I thought it was great. Didn’t feel jet leg or anything at all. Our first stop was in Seattle. Our final destination was in Virginia but we stopped in Seattle to process the paperwork. We got put up in the hotel for one night and one of the person who went with us in the boat, my dad was able to look them up and they came by to the hotel. They immigrate before they came here before us so he looked him up and he was able to contact them and they stop by and they give me, they give us apples and grapes. Oh my goodness. I had a pound of grapes to myself. It was seedless and I ate so much of it the following morning. I’m like “dad I can’t open my eyes I can’t open my eyes.” Cause I guess something from the grapes it’s just yeah. But first time having grapes all to yourself, that was just wonderful. Apple, I had my very first apple in Malaysia but then that’s only half of an apple. Here they brought us some apple and all to me I thought it was just wonderful. So love it.

RW: What do you remember about the refugee camps?

TD: I remember a lot. In Malaysia, we stay before we get to refugee camp we stayed in a temporary housing in Malaysia for a week and there, you know, it’s by the seaside and there’s coconut trees. You don’t have to do anything else. You don’t have to do anything. The accommodation is wonderful. After week spending there they ship us to the island Pulau Bidong and we stayed there for three months. And in there that’s where they process the paperwork to find out if my dad has any qualification to immigrate to the U.S. And then also at that time it was for him to decide if he wanted to go to the U.S Canada, or Australia. So during that three months he decide to go to the U.S. and for me during that three months I was just playing with other kids in refugee camps. And the camps, it wasn’t too bad. It’s made out of just metal sheets and wood. The accommodation was fine, the food was fine. There was a shortage of vegetables so we kind of just eating wild vegetables that were growing on the hillside. I would love to go back there just to visit now. I don’t think there’s anything there now, but I have fond memories of the island in Malaysia. After that we were sent to the mainland in Malaysia and we stayed there for another 3 more months to finalize the paperworks. There, the camp was a lot smaller it’s not the entire islands, but just an area and we just stayed inside the camp. You don’t get to go outside of it and in Malaysia they don’t eat pork and my dad got some money that was sent to him from the relative s in the U.S. so he was able to buy us some pork illegally. Cause there’s a hole in the wall and I guess the people who sell to us are the Chinese and they just look in and they throw in the meat and you throw out the money to them. The reason that we wanted prok so bad is because in the camp in mainland Malaysia I remember we had chicken for breakfast, chicken for lunch, and chicken for dinner. And it was like that for three whole months and that’s why now I hate chicken. If it’s fresh chicken, no problem. These are canned chicken, not very good. The first time eating it, fine. The first week, fine. But month after month after three months that was just too much. And the refugee camp in Philippines was wonderful because it was also on an
island. And you get to roam around, it’s much bigger. And there I was learning English in the Philippines. We stayed there for four months.

RW: Was it crowded at all?

TD: There was a lot. But did it feel like crowded? No. There was room to spread around. During the camp in the Philippines that’s where I first joined the Scout Movement.

RW: Can you describe that?

It’s just you know, something to do. Beside learning English so that way we learn some structure of scale. I didn’t care for it, that’s why right after we came to the U.S. my dad asked me if I wanted to continue joining Scouts “No, I don’t wanna join the Scouts because of the bad experience that I had.” I was a little kid they made me salute everybody in Scouts who was older than me. And I thought that was ridiculous. What did you do to deserve to I have to salute you. That’s what they make me do so that’s why I didn’t care for Scouts. That’s not true for all Scouts but the troop I was in, that was the case.

RW: Were you part of the orderly departure program?

TD: No, we are the boat people. So the orderly departure program, there the one that stayed in Vietnam. They have family in the U.S that sponsors them over. So they just fly from Vietnam to Thailand and Thailand to the U.S. We escaped by boat so we no, we weren’t part of the orderly departure program.

RW: Do you remember how long you were in the boats for?

I was in the boat for 6 days and 5 nights and that was something else. I remember very clearly. Just to get to the boat we have to take this water taxi and we get caught a couple times by the local police and they thought that, we told them that we were just going one place to another selling fruit. Not telling them we’re escaping obviously. And then, it took us the whole day by water taxi just to get to the main boat at night time and there were 16 of us on that boat. As soon as we hit the open sea the wave was just crazy. You know I know there’s no such thing as a 100ft wave, maybe there is, but that’s what it felt like. You keep just going up up up up and down down down up up up, it was like that for a good two days before the water was calm enough to cook. My dad was navigating the boat so they have a hammock to tie him down so we didn’t get blown overboard. So he was just staying in the back and holding the steering and yeah it was scary, but we were on the boat for 6 days and 5 nights and when we land at night. We didn’t even know we made it to another country. Everyone were guessing we were still in Vietnam. At that time they didn’t care if we didn’t left or not, everybody got so sick at the sea
they just wanted get back to land. And it wasn’t until the next morning that’s when we found out that we were in Malaysia and so everybody was really happy that we were able to escape.

RW: How big was the boat?

TD: The boat was about nine meter long and a meter and a half wide. It has two engine and the engine is not every big. Looking back, it’s only two hundred fifty miles to get from where we were to where we landed because of engine troubles and the engine we have wasn’t very big so that’s why it took so long to get there. And I remember I was staying in the front of the boat and then I bounce around so much I was throwing up, A couple people asked “Who are you” “Oh I’m the son of the captain” “You don’t need to be out here! Let me put you up in the cabin” I felt so lucky but that’s where the engine is also. I got so tired, I put my legs down and my left leg hit the engine. I got burned so I got a little scar to remember for that.

