Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: NGUYEN KHAI LY
Interviewer: Alex Nguyen
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AN: This is Saturday, May 16th, 2015. This is Alex Nguyen with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project and I am interviewing Mr. Nguyen Ly. We are at Langson Library in Irvine, California. Can you please state your name and name and your date of birth?


AN: Your parents, how old were they when they had you?

NKL: I think my dad was probably 37 and my mom is 10 years younger so she is 27 at the time.

AN: Did you grow up in Saigon?

NKL: Yes.

AN: Your whole life or at least until you left?

NKL: Yes, so I was born there and we left late 1978.

AN: What was it like growing up there? What were some of your childhood memories?

NKL: My parents mostly had tutors and had us taught at home, I think. I do remember going to public school for a couple years. But for the most part we were kind of sheltered I think.

AN: What did your parents do for their occupations?

NKL: My dad was a tailor, so he made suits and stuff for mostly, he said he mostly made it for foreigners, like the French who were there and maybe some Americans. My mom just stayed at home and I think before she got married she worked at a factory.

AN: Do you have any siblings?

NKL: Yes, I have two brothers and one sister. I am the second oldest. My brother is the youngest, little brother, and my sister is third.

AN: Did you hold any jobs while you were in Vietnam? You were probably too young.

NKL: Yes I was too young. When we were kids my parents, one of the things that they did was have us each learn some sort of, I guess you can consider it, art. So my oldest brother took violin lessons for a couple years. My sister took ballet. My youngest brother, I don’t think he did anything. I took drawing classes and painting classes when I was a kid.
AN: Did you have any interactions with the soldiers in Vietnam? Either American or Vietnamese.
NKL: That I don’t recall. I don’t remember that.
AN: Do you know anything special about your name or your last name or your family’s names?
NKL: My parents came from China. My dad came to – went to Vietnam when, I think he was about 10 years old. I think it was when the Japanese invaded China. His family and him – and he left and then they went to Cambodia and lived there for a while and later on moved to Vietnam. My mom came with her family when she was just a few months old. I think they went directly to Vietnam. So my parents grew up there. My dad said at the age of 12 he had to go pretty much on his own to make a living to support the family. So he kind of apprenticed with a tailor and he had to mostly did all the cooking and all the cleaning, everything. All that kind of stuff as payment I guess for learning the craft. So he lived there with the teacher and his family for several years and then he moved on and started his own business.
AN: Do you know what region of China your parents were from?
NKL: I think they were from Canton.
AN: Growing up in Vietnam did you speak Vietnamese? Did you speak Mandarin, Cantonese?
NKL: We spoke mostly Cantonese at home. I did remember knowing how to read Chinese but I think as we – as I got older it just slowly just - I guess the language disappeared. I still speak a little Cantonese to my parents but it has a heavy accent I guess and my vocabulary isn’t very – strong I guess anymore.
AN: Did you learn any other languages besides Vietnamese while you were in school there?
NKL: No. I – I was able to speak a little bit of Vietnamese and I can understand Vietnamese but that also has gone away.
AN: So let’s talk about how you got from Vietnam to the U.S. How did that happen?
NKL: What I remember is my parents didn’t tell us that we were – I remember they told us that we were leaving the house. So as a kid I felt some – I can sense the anxiety I guess. They were packing all that stuff. I remember my – an aunt took my on a bicycle to one of my cousin’s house or my uncle’s house and I think we all went on some sort of car, truck, or something, some sort of van. My family: my parents, my siblings, and my grandmother, went with my mom’s sister and her family which had – let’s see – I think there were 8 people. So we went to the south - to a city that was in the countryside. We stayed there for a few a few days and then we went to the
ocean. It was at night. That was when we got on a boat. Then I remember seeing soldiers there. So it was – I guess my parents told me that it was illegal but not really also because they paid off – they were able to pay some money and people were allowed to leave I think. So we went on a boat that had about 200 people and then we were on the boat for about 3 days.

AN: So while you lived in Vietnam, who lived in your house?

