

**Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine**

Narrator: HIEU NHU NGUYEN

Interviewer: Kelley Thu Ho

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(00:00)

KH: This is Kelley Ho with VietStories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC [University of California] Irvine. Today is February 15th, 2019. I will be interviewing Hieu Nguyen at 102 Cafe in Garden Grove, California. Hi Hieu (laughs).

HN: Hello.

(00:19)

KH: Hi. Can we start by saying your name, your age, and where you currently live?

HN: Uh, Hieu Nguyen. I'm 34. And I currently live in Garden Grove, California.

(00:31)

KH: And can you tell me a little bit about what you do now?

HN: Ah so professionally I'm a licensed clinical social worker and I work for APAIT which stands for Asian Pacific AIDS [acquired immunodeficiency syndrome] Intervention Team. Um, and I also have a small private practice uh seeing patient within the LGBTIQ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer] community and I also run my nonprofit Viet Rainbow of Orange County.

(01:01)

KH: Amazing. Can we start about um- Let's start with your family. Uh, can you tell me about your family?

HN: So I grow up-I'm one of seven children one of eight children so I'm the eighth person. Yeah, so I have two younger sister, four older sisters, and an older brother so we all grew up in Hue, Vietnam. Up until the age of seven for me and uh that's when we got word `that we were- uh that we would be able to go to America so we went to Saigon to live for about six months to process the paperwork it's through the reunification program um and then I- we were stayed in the Philippines for about eight to nine months and um that's when I learned how to speak English and in March two thou- March 1993 that's when we came to America through the u-reunification uh program .

KH: Mm, okay-

HN: Um, and I've lived here in Garden Grove ever since 1993. Um, yeah. So family of eight and then mom and dad so ten of us total.

KH: Wow.

HN: Mhm.

(02:33)

KH: And you said you were the youngest?

HN: I had two younger sisters.

KH: Oh, two younger sisters.

HN: Mhm.

(02:38)

KH: Okay. So you're number...seven.

HN: Seven. Number Six.

KH: Six.

HN: Yeah.

(02:44)

KH: Okay. Um, can you tell me about life living with ten- nine people? (laughs)

HN: Yeah so I think. Um, it's pretty- pretty- I don't remember much when I was in Vietnam how that was like-

KH: Mhm.

HN: I just remember my aunt taking care of me quite a bit and then my oldest sister taking care of me because my parents would travel for work so I don't remember a lot but what I do remember a lot of fond memories um and I think in- I didn't realize how big of a family we were or how little we had until we were in the Philippines where we would stay in sort of a one-bedroom- you know four wall room with all ten of us um and- but even then I remember having a lot of fun. A lot of fond memories in terms of you know learning English, making new friends and stuff when we were in the Philippines um and then also sort of that realization that we didn't have a lot-

KH: Mm.

HN: um uh transitioned to when we came here to America um we stayed in a uh uh two-bedroom apartment right down the street from where I live now um and uh you know one of the bedroom was used for like sewing machines cause we would do like make clothing for Forever 21 and Macy's back back then uh in in that um in one of the room and so we had one room for the ten of us right? Um but you know I [pause] we learned how to be I can say that the reason why I'm so close to my siblings now and how we we um how close we are and how much we take care of each other now is because of that experience right? Um I think we learned a lot about hard work.

We learned a lot about dedication and we learned a lot about um kind of what it means to to really work and support each other cause uh we would you know we would sew you know after school after we did our homework or even while we were doing our homework we were we would be sewing or [accidentally drops phone] we would be doing something right? And cause we weren't making a lot of money back then and so we would just support each other we would do a lot of stuff together and I remember like there were nights when we would stay up until like three-four A.M. in the morning just to fix things because we made a mistake or because they wanted something more on their their items right? And so yeah I think that brought us a lot closer to together um but it also taught me a lot about hard work and what it means to um to create a dream.

KH: Mmmm.

HN: So um yeah.