RW: How many people were in the boat?

TD: Including my dad and I, sixteen people. So that’s a luxury. Previous time when we tried to escape, that same size boat, we had over a hundred fifty people and for me being nine years old, I remember I have to sit crouched up and there was people everywhere. Here, there was plenty of room, that wasn’t an issue. The only issue we had was engine trouble and the weather. That was about it. We had plenty of food. But then again, we didn’t cook much. I think we only cooked twice just porridge because the water was so rough to cook.

RW: How long were you on the boat with 150 people for?

TD: That one was just for one night just because as soon as we go on the boat, the engine didn’t start. And if there’s no engine, can’t go. So that’s when my dad bailed and all the male adults bailed because if they get caught they’d be spending a lot of time in jail. So they left the women and children behind. And my dad had contingency plan saying “hey look, if something goes wrong, you’re gonna have to find your way home” so he prepped me for all that. So I was able to find my way home. It took me two days, but I got home safely.

RW: Where was your mother and sister during this time?

TD: They were staying at home and they stayed at home. My mom still teaching and my sister still going to school, the government did ask, “where’s your husband and son” and she’s like, “I don’t know, they left, they went somewhere.” So, I mean sure they knew we made it to Malaysia and then after, we spent time in Malaysia, we came to the U.S. that’s when my dad prepared the paperworks for the ODP the Orderly Departure Program for my mom and my sister. That program takes about five to six years. Four years into the process, my mom couldn’t wait any longer. She didn’t know if she gonna be able to go or not so her and my sister decide to escape
from Vietnam also and they were lucky enough to make it to the refugee camps and then because we already have the paperworks, once you get there, she still has to get through the process of learning English and transition, so she also spent about a year in the refugee camps and then she came after.

RW: Did you know where you were during the time you were on the boats?

TD: Absolutely not, I mean I was too young to know. I mean I hear people guessing where we were. I didn’t talk. I don’t remember talking to my dad at all during those six days. The only thing I remember was the very last night of the the rough sea we lost a main engine and then the spare engine was just dragging the boat. I guess in the daytime before the storm came, my dad thought he saw land so at night when nightfall when the storm hits, he cut the loose the spare engine because it was just dragging the boat down. And then, there’s other guys on the boat older adults. he was hogging the empty containers my dad got so upset and he took a knife out and cut loose of the empty container that the guy had strapped around him and is like, “You don’t need this” these empty containers are for children and women so he took that and he strapped it around me knowing I don’t know hot swim, if anything were to happen, I can hang on to the container and float. But luckily, the ship didn’t sink and I remember that three big waves hit the back of the boat. We hit something. And that turned out to be land. So that was pretty miraculous.

RW: Why did your parents decide to come?

TD: After he got released from concentration camp, he couldn’t find any real job. And he didn’t wanna just stay and live with my maternal parents forever and he didn’t have, he couldn’t go back to his side of the family because there’s too many people living there already. My mom mentioned that have we had an ounce of gold in order to buy this pig pen and convert into a house, that would be how much it would cost this pig pen that they were selling it cost an ounce of gold and we didn’t even have that. And basically, there was no future for us because from the old regime and knowing that my sister and I cannot advance in our future and they seeing there’s no future in Vietnam so they decided to leave. And we were lucky to leave because it cost, normally it costs money, but my dad was the navigator, the captain of the boat, so they let us, just my dad and I to go for free, so it didn’t cost us any money.

RW: How did you feel during the entire trip?

TD: The entire trips not too bad, I mean the reality didn’t set in until I got to the refugee camps when I miss my mom, my sister, and the rest of the family. Realize that they look, even though there’s turn of other people around. It felt like just my dad and I, so it was sad initially. But I say, after the first month, it was back to normal.
RW: Were you nervous or scared of being caught?

TD: Oh absolutely. But I was reassured that hey if I got caught, I’m a young kid. They’d probably put me in jail for a month or two. That’s what happened actually, my mom and sister went. They got caught once and they spent about two months in jail and they were released home.

RW: And they were successful time?

TD: Second time they were successful, yeah.

RW: What was the program like when you were learning English in the Philippines?

TD: You know, I thought I was doing great, I thought, “Oh good, okay this is easy.” But I didn’t realize the failure of it when I first come to the U.S. and start using my English that they couldn’t understand me. Even though I thought I knew what I was saying but the accents. But if they write it down I have no problem.

RW: Did you see anyone else struggling in the refugee camps?

TD: A lot. A lot of people struggling in refugee camps just because of the way they escape from Vietnam. I was there for 10 months and every day I heard different stories on how they came to the refugee camps. I mean once you get to the refugee camps, you got taken care of by the Red Cross, by basically the people there to help us. You know, the whole experience in refugee camp I thought we were treated very well. There was Medicare, there was food, not like there’s a lot of food, but you know, we weren’t going hungry at all. It’s just struggling in term of the mental aspect of people lost their loved one at sea. People got raped.

RW: Do you remember the worst story you heard?