NKL: In Vietnam, my grandmother, my parents, my siblings, and my dad’s two younger brothers and their family. It was – pretty much everyone lived together. It was like two stories I think. Yeah I think mostly the whole family stayed together. My mom’s mother was my grandmother from my mother’s side lived pretty close and we were often over there - I was playing with my cousins over there too for quite a bit.

AN: So you all went on the boat together. Your entire family.

NKL: Mmhmm

AN: And then once you left the shore what was that like? What happened afterwards?

NKL: It was I think very early in the morning maybe like 4 AM I’m guessing. Yeah. I remember – you know when you’re a kid you see things that look much bigger than it is. So I remember standing on the top of the boat looking down and the distance was very far. So – and then I saw my mom down there telling me to jump off the boat in the water I guess – so jumped on there and we were in the water and walked towards the beach I guess. The boat landed on an island that was –

AN: There were no people there

NKL: Yeah. So we were there and then we saw soldiers. It was in Malaysia, so that’s where we landed. There were soldiers that came and then they gave us some like water and some sort of food, dry food or whatever. And we were on the island for about a week and then we were transferred over to another island where the refuges were kept. These set up camps or whatever.

AN: Do you know how long you were in the boat?

NKL: 3 days. I remember going to the top of the boat just one time. Maybe to use the restroom or something. I remember there was a storm. But – yeah I think we were just sitting like two aisles and people against the side and one wall and the other wall of the boat. So that was it yeah all I can remember.

AN: You didn’t encounter any pirates? I - you said there was a storm but there weren’t anything bad other than the storm?
NKL: No, we heard a lot of stories about pirates and stuff on the island.
AN: And so once you got to the camp, how long did you stay there and what was it sort of like?
NKL: We stayed there for about a year. The camp I remember eating canned food. All meals 3 times a day. It’s either beans, sardines, or chicken. Canned chicken, canned sardines, and canned beans. There were people that grew vegetables. So I guess it’s like a barter system so you exchange things for what they grow. There were other things that came from Malaysia like instant noodles in a bag or Coca-Cola or probably some candies and stuff that you can exchange if you had jewelry and stuff like that you can change for. People fished and I think twice a year they give you fresh meat. So you had to wait in lines and they give you rations. You know rice and some like a piece of meat for the family which isn’t much but you get a piece of meat twice a year. People dug wells and you went to the restroom in a little pit. But most I remember, at least my family. We would use the restroom; I mean go to the restroom up on a hill. So after dinner or whatever people got a little toilet paper and would walk up this hill and find a place and that’s how they went to the restroom. The homes were made of just these posts with like a plastic tarp I guess wrapped on top – But even on these islands there were people that had – maybe they brought out some – from Vietnam some gold or whatever so they were able to build some homes that were a little bit better that had metal sheets on the top. I did remember one night the plastic from our roof blew off during a storm and then we slept on I think these like bamboo –
AN: Like mats?
NKL: Yeah mats. They were raised on poles I guess. The whole family lived in the same place, structure.
AN: Do you remember if your parents brought like much gold or anything to sort of trade with or barter with?
NKL: Yeah we were able to – I mean I remember there were able to get you know vegetables once and a while. Fresh vegetables. I think they attempted to fish but wasn’t very successful. I remember they were able to buy a chunk of very fatty fish that they cooked and then we had it for a few days.
AN: Do you remember, sorry sort of to back track, do you remember what it was like sort of after the Fall of Saigon?
NK: Yes. I remember there were curfews and then I remember a lot of talk about the changing of the money like the bills. I remember watching a lot of propaganda on the TVs so a lot of war movies and stuff like that. A lot of like hearing from my parents talk about people going to – being reeducated going to camps and stuff you know to be reeducated. I remember hearing kids even when they play, they make up songs about these things: changing of money and going to these places and yeah it was strange.

AN: Did your parents support the communists? Did they care what was really happening?

NK: I think they were afraid. My dad was briefly in the South Vietnamese Army. But he was I guess he was retired – I guess he was too old at the time already. So he didn’t have to stay in there too long. But they all had – I mean they were set up with like a business already so they were afraid of the change that was coming. From what my dad said, getting away from war in China and going to Vietnam and having to experience that kind of the same war and violence and all that stuff was pretty hard.