(06:11)

KH: And what does that dream mean for you?

HN: You know I think a lot of our dreams start from our parents like a lot of our parents or my parents that um I know my parents came to America to have that American dream right?

KH: Mhm.

HN: Um the freedom the um opportunities for their children um and so I think a lot of- I think for my my dream definitely started from that and I think a lot of you know people I talked to their dream started from that.

KH: Mm.

HN: You know and um so for me my creating the path for my dream is is really sort of doing the things that I love maybe not the things that my parent love but like doing the things that I love and doing community work that sort of uh exemplify what it means to have freedom and what it means to um live in this space democratic space right that they don't have um so my dream I think is part of theirs but also a lot of me as well.

KH: Mm.

HN: Right? So.

KH: That's beautiful. (laughs)

(07:42)

So when [pause] when you're here in Garden Grove. Can you tell me about growing up like going to school here for example?

HN: Yeah. So I think like all- like a lot of Vietnamese American Vietnamese who first come here in the 1990s or like early 80s and stuff we kind of found like Orange County to be the Mecca right?

KH: Mhm.

HN: To be sort of that home away from home safe space. And so. I think because we were in this space I didn't have a lot of there was a lot of other Vietnamese people a lot of Vietnamese kids around the neighborhood and so even though it was so far away like it's so different and so far from Vietnam there's still that that I guess that piece of home when you see people that resemble you that you know are still are trying to learn English are doing this thing the same things that you're trying to do and so I remember working walking in the first day of school uh I think that first summer like I had the chicken pox and that first summer I also was really because I had the

chicken pox I like was like staying inside a lot and really learn trying to learn how to speak English

KH: Mhm.

HN: Uh and that first day of school, I was put in the ESL class right? And there were all Vietnamese kids and I remember you know the teacher introducing me and they were clapping and what not and yeah I think it was the instant um um connection with people because they look like you right? Uh and they speak your language uh and even as we're all trying to learn a different language you know there's there's there's I think that gives you a sense of safety um so that that was what I remember and um yeah walk home together with friends and you know cause my house was like right down- it's like right down the street from the school-

KH: Mm.

HN: Yeah so fond memories.

(10:00)

KH: And what about uhm what brought you to UCI?

HN: Yeah, I think so- I had gotten into- so back then there was a program that give you the top ten percent of your class, you can choose to go to- you're guaranteed to go to a university, right? You just don't know which university. But you're guaranteed to go to a university. I applied to four school like UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles). UC Santa Barbara, UCSD (University of California, San Diego), and UC Irvine. I got into three except for UCLA. Was really about to go to UCSD and then I think I chickened out. Like I had never been away from home. I grew up in a very big family. We were all close. And I was the first person to get into a university, a four year college. Yet, I think I just chickened out the last minute so I withdrew.

Like I had accepted to go to UCSD. My friends- my best friend and I at the time plan to room together and everything and then I chickened out last minute and I said, "Oh, I'll go to UC Irvine" and I was a commuter-

KH: Mm.

HN: So that was the reason that I ended up in UC Irvine, you know?

(11:26)

KH: Yeah. And what did you study in?

HN: I study psychology.

KH: Okay.

HN: Yeah, study psychology in- at UC Irvine. And you know I think because I was a commuter, there wasn't a lot of sense of community at UC Irvine. Like you know being a commuter going to UC Irvine and the only sense of community I had there was: I remember the first day walking into the LGBTQ resource center because I wasn't out before then right? And I think this was me being- me at nineteen being- having a lot of time to think about who I was and doing a lot of exploration, a lot of dealing with the conflicts about my feelings and being told by family, I think sometimes unconsciously and unintentionally, but mostly the society about how being gay is wrong and so I think college was the first time I had time to be exposed that there are other gay people and LGBT people and so recognizing that and recognizing the struggle within myself, I sought out resource at the LGBT resource center at UC Irvine and I remember the first day walking into the space, you- back then, it was in the corner. In the corner like hidden, very hidden and I remember look- I remember seeing Bryant who I call my little brother. He's a white kid. Back then, he was like 17 or I think he was 18 and we just connected and we became friends and then I met Alex Tran whose like just between Alex and Bryant, they are my only two friends

that I keep in touch with now from UC Irvine. And both were from the LGBT Resource Center. Yeah, just stepping in there and feeling a sense of belonging; feeling a sense that there are other people like you and that there could be community and so yeah. UC Irvine, the only sense of community I had.