TD: Worst story I heard was that this, and actually, I didn’t have to hear it. You know every day in refugee camps especially in Malaysia in the Pulau Bidong the island, every day you just go out to the dock and there’s new shipment of people coming in. And then you know, the reason you’re there is just trying to see if you recognize anybody who comes. But then this one time I saw this two people came up and they don’t look like human at all. And that time I was only ten and then I’m like “Woah, these people look weird.” Later I found out it took them over a year to get to refugee camps. What happened was they missed all the refugee camps entirely. Cause my dad afterward, told me that, “Hey, when you leave Vietnam it’s so easy, when you get out there the wind gonna blow you. If you don’t hit Malaysia you’ll hit Indonesia, if not you’ll hit Hong Kong, Philippines. Worst case scenario you hit Japan or Korea or if the blow you in the wrong direction, then you know hit Thailand, so really you’re protected by all these islands or you can’t really get lost.” Well this guy apparently, they did. The whole ship they went all the way up to
the north and then of course, they didn’t prepare to bring enough food and drinks, so they turn to cannibalism and just to survive and that’s why it took them so long. When the wind blew them north and then blew them back south, that’s why they came to the camp. Yeah. You see them and they don’t look like human. And that was, I feel bad for them. I mean beside, rape stories countless. Countless rape stories about the Thailand pirates. But people eating people. That has to be the worst story for a kid to hear.

RW: Do you remember how many people were on the boat?

TD: They say that they had fifty people, or you know around there. And then when people first died, they’d just throw it overboard, but when they realized they’re gonna be running out of food, that’s when they resort to cannibalism.

RW: What were your first impressions upon arriving in the United States?

TD: I thought it was great. After Seattle, so we didn’t do much in Seattle we were just in the airport and hotel, from there we fly north of Norfolk and then from Norfolk we live in the city of Hampton. I didn’t know at the time, but I guess that’s like the projects. That’s like the shelters home for the low income, but I didn’t know any better. At the time I thought it was wonderful. I live in the nice home, have TV to watch, and we were given some money by the church, the local church. So I love it but looking back I remember staying there. My dad gave me some loose change and asked me to go buy cigarettes for him. I was eleven and I was able to do that in Virginia and I think you can’t do that now.

RW: Whose home were you staying at in Virginia?

TD: We were staying home with not the sponsor, we were sponsored by a church. But a Vietnamese. I don’t know. The guy who helped us was Vietnamese and he said, “Okay let me put you up into this house with this Chinese-Vietnamese.” So the guy was able to speak Vietnamese to us and we stay there for one month. And then that’s where I first experienced my first Halloween and I thought, “Hey I love this country. You just have to wear old clothes and paint your face and people give you free candy.”

RW: Do you know why your father chose the United States over Canada or Australia?

TD: I guess familiarity. During the war, he came to Norfolk, Virginia in 1972 for training. So you know, when he went up to the interview he’s like “yeah I was just in Virginia in 1972.” And they asked if he wanted to go to the U.S. and he was like “Sure, why not.” Whereas in Canada or Australia he didn’t know anybody else.

RW: Can you describe a little bit about your time in Virginia?
TD: It was really short beside the Halloween the only other thing was that my dad was able to reconnect with his friend in the military and they live close by and I came to their house and stay for the night and I love it. Met the family and they took me to a church even though we were Buddhist, but they took me to church cause I guess they were taking care of me. The only thing I remember was that I was disappointed when they went out for their bread. They’re like “no you stay here” and I was like “why I want some bread too.” I guess I wasn’t in the religion so yeah, that’s about it beside the church and beside the Halloween and one month we pretty much stay at home not doing anything, didn’t go anywhere, just listening to Vietnamese songs, watch some TV, that’s about it.

RW: Was your father’s friend American?

TD: No, Vietnamese.

RW: Was the transition from Vietnam to Virginia difficult for you?

TD: No it was just another stop along the way.

RW: At that point were you able to speak English fairly well?

TD: No, no I didn’t speak anything so during that one month I don’t think I speak any English. Because I just stay home, my dad the guy who live with us, he would take us to the grocery, but you know we didn’t say anything. I mean the one time I buy cigarette for my dad, I just brought some change and gave him the change and pointed towards the cigarettes that I wanted and that was it.

RW: What kind of foods would you eat since there was little Asian food over there at the time?

TD: Even though there was little Asian but, rice, you still get rice, and you know just vegetables and meat. But you know, it doesn’t have to be Vietnamese food, but basically we were just eating rice. I know we’re just eating rice and just meat and eggs.

RW: Did you eat any American food?

TD: No I don’t think so. I don’t recall having any American food like going to McDonald’s or anything like that, no. I guess cause we didn’t have the money for that.

RW: When did your father decide to move to California?

TD: We stay there for a month and then his friends from California told him you know, “Come over here you can stay with us” and then my dad’s like, “Okay if you say” and his friend was the
mechanical engineer for his tugboat so he knew him well. He knew his family well and so we just packed, we didn’t have anything so we just put our stuff in the luggage and went on the Greyhound spent three days on the road to California. First stop was in Lawndale, we stay pretty much in Lawndale and Hawthorne. Being a newly immigrant, you don’t have your own place, you just share rooms with different families. So the longest we stayed with somebody was a year sharing a room with them, and then finally we were able to rent a place, an apartment in Torrance and stay there for a good ten years.

RW: Did you like California more you liked Virginia?

TD: I think so, even when I was in Virginia, that was in October so it wasn’t that cold. Weather wise, I mean I guess once you in California, that’s when you start spreading your roots back getting used to the country then yeah I think I like it much better because there’s more activities to do. In Virginia there wasn’t much activities.

RW: What did your father do when he moved to Torrance? Did he look for jobs?