AN: SO your entire childhood was sort of war until you went to the camp right? The refugee camp. For most of your childhood.

NK: Yeah that was the peak of the Vietnam War I think. About ‘69 to the end.

AN: So how did you get from the refugee camp to the US?

NK: So we went – I really don’t know how it worked. I think there was a sponsor. So I think – my dad’s, one of his brothers left before us, left Vietnam. They did the same journey and then arrived in the United States about a half a year or maybe a year before us. And I think there was some sort of sponsorship that happened. On the island you hear these numbers and names being broadcast constantly. Like you know maybe every hour or so. You hear the boat number and the family name and then that’s when you know that you are leaving. But the rest of the time they would play these music, music from Vietnam and things like that on these speakers. I think it was part sponsor by my relatives and part had to do with some sort of church that was here.

AN: So once you got to the U.S. where did you go?

NK: We landed – so when we left Malaysia, we went to the big island in Malaysia, one of the big cities. We stayed there for maybe about 2 weeks and then they check your- you know – they did a physical on you and then we went on a plane and then landed in San Francisco. When we got off the plane there was a group of people that met us, American, and they gave us a jacket I
guess and then we were put in a hotel room overnight and then the next day we flew to Los Angeles.

AN: What was that plane ride like? What you were about 10 years old? What was that like flying all the way from Malaysia to San Francisco?

NKL: Yes

AN: Was it hard?

NKL: No I think we were excited to leave. In the – when we left the island and went to the capital city – one of the cities in Malaysia. That camp even that camp had more food I guess so it got a little better and by the time we got on the plane we were excited at least I was about leaving the island and going to – I guess we heard a lot about America and stuff like that.

AN: So once you came to Los Angeles where did you, did you get settled and where?

NKL: Yes so our family stayed with my uncle’s family for – they had an – they lived in an apartment so we stayed there probably for a couple weeks and then we were able to – my parents found an apartment and we were able to move out. I think it was with some sort of government assistance. So the – when we got to Los Angeles we lived in – my uncle was in Alhambra.

AN: Did you parents – what did your parents do for a source of income right away? Did your dad go back to being a tailor or did they do something else?

NKL: They did what most immigrants from Vietnam did at the time. They took pieces of – parts of clothing I guess from the factories and they sewed these parts and then you would get I don’t know maybe 10 cents a part or whatever. So I remember them sewing – whatever the sewing machine. Both my parents. Late into the night and early into the morning whatever.

AN: So they did this work at home?

NKL: Yes

AN: And then you went to school?

NKL: Yes

AN: How was that?

NKL: I started school pretty soon after we got here. So I think we got – we came to the – we got here late 1979 and I started school probably in January 1980. And I started 4th grade. First day of school - yeah I remember – so they – the class had started and so they brought me into the classroom and then there was a boy that came up and just kissed my cheek. (giggles) And the rest of the class just laughed. And so that’s what I remember. And then at the lunchtime I
remember eating – to me it reminded me of Vietnamese noodles but it was actually spaghetti. So when I got home I told my mom that we had the Vietnamese noodles for lunch. But – and then I made friends pretty quickly. There weren’t that many people from Vietnam at the time over here. So there were very few Asians. I mean even – I remember there were maybe a couple Chinese and a couple Vietnamese kids at the time. Yeah and I started school but it was – I would have friends but I would be – from 4th grade until 8th grade I didn’t speak to my friends at all. Even when I started to pick up the language and understand and I was able to speak at home and you know I would speak English at home but in school I was really – yeah I had friends but I had this anxiety about – about speaking I guess in English. So I would only speak when a teacher called on me and that was it.

AN: Did you have to take ESL [English as a Second Language] classes?
NKL: Yes I took ESL classes until probably 5th grade I think. I was held back actually for a year. So I guess because I had started school middle of the school term but that didn’t happen to my siblings. They were allowed to move forward I guess. Maybe because I didn’t talk or whatever.