KH: Ah.

HN: Yeah.

(13:55)

KH: How were you as a student going-

HN: Yeah.

KH: as a commuter 'cause I know it's-

HN: So I like- I was really pretty focused and concentrated on just finishing school so I finished the program- the psychology program within four years and then- I was taking like four-five classes each quarter and also working almost full time, right? So I was working almost full time at that time like 30-35 hours a week and also going to school taking like, 18-20 units. 21 units.

And so I was just doing- I was going through the motion. That's how I would say it. Going through the motion. And I think maybe that's why I told(?) didn't have a sense of community because I was just going to class and then going to work. Going to class and going to work. And I mean it was good. I was a good student. I think I graduated with a 3.8 or 3.9. I took my first social work class that they had a social work class. The only social work class back then at UC Irvine and that's when I felt like I found something that spoke to me because I think for me social work is really- integrates sociology and psychology and because when I was taking psychology. I was just like- I really don't think just think that it's just like an internal process, right? Sociology really incorporates sort of like the families, society, culture, community and so. I wanted



something that for me bridge the two and so when I took the social work class, it spoke to me and yeah, I felt like it was incorporating the aspect of psychology and also the aspect of social-how we're socialized and sociology and yeah that's when I decided I want to become a social worker. But thinking back, it made sense because when we first came here, we were involved in the welfare system and so there were a lot of social workers that really helped us and really helped our family. And I always tell my family- my mom and dad because they still- you know, have the hopes of me becoming a lawyer or like a doctor and I said, "I'm not good at math or science and so psychology was the next best thing for me."

(16:58)

KH: Okay. What did you work at- where did you work at when you were a student?

HN: So when I was a student- going back to sort of my first comment around like my dream, right? American dream or what does my dream look like? Ever since a young age, I created- for some reason instinctively I created- I really tried to create a path for myself. At fifteen and a half, when I was able to work through a work permit, I decided I wanted to go work for Quizno's and Charlie (?) because I wanted to learn what it was like to work for an American sort of company, right? And then, after that, I went to go work for- during college, I work at Footsies. Called three pairs of shoes for \$25 dollars, right? Women's shoes for \$25 dollars. So I worked at footsies with my really good friend at the time, Craig. And that's how we got through college. We worked there for four years. For me, three years. The last year, I wanted to have experience working the psychology field, so I started working at- as a case manager at (?) Concepts Incorporated, which is a substance abuse program. So I did that for about a year toward the end of my college career. Yeah.

(18:35)

KH: Okay. So I wanna- because this- your coming out story is so integral to who you are, can you tell me a little bit more about growing up as a gay person and how-

HN: So I think thinking back- I was gay before I even knew it, right?

KH: Mm.

HN: I just didn't have a name for it, right? At the same time, understanding how I was impacted. The reason why I didn't have a name for it was through- was because I repressed it. Repressed the idea that I was gay, the notion that I was gay, the feeling that I was gay, because of the messages that I was hearing, right? I remember a couple of times my mom would talk about. She used the word bê đê right? Bê đê. Which is really- which is like I think translated to like faggot, right? Bê đê in Vietnamese. And when bê đê is used to describe gay people in Vietnamese, it's not positive. It's never positive, right? It's seen as weird. It's seen as sickness. It's seen as like just not good. And I remember her also using- telling me that you know why am I acting so bê đê, right? Tại sao thiếu mình bê đê vậy? Right? Like three-four times. She denies it. She denies that she says it when I came out to her. But I think that was- I think I repressed it because it was not seen positively because- I just kind of just repressed it and I went in like busy mode. Distraction mode. So I kept myself so busy in high school like- I was literally on any given day. I was supposed to be at like three-four meetings, right? Because I kept myself that busy. And I kept myself so focused in school so I didn't have to think about it. This is all in hindsight. I didn't realize all of it. Why was I working myself to death back then, right? Why did I keep myself so busy back then? Why did I become such a high achiever right? And like working to the point where I was tired. To the point where I exhaust myself. Being involved. Being such a good