TD: Yeah, when we first came here people saying you can go on welfare because you have a young child and you can stay on welfare until he’s 18. So he was on welfare for maybe three or four months because when you’re on welfare you have food stamps and the reason he stopped asking for welfare staying on welfare was he noticed, he didn’t tell me this until later, much later in life is that he noticed that every time we go to the grocery, I would buy all the stuff and I would put it in the basket and then I would just leave the market and let him pay because I was just too ashamed of paying with food stamps. So I guess that’s when he decided “I don’t need this” and he was lucky enough that somebody took him in and tell him, “Hey do you wanna work in the print shops” and he’s like “sure, I want to, but I don’t know anything about working in a print shop” so the guy show him the ropes and so after three or four months of staying on welfare he just quit altogether and go to work. And he went to work in Los Alamitos. We didn’t have a car so he couldn’t commute back and forth, so I just stay with his friends in Lawndale and he would stay closer to his work in Los Alamitos and he would come home on the weekends to see me. It wasn’t about until about a year later that’s when he was able to buy his own car and rent his own place and then you would commute back and forth to work and I was able to live with him. But for the first year I would just stay with his friend’s family.

RW: Where did he rent his house?

TD: During his work he stayed with the guy who trained him and the guy live in Los Alamitos too so, that’s closer for him.

RW: When did you enter school?
TD: As soon as I got here which was sometime in November. So I say the early part of November in 1984 and I entered as a sixth grade level and yeah, I started pretty much as soon as I got to California.

RW: Can you describe the school a little?

TD: The school I think it was called Anderson Elementary and I remember the very first day I got in a fight with the guy. The guy was Vietnamese too but he didn’t speak Vietnamese to me and I wanted to play with him so I was asking for the ball I say “can I have the ball?” but because of my accent he couldn't understand me, and I was like “well why doesn’t he want to play with me?” so I got in an argument with him and fought with him. And my best friend he’s Chinese, and it was funny cause we have different language. And he’s like, “oh it’s okay it’s okay” you stay and play with me. That’s when I met my best friend. Unfortunately he passed away when he was 31 or 32 from asthma. School was great, it was easy compared to Vietnam it was easy. Even though there was a language barrier, after three or four months, even though I was in ESL classes, for math and science math I was in regular classes, so I was excelling in the very first year I was representing my class as the sixth grade to compete for the school math competition and I came in second. The reason I didn’t win first because they have math problem and I didn’t understand it and that’s why I failed.

RW: What city was the school in?

TD: This was in Lawndale. So I spent sixth grade in Lawndale, Andersen seventh and eighth also in Lawndale and then in high school that’s when I went to North High in Torrance.

RW: Why did your father decide to move to Torrance?

TD: Because Torrance was much safer. The high school is much better than the high school in Lawndale. The high school there had bad reputation so they have fights every day. Even junior highs there was fighting in schools too. And in Torrance, fighting was non existent.

RW: Was school easier here or in Vietnam?

TD: Absolutely here it was a cake walk. Straight A’s throughout and the reason it’s easy is you just do what the teacher tell you to do and you just repeat it and that was it. No thinking at all, just memorization. It was too easy, no challenge for grade school.

RW: Did you have difficulties identifying yourself?

TD: No, there was a lot of Vietnamese in the school too. I hang out with mostly Vietnamese friends, but we speak English. No difficulty whatsoever, enjoy school throughout. Didn’t play
much sport until high school. Play soccer. I was paperboy have my own paper routes making money as a little kid. It was great, no difficulty at all.

RW: Why did you decide to get a job as a kid?

TD: My friends like, “hey you want a job?” this and that, you know you get to go to the movies, they pay you. I think I was getting paid between forty and sixty dollars a month delivering papers. The thing that was more exciting was the tips that I would get. Cause you’d have to go collect the money from the subscriber. They don’t send it in, you have to go and collect the money and that was all fun. And then you would earn prizes, I remember the very first prize I got from delivering the paper was the hand-vac for car the car vacuum cleaner and I gave it to my dad. He had it for the longest time even though it stopped working after a few years but he still kept it as the very first souvenir as the very first present I gave him. It was just because of the background I was selling stuff in Vietnam, so I thought, “hey I get to do something fun, ride bikes around, throw the newspaper.” The very first week or month I was horrible at throwing the paper. You can’t just stop your bike at every house and put the paper on the front porch, it takes forever. So you just throw the paper, and the first few times I break some points. So what I do is run up, take the paper back, put it neatly on the porch, and then the broken pots, kind of just squish it up and put it away.

RW: Did you ever help your father out, moneywise?

TD: I gave him the money and he kept it. Not so much that he needed it, but later on he gave it all back to me.

RW: Did you identify yourself as American?

TD: No, just Vietnamese. Not this Vietnamese-American stuff, not until much much later until college. When people ask I just say I’m Vietnamese.

RW: Did you try blending in?

TD: Yeah I have no problem. In high school friend I have all kinds of friends from different culture, some were Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Indians, Caucasians, Blacks, I mean I blend in with everybody, I have no problem with anybody at all. No conflict with anybody.

RW: Did you do any extra curriculars?

TD: I don’t remember, in high school you probably play sport, but I didn’t play any sport. I didn’t play any music. So just hanging out with friends, riding bikes around. Nothing much.
RW: What is the most memorable experience during the time?