AN: And so after 8th grade and then you went to high school. What was that like? So you’ve lived in the U.S. for most of your life. What has that been like?
NKL: When – so from 4th grade to 6th grade it was one school. It was elementary school. After 6th grade we moved to – so from 4th grade to 6th grade we lived in San Gabriel. From – and then after graduation, my graduation, we moved to Alhambra and that’s – we lived there from when I was 7th grade, junior high that’s 7th and 8th grade, until I graduated high school. From 7th to 8th grade I started seeing more students who are more like myself. A lot of kids from Vietnam. Some kids from Malaysia, I remember even. Kids from Hong Kong and stuff like that. So there were more Asians in – from 7th grade and 8th grade but still I didn’t talk but I had friends. And then when I started high school we moved again. No actually it was a different high school. It was a different group of friends. That was when you know I decided to open up or whatever. High school was just normal. There were a lot of Asians. I would say probably 40% Asian at the time already. Right now it is probably 60 or 70% over there.

AN: What kind of activities did you do in school or after school? Like sports or arts.
NKL: I didn’t do any art at all. In high school the only thing that was close to art was a drafting class or a – a basic drawing class which was very boring I remember. I played a lot of basketball at the time. I was pretty good at it and I tried out for the team but didn’t make the team. But we
played basketball like everyday after school. Hung out with my friends and my parents work all
day. So by the time I got to high school my parents, my dad and his dad, his siblings I guess got
together and opened up. They all got money together and opened up a jewelry store in Alhambra.
So my parents worked there every day and so – we were just left by ourselves mostly until our
parents came home.
AN: Did you – you never worked at the store or never just sat there after school?
NKL: Once and a while I would go over there. They – my uncle did try one summer try to teach
my oldest brother and myself – a few things about how to put a ring together and things like that.
But we didn’t – we weren’t interested I guess. But I at the time, the schools, the government had
these for low income families where during the summer the kids can work at the school and get
some money from that. So I worked for – my freshman year I worked in an office at school. Like
doing filing and all that stuff, typing. The next summer I worked at a park in Alhambra as a
recreational aid I guess. I watched over kids who were in day camp –
AN: How did you celebrate holidays like birthdays, or anniversaries, or Lunar New Year? How
did that – how did you do it in the U.S. compared to Vietnam?
NKL: I think we kept a lot of the traditions. Birthdays – the adults’ birthdays – I remember each
– my parents’ birthdays they would invite the whole family including my relatives. So they
would either celebrate at home with a big meal and – or eventually when they had a little bit
more money we would go to a restaurant and all have a couple of tables there. So one table
would be all adults and then there would be a table that was for the kids. We did that for
probably up until my 20s, that was the tradition. The new years – at the beginning we still kept
the traditions with the whole chicken. In my family when there’s a holiday, my mom would
make a boiled chicken and there has to be a chunk of roast pork or whatever. That’s the two
things that they – she had. My mom is Buddhist and we had the ancestor worship tradition too.
So it was a combination of Buddhist and ancestor worship combined I guess. So she had an altar
set up at home with incense and stuff like that.
AN: What about your dad? Was he religious at all?
NKL: He is – I guess he – he’s not very religious but I guess he kind of follows what my mom
practiced. My mom converted us kids to Buddhism in Vietnam. We went to a temple and did
some sort of ceremony and we were Buddhist I guess. So when she came over here I remember
every morning she would read the – this Buddhist text and she would sit there and read for an
hour. Kind of chant out loud and she still does it today. But I mean for myself, as I grew older I
grew out of that religion I guess. I mean I still – when there’s a holiday and we have to go to the
cemetery and visit where my grandparents are buried I still do the incense and all the rituals just
to be – just for my mom but I’m no longer – I’m not a religious person anymore.
AN: So after leaving Vietnam did you bring anything with you that your family still has today?
Like your mom’s book or maybe a picture or something.
NKL: We took very few things, mostly just clothing. I remember having a lot of drawings that I
left behind and I don’t think my parents brought over anything except for a few jewelry and a