student. To the point where I was exhausting myself. I think was really the underlying feeling I had was I didn't want to disappoint my parents, my family because I was gay, right? So I became an over-achiever for that reason. And when I came out to my- I came out to all of my friends first and luckily even though I was hiding who I was or I didn't realize who I was- I didn't have a name for it. I hadn't come to terms with myself yet. I had always tried to be like a good person right? I always tried to be myself as much as I could. I was friends with everybody in school. I was- I saw all that story because I wasn't like- I had a good high school experience.

KH: Ahhh.

HN: I had a really really good high school experience because I think how I was and who I was I had become friends with everybody. It didn't matter which group. I was friend with quote-quote the cliques in high school. I was friends with like the football player. I was friends with the cheerleaders. I was friends with the honors student, AP students even though I wasn't in AP or honors, right? I was friends with the new students from Vietnam. I was friends with everybody. Again, creating a path for myself, I got involved in the activities, I got involved in student government. I got involved in senior class stuff. So I was the vice president of my class, junior class. I was the secretary of my sophomore class and then I- somebody nominated me to become the senior class president of 2002 [objects shuffling around] I became the senior class president for 2002 [Kelley laughing] class of 2002.

KH: Yeah.

HN: Unwillingly and at the time, I was still very shy and very awkward and very timid and didn't have a lot of self-confidence 'cause I wasn't out yet, right? But I did it. Created a path for myself

and yeah, I had a good high school. There was some bullying, but I was for the most part, happy.

(24:26)

KH: Where did you go to high school?

HN: Santiago High School, right down the street on Trask and Harbour.

KH: Oh.

HN: Yeah.

(24:35)

KH: Okay. So can you tell me about how the conversation with your friends went about coming out? And then, in contrast with your parents?

HN: Yeah so I said like come to terms with myself because like it took me a while. It took me until I was nineteen to feel comfortable telling my friends. My friend- all of them were so accepting and all of them were like "Oh, we knew.", right? "We're just waiting for you", right? And so they accepted me and they were friends with me because of me and not because of what my sexuality was, right? And that was a really great lesson for me. A great lesson for me so that- true friends- people that are important in your life, they should accept you for who you are. Not for what you are. And so, yeah. I think my friends gave me a lot of courage. Yeah, a lot of courage to come out to my family. And so I think with my family. Again because of our experiences together collectively as a family- being coming here- living in the Philippines and then coming here, I think that created a lot of bond and that created a lot of trust- created a lot of loyalty and created a lot of- sense of family. And so when I came out, I came out to my youngest sister first who I adore. I feel like I raise her. And I came out to her- every time I would- by the

time she was like- by that time I was able to drive her- yeah, I was driving for about three-four years already. She was used to me driving her and having conversations about her and in hindsight again, I think I was preparing her all along. So I would always have conversations with her. She hates going into the car with me because she feels like I would lecture her like I would lecture. And I would talk to her about diversity. I would talk to her about acceptance. I would talk to her about embracing people for their differences and being kind. So I think I was preparing her all along and so when she was eleven, when I came out to her. Yeah, we were eight years apart. We're eight-nine years apart. When I came out to her, she asked me questions about like- because she really didn't know. She was- and I had to explain to her, "Yeah, you know some people they grow up and they like people of the opposite gender, opposite sex so other people- like a boy liking a- a guy liking a girl and then a girl liking a girl and then a girl liking a guy, but other people, they like the same sex and so, I remember explaining that to her and then she asked the question: "So like girls can also like girls?" And I was like "Yeah!" So I think the next thing she said was like "okay". And then I asked her to respect my privacy and respect nonprivacy because we don't have privacy in the Vietnamese community- family [laughs]. But respect my wish to let me be the one who tell my siblings.