TD: I don’t think I have much memorable experiences. The only thing is even in elementary school. The only year I spent, I was student of the month there. In junior high I was also voted student of the month. And then in high school, in my sophomore or junior year I was just sitting in the auditorium and they were about to announce the student of the month and I was just joking with my friends and surely enough they call my name and they were like, “dude you knew it ahead of time” and I’m like, “no I didn’t. I didn’t know that” That was the only thing memorable, it’s nothing much. In school, we play cards game during breaks, during lunch hours just cards playing cards and it was crazy. The school everybody was playing cards.

RW: Where did you go to college?

TD: After high school, I went straight to UCI. I took a couple of courses at the community college at El Camino College in computer science before and then after that I went straight to UCI.

RW: What year did you enter?

TD: Came to UCI in 1991.

RW: Was it your first choice?

TD: No actually, all my friends who stay in the old district in the Lawndale school district, they all went to UCLA. So, I mean I was still hanging out with those guys too. So I applied to UCLA and they didn’t accept me and I applied to UCI and UCI accepted me. The reason I didn’t get accepted to UCLA was because I didn’t take one of the tests. And they was checking very carefully they noticed I didn’t take one of the tests so that’s why they just rejected me. UCI I just guess they accepted me due to my grades but they didn’t realize I didn’t take one of the requirement tests. I think it was the ACT, I took the wrong test and when I got accepted UCI I call them up and I’m like, “hey you realize I didn’t take the test, right?” And they’re like, “okay we didn’t realize it but why don’t you just take the next one.” And so I did and then I came I started in the fall of 1991 majoring in biology.

RW: How would you describe your experience at UCI?

TD: Oh that was tough. That’s when I realize the difference between the university and the community college. University that’s why they call it a research university. You’re gonna have to do your own research. Everything on your own. It’s not just repeating what the professor say and you just get good grades. In high school if you just throughout the grade school, you just have to do the homework and take the test. You repeat what the teacher say you get 100% no
problem, easy. At the college level it’s everybody is as the same as you. In high school, you got the lazy kids, the dumb kids, and if you’re not lazy then you get the good grades. Here, when I first enter UCI I realize hey look, everybody in the same boat as me. Everybody has the same background. You have to do something different than them to get better grades. So it was a shock. It was a major shock going from a 4.0 average to a 1.5 so that was a shocker.

RW: Was 1.5 for your first quarter?

TD: No, the whole year. And that was bad. I didn’t pull my grades out until the second year cause I was on probation for a while until pretty much after sophomore year is when I finally caught up.

RW: Did you like the campus?

TD: Loved the campus but looking back, I felt like I didn’t have a college experience. It was just pretty much going to school and then didn’t go back home, we rent an apartment close by so we just live there. So we just go there and go back to the apartment. Didn’t spend much time here didn’t just many clubs. I did join the Vietnamese club, but they didn’t do much so it was just, college life was non-existent.

RW: What was the club called?

TD: I think it was called VSA, Vietnamese Student Association.

RW: Did your father move down here with you?

TD: No, he stay put in Torrance and I just moved down here share an apartment with a few friends. Still in touch, keep in touch with those guys.

RW: How were you paying for UCI?

TD: Through financial aid and through work study. Parents help out with the food and you know the transportation.

RW: How has UCI changed over the past 20 years?

TD: It definitely changed a lot. I feel like students now who come to UCI they do get the college experience. There’s a lot more support, but then again it’s also because of the technology changes so that helps. So you know, UCI really become a real college campus like all the other colleges that, you know, you’ve heard of. I mean now comparing between UCI, I’m not being biased or anything but like comparing UCI to UCLA or Berkeley, shoot I’ll take UCI any day.
Cause you have everything that you need in a campus. Whether it’s a sport team to root for, your own college team to root for, shows, foods, and the campus, it’s a great campus.

RW: How far was your apartment from UCI?

TD: About four miles here so I would bike to school, take the bike trail and yeah. It was much cheaper that’s why we went that route.

RW: What do you think of the Vietnamese community in Orange County?

TD: I don’t know how we got this far. I guess through a lot of hard work but it’s pretty darn impressive for being the first Vietnamese got here in 1975 and even know we just celebrated 40 years of living in America. Come so far it’s just wonderful. There’s just so many entrepreneurs, there’s so many successful stories, of course there are a lot of gangs and violence, but the Vietnamese community in Orange County, I think they’ve done a wonderful jobs for themselves. Just look at the house, when people move into Westminster of Fountain Valley, they improve the city. They don’t degrade the city so, you look at the cars the people drive, they drive, I’m not saying fancy cars, but all their cars are nice cars so. Such a short period of time, I think the Vietnamese communities here have done a wonderful job for themselves

RW: What was your opinion on the Hi-Tek protests in 1999?

TD: I went there just because everybody was there and it was close enough. I just wanted to see what was going on and I mean I get it that the guy has a point that hey if this a free country he should be able to display a picture of Ho Chi Minh, but dude, don’t do it publically knowing full well that so many people hate him. They have the right to protest too so I guess he was just, that’s just my opinion. He was just trying to get some attention or somebody tell him to do that but at that time I wasn’t old enough to understand, but I was just there to see what was going on. But it’s good to see the Vietnamese people out there protesting, good to see the unity amongst the people.

RW: Can you describe the protests a little bit?

TD: It was really crowded there. It was loud. I mean I just sit in the middle and people were just chanting freedoms and chanting anti-communist slogans. That’s about it, but there were just a lot of people in such a tight space.

RW: What is your current occupation?