few items and things like that. Years later when an aunt of mine – of our family came over from
Vietnam she brought a whole package of photos from Vietnam that was left behind.
AN: So after high school did you go to college? What did you do?
NKL: Yes, I went to college. I went to Cal Poly Pomona. I went in as a civil engineering major
the only was originally I applied to – as an architecture major. I didn’t get accepted so I changed
to civil engineering and so got in as that. I took a year I guess of civil engineering classes and
decided that it wasn’t for me so at the end of the first year I took an art class. I hadn’t drawn or
did anything like that since high school or even before. So that kind of got me interested in
things that are related to art. It was an introduction to design class. So the second year I switched
over to graphic design. But in graphic design the classes didn’t interest me either so I started
taking more fine arts classes. Got into drawing, painting classes and that’s when I realized that’s
what I wanted to do.
AN: And so after college did you immediately go into art or did you get your MFA [Masters of
Fine Arts]?
NKL: No so I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree and the summer I graduated my painting
teacher got a few of my classmates and myself a residency in Italy with a group of students from
England. So we all met – got together in this small town outside of Rome about maybe 50 miles
from Rome and we lived there. We had this building – pretty large building that was given to us
to stay for 3 weeks. And we were commissioned to a mural over there – a fresco. It started at
around 20 and people came and went. There was a time when we had 40 people, students and
teachers, staying and working there. So during the day we would take trips to other cities to look
at art and do preparatory sketches for this mural. So that was I guess one of the main experiences
in my life.
AN: How did your parents and family feel about you going to Italy or just art in general?
NKL: I think my parents prefer that I went into – would’ve gone into a different profession I guess; something that is more practical. But in general they were supportive I guess. So my parents did pay for my trip to Italy, the plane ticket and some spending money. When we got there we did have to pay to stay there, to stay in this town but we had to cook our own food and things like that. So after I came back from Europe, I started working for my parents. So my dad after working in the jewelry business for a while he – him and my uncle, they opened up a restaurant. So I worked there for about 3 years full time, about 1995 until ’98.
AN: And so how long were you in Italy for?
NKL: I was there for 2 months.
AN: 2 months?
NKL: Yeah so we stayed there and did our mural and then a couple of my friends and myself we just took the train and went to several other cities in Italy and then I – the last week or so we went to Germany and stayed there for a week and then came back home.
AN: And so what was it like working for your dad and your family?
NKL: It was probably the hardest work I’ve ever done. Yeah working in a restaurant 7 days a week, the days were pretty long. So I worked probably 8 hours a day. My parents probably worked you know probably 12, 13 hours a day. We had – we didn’t hire very many people so I did everything from being a cashier, a busboy, a – bring the food out, a waiter, everything pretty much except cooking.
AN: So did they own the jewelry store and the restaurant at the same time?
NKL: Yes so eventually my dad – I guess split, left his share of the jewelry store and then he – they had got together and opened the restaurant and eventually they split it. My parents owned the restaurant at the end.
AN: And what kind of food did they serve?
NKL: It was Vietnamese food and also Chinese food that was – the recipes were from Vietnam. The food that the Chinese – the ethnic Chinese cooked over there. So a lot of noodles and rice dishes.
AN: Was it a lot of food that you had grown up eating and sort of that was made at home or was it more Americanized?
NKL: I think it wasn’t Americanized. Our customers were actually all – mostly people who came from Vietnam. Very rarely we see an American or even other Asians eat there. But they – the business grew and did really well.

AN: So after working at the restaurant what did you do?

NKL: So when my parents sold the restaurant and decided to retire, I went back to graduate school and I started graduate school fall of 1998. I went to Cal State Fullerton and started out as a painting and drawing major. After a year I dropped out and – because it wasn’t working for me. So I took a break and then eventually went back and went into printmaking and that’s what my degree is, in printmaking.

AN: So after grad school did you start your own artwork or what did you really do?