So I went to the next sibling. And then I asked the next sibling right? My younger sister and then I went to my oldest sister and then the older- the mid one and then I went up. But little did I know, every single one of them, I asked them not to tell anybody. Let me be the one to tell people. All of them told everyone. [Kelley laughs] Because I later found out that it was because they were so scared. They didn't know what to do. They didn't know how to protect me. Because they were also growing up in the same environment that I did. They were growing up with the same messages about gay people that I did so they were afraid for me. They were scared for me.

But yeah, all of them were [pause] they had a lot of questions. They were scared. But in terms of love and in terms of- I don't think it changed much.

KH: Mm.

HN: Sometimes the whole- sometimes their ignorance show right nowadays even now.

Sometimes their own- sometimes they don't recognize their own heterosexual privilege. So I am a very good reminder of that. I remind them. Sometimes the homophobia shows through the ingrained cultural practices of like saving face. That's how their homophobia shows through. But I let them know. I remember one time, my oldest sister. It was my dad's birthday. I think it was his- 55th, maybe 60th birthday and he was inviting all of his friends and at this time, I had been with my partner for about three years now. So they had my partner over for dinners and celebrations. All of that already and my sister asked me because he would have friends over if it would be okay for me not to invite my partner. I let it known. It hurt me deeply. And I had to tell her how much it hurt me. And kind of drawing from her own sort of experiences with people not accepting or not treating her well and stuff like that to get her to empathize with my situation. But ultimately, I really was clear about her having to make a decision. If she wanted me to not bring my partner over to this family function then she would have- for this event, she would have to make a decision that I would never join again another family function without my partner. Yeah, she made the right decision and it was- you know, I apologized. "I'm sorry I was insensitive. I didn't mean to hurt you. And it was really for dad. Duh-duh-duh-duh-duh." But they never tried again. To not invite my partner or have my partner over to something.

KH: Are you still with your partner?

HN: Yeah, still with my partner.

KH: And how long has that been?

HN: Hm. We've been together for eight and a half years now?

KH: Wow.

HN: Mmhmm. We used to live across the street from my parents.

KH: Ahhhh.

HN: And now, we live down the street from them. [Kelley and Hieu laugh]

(33:12)

KH: So your parents are like- despite your mom saying early on things that she didn't realize were hurtful to you. How is your relationship with your parents now?

HN: So I think I should be talking about my coming out, right?

KH: Yeah.

HN: So I came out to my siblings each one of them first along the hierarchy. But then I came out to my mom the first- the night before I was going to go visit Vietnam when I was graduating from UC Irvine. So she cried. She denies that she ever said the word "ba day" to me. She believes that, "Oh, this is because of MTV" and stuff like that and she said I was confused. Et cetera. Et cetera. But I went to Vietnam and with my two sister. And yeah I came out to my older sister in Vietnam. But she already knew because my mom had called. That was the sister that raised me for the most part and I was so shocked on how much [chair moving] she was so understanding, but I think I had my own ignorance in terms of like "oh, she wasn't really educated" and "she was not exposed to western culture" so why would she be so understanding and so embracing of gay people? But she had so much wisdom. And she was so accepting and embracing of me. Yeah and I was very lucky. My mother took a while. I remember also having conversation with her because there was a time where after three years I had came out to her, she