TD: I am a computer programmer for the school of humanities and I do computer programming. I pretty much do all the tech support in term of hardware and software support for faculty staff and students for the School of Humanities.
RW: Why are you working something that is completely different for your major? 5:07

TD: First off, I hated my major. I never liked it from the get-go cause biology you have to deal with laboratory work, dissecting animals, blood. Can’t stand that. When I was in school, I was working at the computer lab in the School of Humanities, and I also had a job at Disneyland. I saw the way I got treated as a student worker here at the school and the way I got treated at Disneyland. Disneyland might be the happiest place on Earth for the tourists, but it was the worst place for employees. Nobody was happy behind the scene, didn’t like it one bit so I was working here in the computer lab for a few years and when I was finishing with my school I was telling my boss, “Hey look, I’m done with school, it’s time to move on.” I guess he liked me and he’s like, “well how would you like to stay here and work for us, full time?” and I’m like, “Well I don’t have a degree in computer” and he’s like “doesn’t matter we’ll train you in the job.” And it’s cause something that you do, I consider this as a hobby, I consider this to be fun. And if it’s something fun you pick it up really quickly so I got trained on the job and within a year I was really confident in my position and what I was doing.

RW: What was working at Disney like for you? Why did you say it was such a bad experience?

TD: Disneyland they have, when you face the public they call it the stage, and then behind the stage people were just depressed. The manager was really bossy, they weren’t friendly to you, they just like, “okay you’re working this day, this day, this hour, this hour don’t be late and don’t screw up” and you get yelled at all the time for no reason. Not just myself, but other people and so really. If you’re just a manager of one position, you still have to answer to other people, but I don’t know why they just like to be bossy. Here, even though I have a manager, but they’re so friendly so it’s different. So after six months at Disneyland I’m like, “okay, that’s it, goodbye.” And they’re like, “you know if you quit you can never work at Disneyland again.” I’m like, “I don’t care to work to care at Disneyland again. No thank you.”

RW: Did you wanna work at your Disneyland because you went there before?

TD: No, what happened was my friend was looking for a job so he asked me to drive him to apply to a job at Disneyland. While I was there people asked why I didn’t apply too. So I’m like fine I’ll apply. I got the job, my friend didn’t get the job. I didn’t wanna work at Disneyland I already had a job at campus. But the job here only during the school year and summer time you’re not working so it kind of worked out perfect.

RW: Did you ever go to Disneyland before working there?

TD: I went there once or twice. I worked Disneyland for six months but that’s only during the breaks so like summer. I have summer off so I worked at Disneyland and worked two summers
there and not any other time. Cause they make me work during Christmas breaks or Spring breaks and I’m like nope I’m busy. Because the one condition was that I was still an employee so at least once or twice a month I would just visit Disney and go in and play so that was a benefit.

RW: Are you still now still Buddhist?

TD: Yes, I was in school when I was in college, the very first year I got recruited into this Born Again Christian and I was really good cause my memory was great, I know everybody's names in the group. I was playing softball with them and they recruited me without me knowing it and I was about to convert. The very next day I would be converted but then they went over some of the things and they said you’d have to donate 10% of your earning and I’m like “wait nobody tell me, no religion forces you to donate 10% of your income. There’s something wrong here.” They were telling me I would have to renounce my family and my religions. You know as a college student yeah I can live with that but when they touch the money aspect of it, forget it, I’m not converting. Screw it. They tried calling me the next day and I’m like nope not going. I got recruited into the Born Again Christian group and was learning the Bible, I knew the Bible very well for the longest time. I was joking with my friend that I wasn’t a bio major but a bible major. I guess it was just it didn’t fit.

RW: Are you currently married?

TD: Yes.

RW: How did you meet your wife?

TD: I met my wife here at school. The first time I met her, nothing happened. It wasn’t until like three years later I went back to Vietnam and I shot a video of my trip and I came back. The guy who works for me in the computer labs like. “wow, that girl, you remember that girl? She’d like to see your video.” So I lent her the video and one thing lead to another, within 10 months we got married.

RW: So she’s also Vietnamese?

TD: She’s also Vietnamese and she also went to UCI.

RW: What was your wedding like? For instance was it more American since you lived in America? Or was it more Vietnamese?

TD: I think it was more Vietnamese just cause her dad was more involved in the communities and he was more religious. He also knew a temple so we actually have our wedding in a temple and I think that was pretty cool because not a whole lot of weddings takes place in temples. So
we got the wedding in the temple that was the ceremony, and then a couple days later we had a reception in a restaurant. It was more Asian, more Vietnamese than American.

RW: Were you wearing more traditional clothing?

TD: I did, for both the ceremony and the reception. I still have those traditional clothes, of course they don’t fit anymore. Too small.

RW: Can you describe it a little bit?

TD: Just a long dress. The ao dai, the head gown. Yeah my father-in-law, he’s really into other traditions ceremonies. Whether it’s weddings, funerals, or anniversary of deaths, he’s really good. You just follow his lead.

RW: Can you describe more of the wedding in detail?

TD: The wedding was basically, we went to the temple, we paid respect to both sides of the families, we paid respect to the ancestor, to the buddha, and the thing that stood out the most was that why is there a wedding ceremony. It's so that why, when you get married, it’s two separate person, this is my own believe I’m not sure about other people but, I see wedding as an agreement between two very different people and why do you have to have all these people there? Or why do you have to be in front of a church or a temple, it’s so that you remember the vow that you make about things that are sacred to you. Or you’re making a vow to the elders that were there. And after that when we get into arguments it helps both of us to kind of go back to the ceremony, why it was important. It was important because we made a promise that we would love and cherish each other so that’s why I think the ceremony was important. I mean if before we get married, we just went to city hall and got the marriage license. It was easy just in front of the judge you say I do and she said I do and that was it. That was straightforward, nothing memorable about it. But at the wedding ceremony, that’s the process that was involved, the people that was involved, that’s why you don’t want to break that.