NKL: My first year at grad school I - during the summer I got a job at a library in Covina. So I – that was my – how I made a living. It was a part time job at the time. It was like 30 hours, 35 hours, close to 40. And I’ve been at that job since. I’m still working there. After grad school, I started to find ways to keep working and be motivated because once you’re out of school it’s very tough. I think most people don’t end up doing - making art after they leave school. So I enter competitions. I looked for places to show and then slowly I met people and then I was able to show more and more even though I don’t make money for it. But I as I show more I was able to get a teaching job part time. So right now I’m working at the library and I’m teaching at the Irvine Fine Arts Center. Pretty soon I’ll be teaching in San Pedro at the Angel’s Gate Cultural Center teaching printmaking.

AN: So when you compete what sort of influences your artwork? Is it Vietnam or your experiences here? What sort of influences it?

NKL: I think childhood is a – I mean the memory of it is a strong – I don’t think it will ever go away in my heart. It’s not – I guess it’s not literal. You know it’s – there’s feeling – it’s hard to describe. That childhood part is very much a big part of it. And then you know experiences from that point on and everything I see around me you know what’s going on in the world and things like that. All of these things constantly influence me. Other people’s work I guess do that too.

AN: And what kind of media do you use? Do you paint or draw or make things?

NKL: I’m for the most part a print maker. I print using the traditional methods and processes which is what a printing press done by hand, hand cranked and hand inked plates. So the traditional processes are intaglio and relief. Relief being wood cuts where a plate is made with a
piece of wood and carved in there and ink is rolled on top. The plate is set on a printing press and paper set on top and printed. Intaglio is – was traditionally done with zinc and copper plates and etched with acid but you know these days I’m constantly experimenting with all kinds of ways of printing.

AN: Are your siblings artistic in any way?
NKL: No they’re not. I think I’m the only one in the family that has any interest in the arts. When we were kids after we came over here my parents took my siblings and myself to a community center and we all took drawing classes there but they didn’t have any interest. At the time I was good at it but it wasn’t a very interesting class. It was very traditional and the teacher wasn’t very inspirational. I got back into it but my siblings – it wasn’t their things.

AN: So your parents emphasized art in Vietnam but here did they emphasize studying and getting a job?
NKL: Yes – yeah getting a job, making a living, that was important.

AN: Did you ever encounter any racism or discrimination growing up?
NKL: Yes at the beginning, the first few years. People would call you names and stuff like that. But I think once – gradually it got less and less because you know more and more people from other places are – beginning to be in the schools and people are used to seeing other ethnicities and other people from different cultures around. Yeah at the beginning but not so much after a while.

AN: Do you self identify more as Vietnamese, or Chinese, or a combination of those two?
NKL: I think when I was younger because my – because at home we spoke Cantonese and then we would watch these movies from Hong Kong and stuff like that. I identified mostly as being Chinese I think. But as I grew older I realized that I mean Vietnam was the only other country I had ever been to that I had ever lived in. For me now it’s both – it’s both Chinese and Vietnamese and American I guess. Yeah it’s all mixed up.

AN: Do you have any strong emotional ties to Vietnam? So like if there’s some anti-communist rally do you identify with those people?
NKL: I think – I don’t know it’s hard to – because I think the communists had to do what they had to do. It was more of getting rid of the occupation you know, the Americans. It was more about bringing the two parts of the country together. So I don’t really have any anger towards communist Vietnam I think. I don’t really have a side. If there’s a wrong it’s the French and the
Americans. There was a war that wasn’t necessary. About 3 million Vietnamese died and about 50 thousand Americans.