wouldn't ask me- she wouldn't want to talk to me about like my partners or who I was dating and how I was doing with love life and stuff like that. But she wanted to talk about everything else. So one day, I really sat her down and I said, "You know mom. You're going to have to make a decision whether to know everything about my life or just know certain parts of my life and not like the part that makes me gay. Or the part that you don't want to know anything about me being gay. Having a partner and et cetera, et cetera. If you choose you only want to know certain parts and not everything, I will never talk to you about anything about my life. So you have to make that decision." I think she made the right decision [laughs] but yeah, she has moments where she still say something offensive and then she'll catch herself because she sees me looking at her. I've been very open with my mom and my siblings to educate them, to talk to them, to tell them about what I do and stuff. [baby noise] And then my dad is very interesting because I don't think I ever really told anyone this. I never really verbally told my dad I was gay. I never had a conversation with him that "Dad, I'm gay." He knows I'm gay because of all the work I do. And my parent, my mom, and my sibling telling him and he sees my partner, but we never had a conversation. I try to meet them where they're at. I try to be understanding. I try to understand that it took me nineteen years for me to come to terms with myself and so it's going to take them a while too. And I think for them- at least for my mom- I think my dad as well. I was always the quote unquote "golden child".

KH: Yeah.

HN: Because of where they come from, because of their understanding, because of what they know about and how they know about gay people, I think for them me being gay sort of somehow dashed a lot of their hopes and dreams. Somehow, oh! I can't have children. They believe I can't have children. And that definition of what children and passing on the family



blood and all of that stuff. So I know that. For them, it's a lost. For a lot of our parents, having a child come out as LGBTQ is a lost for them. It's a lost for that dream and it's a lost of that hope whatever that might be for them. And that's why I go back to saying, my hope is part of my parents and myself. My dream. But I meet them where they're at and I believe that they are- they're come around significantly. I think about four-six years ago when we were fighting inclusion for the Tet parade. I had told them how important it was for them to- for our family to do an interview for the OC Register. So my parents and then my sister, my oldest sister, and myself sat down with the reporter from OC Register and we were interviewed.

(39:53)

KH: Tell me more about the- we talked about it in class a lot. But the fight for the inclusion.

HN: Mhm. And so the fight for inclusion in the Lunar New Year Tét parade in I think 2013 really started my advocacy and my activism. I think prior to that I thought about sort of social justice, advocacy through the lens of being a social worker. Those are one- two of the main tenets, main values for social work which is social justice and advocacy. So I was doing that work through that lens. Even though I did the- became a social worker and worked for the LGBTQ community, it never became- it was never like too deeply personal besides being gay. I think that doing advocacy and social justice work for Vietnamese within the Vietnamese American community around LGBT issue at a deeper level. I think I was doing LGBTQ work through the lens of social work. Through the lens of me being gay, but like doing the work within our communities added such a different level. A deeply personal level. A deeply vulnerable level. I think that vulnerability is actually courage so it took a lot of courage. And not just on my part, but I speak sort of about that on everybody's part who stood up and who was involved in the fight and so it all started one day. I think after a three-year hiatus 'cause we were

able to march in 2010. During the whole marriage equality fight. But during 2010, that was run by the city so even though there were protests and even though there were boycotts, they couldn't discriminate and not let us march. And fast forward in 2013, after a three-year hiatus for OC [Orange County] to find their own identity, OC LGBTQ to find their own identity, a group of six of us decided to want to march and so sent in the application and by this time, it was ran by the Vietnamese Federation of Southern California something. And it was considered private event. And so they didn't- they declined our application and so that gave us like I think three weeks to a month to organize and you know that night, six-seven of- six of us met in my living room and we organized. Organize. Organize. Gather support. And went from there. And that first year even though we didn't win the fight for inclusion, I think we won a lot of respect and we won a lot of visibility which was also important

KH: Mm.