RW: How long have you been married?

TD: For 16 years.

RW: Do you have any kids?

TD: Two kids.

RW: Can you tell me a little bit about them?
TD: Yeah, the oldest one is Sidney, she just turned 12. Bruce, he is almost 10, he’s 10 next month. Both are wonderful kids. They are very sweet. They are both currently in the scouts movements because my wife was also in the scouts she was growing up in the scout family. It’s funny cause I was anti-scouts but she loved scouts and my father-in-law started his own troop. They play music. I don’t know how to read music notes but my wife she kind of teach him a lot of things. A lot of the music, it helps.

RW: How are you choosing to raise them? For instance, more Vietnamese setting or American, or a blend?

TD: We try to blend, but blend doesn’t really work. When they were young, before they started school, they speak strictly Vietnamese. But once they started school, within three months or six months, it’s not that they forget Vietnamese, but they just don’t speak it. They just speak English. We try to talk to them in Vietnamese but they respond in English. They can’t understand Vietnamese when grandparents talk to them. So that’s kind of cause them to not talk a lot with grandparents. They talk very minimal to them, we try to have them blend in. All there friends now, I don’t know if it’s because they go to school in Irvine, I don’t know if it’s because they don’t have a lot of Vietnamese in school, but a lot of their friends now are different than when my wife and I grew up, there friends now are either Caucasian or other ethnicity. Not a whole lot of Vietnamese. I don’t think my daughter has any Vietnamese friends out of scouts same with my son. It’s not that we’re trying to teach them the American culture, but it’s just the way it is, the way they are and also I’ll philosophy both my wife and I philosophy now are different than our parents philosophy. Our parents’ philosophy was that you gotta grow up and be a lawyer, doctor, or engineer. My wife and I we don’t have that philosophy towards our kids. They can’t be whatever they wanna be as long as they happy and healthy and that’s it. Happy and healthy and nothing else. We don’t ask anything else out of them.

RW: Do you still only speak Vietnamese to them at home?

TD: No, once in a while when I remember, but just because, you know it’s easier to get feedback from them or you know, when you ask them question it’s quicker, easier to speak in English with them. So yeah just speak English to them.

RW: Would you want your kids to have a traditional Vietnamese wedding?

TD: That’s not important, no. My wife and I, we like them to know about it and then it’s up to them if they want it or not. Yeah we want them to make their own decision. We don’t want to make decision for them.

RW: Do you talk about your life in Vietnam with your children?
TD: Absolutely, especially my son. He’s really lazy at eating so keep telling him mommy and daddy growing up didn’t have food to eat. So why are you wasting food? So eat. Yeah we tell them stories, they know. We would love to take them back to Vietnam just to show them, but now it’s way different than when we growing up in Vietnam. We would love to take them back just so that they’re surrounded by nothing but Vietnamese so that would force them to speak Vietnamese a little bit but the weather, the traffic, the food, and the flight, I don’t think it’s worth it. And Little Saigon is not the same. It’s not the same as going to Vietnam.

RW: Do you still celebrate Tet?

TD: We do. But not like the, well we do. We still go to temple and Tet my wife now start making Bang jin again so that way she can teach them the tradition and we still have some of the sweets like the coconut sweets that we have so yeah, we still celebrate but in Vietnam we would take off a few days before the new year and a few days after that. Here, we don’t take any day off. If it happened to fall on a weekend that’s great, but if not we still go to work, still go to school.

RW: Do your kids like celebrating it?

TD: They do just because they get the Li Xi. It’s not recently until they care for it. They didn’t know what getting the money means, they didn’t understand but now they do. They like it and especially my son, in Garden Grove, Westminster he get to play with firecrackers and he loves that thing.

RW: Did you ever travel?

TD: Yeah we travel quite a bit. Before I got married I drove around a lot. After I got married and have kids, basically we’ve been to, myself I’ve been to 45 states. My kids maybe 35 states. So we travel quite a bit. Just in the U.S. My wife and I have been outside the U.S. we’ve been to London and Paris and Tokyo. We also went down to Mexico a couple times in the past year.

RW: Did you only Vietnam once in college once in college? Or did you visit again?

TD: I visit Vietnam three times. Or four times. Three times, I visit three times, once before I got married, once after I got married, and once the kids were born they were three and one. I just want them to have the same experience that I had. I just want them to have a picture with their great grandparents. I was the only grandkid who knew my great grandma, not even my sister. When the time my sister was born, my great grandma passed away. So I was the only one with the folder so I just want my kids to have the same experience. So that was cool.

RW: Can you describe why you went to Vietnam 3 more times?
TD: Mainly to visit relatives and the food. Love to eat the street food. Now it’s not so safe to eat the street food so that’s why I didn’t. I don’t care to go back to Vietnam. It was cheap and to visit family. Going to Vietnam is not a vacation, if you don’t have any family, there’s no reason going back. Because it’s just sad to see so many poor people and you can’t do much about it.

RW: Did you go with your wife?

TD: The last two time, yes.

RW: Which relatives do you besides your grandparents?