AN: Do you have any sort of nostalgia for Vietnam as a country?
NKL: No I mean I haven’t been back since I left. My parents have but I haven’t. That’s a place I would eventually go back to. I think there are things that are not resolved you know within my self and as I go back so – I mean all those years of war we ended up at the same point you know. Vietnam is a – they say it’s communist but it’s pretty much capitalistic system. So you know what good was it for?
AN: Do you have kids?
NKL: No I don’t have kids.
AN: Well if you did have kids how would you tell them or teach them to self identify as? Would you teach them about their Chinese heritage, their Vietnamese heritage?
NKL: Yeah I mean my wife and I decided not to have kids so it’s – as I said before I consider myself all pretty much mixed now. It’s – you know it’s not like – at times I don’t feel like I belong to one group or the other. It’s hard to say but all those things that I experienced would be taught to my children if I had kids.
AN: Are you a citizen? Were you granted citizenship when you got here as like a refugee status?
NKL: No I got my citizenship when I was like 21 I think.
AN: You had to take the test and everything.
NKL: Yes – so my parents got my citizenship first and they took the test and then a few years later I did.
AN: What is it important for you to get your citizenship or was it just something you did to make things easier here?
NKL: At the time it seemed important but no so much anymore. My parents, my siblings they all changed their names to English names. I did so too at the time and I used an English name for a couple years and then I started going back to my original name and then I had it changed back.
AN: What English name did you go by?
NKL: It was Charles because I – in high school I took a French class and we each had to pick a French name. So that was the name I picked and that was the name I used when I got my citizenship. When you got that they ask if you wanted to change your name. So I changed that but I didn’t stick with it very long.
AN: So your original name is more important to you.
NKL: Yes.

AN: And your wife how did you meet her and how did you guys sort of get married?
NKL: In college, in graduate school, she was an undergrad at the time. She is from Japan. At the time she was a foreign student at the time. We met in a print making class. My wife was studying graphic design so that’s how we met. We dated for about a year and then we got married.

AN: Did your parents sort of approve? Did they want a Chinese Vietnamese girl?
NKL: No I don’t think they mind. I mean I think they were happy I had a – I was able to find you know a person to be with. Because there were many years when I was pretty much like a I guess you could say a loner. So yeah there were good with it.

AN: Are you sort of involved in either the Vietnamese community in Southern California or the Chinese community or the Ethnic Chinese community?
NKL: I am somewhat involved with the Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association in Santa Ana. I have shown there a few times and I was a guest curator for one of the shows about a year ago. When I was in – at Cal Poly in a painting class I met Ann Phong. I think she was one of the people I looked up to when I first started painting. At the time she was a senior and I was a second year college student. So when she graduated she went to Cal State Fullerton and years later I heard that she went there so I decided to go there and Ann is one of the members of VAALA I think. So from time to time she would ask me to be in these shows so that’s how I become involved the last few years.

AN: Do you still see your family often and like celebrate holidays and stuff with them?
NKL: It’s becoming less and less. Even though I don’t live that far from my parents’ house. I see my parents once a week. My siblings I see less than that probably once a month. We only get together during New Years and my parents’ birthdays or Mother’s Day, Father’s Day. Yeah it’s not so much anymore. But yeah I do visit my parents weekly. Maybe once or twice a week.

AN: Sort of going back, was there at lot of like culture shock and would it seem I guess silly to you now since you got to the U.S.?
NKL: There was for me I mean that’s why I think I stopped speaking for so long. It was in a way I was able to adapt to part of this new culture. But there was part of me that wasn’t able to. So there was always a part of me that felt like I did not belong until much later, until I got much older. So I don’t think of it as being silly or anything. I think actually many kids who had the
same experience I did probably felt the same way. It was hard to – I mean for me it was like a pretty strong – there’s a line – you’re here one day and the next day you’re a different – it was just hard to. I mean it’s still hard to figure out how that is – how to resolve that part.

AN: Do you sort or live or interact with the Little Saigon area or are you more in the 626 area?

NKL: I live in Whittier so I – yeah I don’t. The only times I come to Orange County is to teach in Irvine. But yeah I don’t really go to Little Saigon or unless I’m meeting a friend there. I don’t really go to many Vietnamese restaurants in San Gabriel or Alhambra where there are a lot of Vietnamese Americans. Right now I’m – because of the friends I have met who are from pretty much all over the place – I think that kind of - I don’t know – that part of the cultural identity I guess it’s even more – it gets even more blurry I guess. Right now I’m working with a group that is – that has a lot of members who are Latino. I guess I’m slowly assimilating that part of – that culture too. My wife is Japanese so I have adopted some of the – I wouldn’t say traditions or whatever but at least the food and you know maybe a little of how the Japanese see things. Yeah I guess. Sorry

AN: It’s ok. So how did you get involved with the Latino group?

NKL: The group is called Los De Abajo. They – the group has been around for 10 years. It had originally started in East LA [Los Angeles] at the Self Help Graphics facility I guess. Self Help Graphics is – was originally based in East LA [Los Angeles]. It was set up to be a printmaking and art, fine arts, - some sort of community center for the local community. That’s how I got involved with the group. I had started to go to Self Help Graphics in the mid-90s even when I worked at my parents’ restaurant. Between undergrad and graduate school I would take life drawing sessions at Self Help Graphics once a week just to you know I guess as a way to stay connected to the arts. So I took classes there. Eventually I met a person that started the group, Poli Marichal. I took a class with her and she really liked my work and so a year later she and the group invited me to join them. So I’ve been with the group since 2011.

AN: What do the group do mainly?

NKL: We do collaborations. We are basically a print making collective. We make prints and collaborate on projects and we come up with the theme. The theme is usually something that’s happening, that’s current. Right now we are working on a show that deals with water. So about the drought and things like that. So we have these projects where we all work on single pieces of art and we also do our own things, make our own work that relates to the same theme.
AN: So would you say you use your art for maybe activism, like you talked about the drought, just whatever the subject matter is?

NKL: I know there are – in our group they are very political and a few have been activists in the community. But for myself it’s more – I make work that relates to the theme but it’s more personal. So I tend not to like things that are up front like with slogans or things like that. I like things that are more subtle that can be much – can be – can have the same meaning but can be more subtle and have a deeper effect.

AN: Have you ever done any work that’s been about your experience coming from Vietnam or something?

NKL: For my graduate show, I did things that dealt with childhood. So again it’s not – it’s a very abstract – it’s not literal I guess. It’s not specifically about coming here. It’s about being at that time and also what happened since. In a way I guess it does deal with Vietnam and war and things like that but in a more subtle way I guess.

AN: And so what would you say to somebody who grew up ethnic Chinese as a child now? How would you tell them about your experiences? What would you say to them?

NKL: Ethnic Chinese in Vietnam or over here?

AN: In Vietnam, or over here. It doesn’t matter. What kind of message would you leave for them?

NKL: I guess it’s okay to be – to accept different cultures. You can be, you can identify with your parents – where your parents are from and also identify with where you were born. So I mean if I think about it, I’ve never been to China. I don’t know how China is. I can read about China but the only part I know for sure is Vietnam. So I guess accept both or if you have 3 cultures accept them all.

AN: Would you want to go back to China and explore that side of you?

NKL: Eventually yeah, I think that’s important too but for me I think it’s more important to go back to Vietnam first.

AN: What would you do if you went back today?

NKL: I think I would go back to the old house where I was born or where I lived. Because a lot of the memories I have when I was a kid was very fragmented. Sometimes I don’t know if I dreamt it or if it was real. Maybe going back would clarify it. I don’t know.

AN: Do you have trouble remembering what it was like back in Vietnam now?
NKL: It - once and a while it would – I remember like bits of things but not one – not something that is continuous I guess. I think I left – when we got here as a way to adapt I maybe pushed that part of myself, those memories behind. Maybe left it at the back of my mind. I don’t know if it will ever come back or not. Maybe when I go back it might.

AN: Do you have any last stories or memories you would like to share or say?

NKL: Remember being a – when I was a kid in Vietnam I was very clumsy I used to fall all the time. There was a time when my aunt had – I was sitting in the bike on the back seat and I stuck my foot into the bicycle wheel and it tore the skin off the top of my foot. Yeah those are things I just- getting these minor injuries and stuff. I remember eating these not the pineapple – there used to be like a core. They would take the core of the pineapple and sprinkle salt and chili peppers and those things and I thought it was delicious at the time. It’s the stuff that I still eat. Yeah those are the things, small things, I remember.

AN: Anything else?

NKL: No.

AN: Ok thank you so much.

NKL: Ok.

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