TD: Just the immediate relatives like my grandparents, uncles, and aunts on both sides of the family and that’s it.

RW: So did you enjoy living the U.S. more than Vietnam?

TD: Absolutely. Even though sometimes living in the U.S. the stress, and I often talk to my wife like “Hey, if we retire and go back to Vietnam to live.” The thought has crossed my mind, but I don’t think realistically that would happen just because here, you get so much, we keep talking about freedom in America. You don’t know what freedom is, when you go back to Vietnam, as soon as I land at the airport I feel the pressure of dealing with the immigration, of the Vietnamese. Even though I speak the language, I don’t feel like I’m free to do anything and say anything a lot. Here you can say whatever you want, it’s fine, you know, as long as you don’t hurt anybody it’s fine.

RW: What do you like most about the United States?

TD: Of course the freedom, and the opportunities and law and order. That’s, I would say number one is the freedom, number two would be the opportunities, number three is the orderly, in anything whether you go the airport, you get in line, whether you’re grocery, there’s lines. That’s not the case in Vietnam I went back there and I keep yelling when I went with my wife, I keep yelling to all those people “Come on seriously? Why do you cut in line?” That’s just the way they are.

RW: What do you like the least about U.S?

TD: That time travels really fast here. Cause you have to work for your livings so time flies. I mean it goes by so fast. That’s the only complaint that I have so basically you just have to, don’t waste your time. Just live your life, otherwise it just passes you.

RW: If you could, would you rather have stayed in Vietnam?
TD: Oh definitely not, no. There’s no way I can be, looking back now, there’s no way the success that I got now to what I can imagine if i had lived in Vietnam, I don’t think it’s the same. So no, I’m really glad that my dad and my mom decide to escape Vietnam, come here and give myself and my sister better futures and I think I’m grateful for that.

RW: Is that why you said it was, more like forty years Vietnamese have been in America instead of saying forty years fall of Saigon?

TD: Exactly, exactly. Definitely.

RW: What do you miss most about Vietnam?

TD: I don’t know if it’s true or not, but the people. The last time I went that was about ten years ago, nine ten years ago. The people really sincere, you connect with them. The sincerity, that’s the only thing I miss about Vietnam, nothing else. I mean the food, they have it here. Everything they have in Vietnam, they have it here. It just the sincere of the people, but now, I don’t know how true that is, so I can’t say.

RW: When it was the first time you tried American food?

TD: When I get to California, and I hated it. I hate hamburgers. But now, I try all kind of foods and now I guess, living here long enough, you just wanna learn different cultures. This and that. And I can see when i have new relative that come from relative and I introduce them to hamburger and they didn’t care for it and I’m like, “Are you kidding me? These are like the best hamburger you can get, you know?” and they didn’t care for it the same experience that I had when I first had it. So yeah, it was, it’s just different food, but now I love all kind of food.

RW: Would you prefer Vietnamese food over American?

TD: Prefer, no. Actually depends on the moods. You know if I’m like, if I’m sick, if I feel like I’m sick I love pho. I love the soup that helps a lot. But also keep in mind that the Vietnamese food is way cheaper than American food. I have one of our professor here he’s like, “I can feed my whole family for a whole week with Vietnamese food versus just two meals if we just go out to American restaurant.” And that’s very true, it’s cheap and it’s easier to get, so sure why not.

RW: What do you think about American culture?

TD: I have adopted grandparents who are American and they great. They help me blend in and you know they told me learn from the Japanese, you don’t want to isolate yourself. Not saying that something would happen but you would want to blend in so that if something were to
happen, you have your American friends to help you out. And so I’m like, “oh that’s a good point.” So, I can’t say enough. America’s been great not to just me, but my family, to all the people that I know who immigrate here from Vietnam.

RW: What do you think your best experience is living in the United States?

TD: The safety, you don’t fear. You have no fear, you don’t have a fear of the police. Just follow the law and you’re okay. That’s not the case in Vietnam so that’s probably the best thing about America is that just don’t mess around and you’d be fine.

RW: What about personally, like what was your favorite experience in the United States?

TD: Favorite experience? Hands down travel. I’ve seen more of the United States than I’ve seen of Vietnam. I don’t know much, I mean when I went back to Vietnam the three times, sure I travelled to different areas but I just go to those areas and of course I have to go with the locals. Here for me to go anywhere I can just go by myself, I just hop in a car and go. So that’s again, the freedom to do what you wanna do. That’s the most important thing.

RW: Is that why you traveled 45 states?

TD: Absolutely, yes yes. There’s a few more states I wanna knock out, but my wife’s like, “I don’t wanna get in a car with you anymore, I’m tired of driving.”

RW: Is there anything you would like to say to future generations?

TD: Yes, the only thing I say is do whatever it is that makes you happy and make sure that it makes you happy. Whatever it is that you wanna do in life just make sure you are happy with that decision. And become compassionate about what you do. Have compassion for others, have compassion to yourself too. And that’s you don’t have to be a lawyer, you don’t have to be a doctor, you don’t have to be an engineer to be successful. You just have to be happy with your decision, with yourself. And with that decision I think that’s good enough to get through life. Cause it doesn’t matter how long you live, now I just heard that you can live over 100 easily and say you live 200 years, it’s still a short period of time so so just enjoy every moment of it.

RW: Is that the same message you have your kids?

TD: Yes, absolutely you bet. Every day I ask them. “Are you guys happy, are you happy are you happy? If you’re not happy tell me why and that’s it.”

--End of Transcript--