HN: And so, after we didn't march, we decided to- we couldn't march- we decided to do- to hold a rally and a protest. At the time, we called it "demonstration"; "peaceful demonstration" because we didn't want to be seen too quote unquote "aggressive". But that really changed the narrative I believe in the Vietnamese American community around LGBTQ issues, LGBTQ people and it also changed the narrative around, the larger narrative around- a larger narrative within the LGBT, general LGBTQ community. That there are gay LGBTQ. There are LGBTQ Vietnamese Americans. So- and so we used- that platform really to educate people on the radio. On TV shows. And in interviews and all of that right? I remember asking one of the TV hosts, "Why have you invited us three times over the last three weeks?" And he said, "You all are the hottest topic right now. Every time we get you, we have you on. The phone lines go off." People are watching. And so he said, "I know this is necessary. I know people are wanting this

conversation." And I knew it was working also when my sister came home and told me their temple; she goes to a temple and they were talking about it. I knew it was also working when one of my friends said that their family was talking about it at the dinner table. So we wanted that narrative to continue. We wanted our story to continue. And really, our strategy the whole time was to tell our truth. To represent ourselves the best that we can. To tell our stories. And it was the stories of not just LGBTQ people, but it was a story of community. It was a story of families. Families who love their children unconditionally. Who doesn't feel the need to save face. Who are proud of their children regardless. So we told that story. We told our stories. And I think that's what spoke.

KH: Mm.

HN: And then the second year when in November of the following year of 2014, for the 2014 parade, they decided to have a vote. A public vote and somebody posted the ballot on Facebook and I was alerted to it and we went in organizing mode. But by this year, there was like a two-three/two and a half month time frame to organize and by this time, we had more of an organization, more of a identity and we- but by this year, out of the six original people, three-four people have left due to burn out, due to how personal- I believe, due to how personal it became for them. To do this work in the community, to face your family, to face your relative, to face the community, that's why I said vulnerability is courageous. We began organizing and this time we had a clearer message. We knew exactly what we wanted and we didn't back down, but we were open to conversation and dialogue. We were open to educating and we were continuing to be open to tell our stories and so- we were more, I would say, more quote unquote "assertive", they would say "aggressive" so we contacted all the mainstream sponsors to tell them that they are supporting a discriminatory event and so they lost sponsorship money and that spoke. And

that is why they had a second vote and at this time, it was publicized by TV crew was there to film this live, was broadcasted and sitting in that room with a couple of young people and a couple of mothers, I told them "You know, they are going to say a lot of things about us. They are going to call us a lot of names. But if we react to that, then you're playing into their how they're trying to present us which is unruly. Which is crazy. Which is everything negative. And so I said, "Bite your tongue. Sit there kindly, calmly, respectfully. Do not take this personal. Don't personalize it because this is their own shit." So in that event, they called us all kinds of names: sickness, illness, disease, all of that and for the most part, we remained really calm except for one mother, she was so mad because that was her first time witnessing that, realizing that her child are treated like this. Her gay child can be treated like this so she stood up and she slammed her purse and she said, "Bullshit!" Think about a Vietnamese mother saying that. She said "Bullshit!" walking in her high heels [makes high heel sounds with his hands and Kelley laughing] making noise. But we stood up there and we were the most well-spoken. We were the most-represented ourselves- educated, reasonable, informed, beautiful people.

KH: Mm.

HN: Yeah?

KH: Yeah.

HN: With a good heart, right? So they quote unquote "allowed" us to march, but we won that fight. We didn't back down from any of the terms they were putting out which was to walk behind the parade, to walk five minutes behind, to not hold our rainbow flags, and I said, "No, no, no, no, no." If we're going to march then we're going to march and represent who we are which are Vietnamese. We're Vietnamese American first and foremost and we are also LGBTQ. And we want to represent both identities, right? And my whole time was, I do not want young

people who might- who may be on the sidelines who are not ready yet to come out or older folks who are on the sideline to see this marching and yet also see us hiding who we are by not having the rainbow flag or by walking in the back. And ever since then, we have been organizing and we have been doing really good work across the country and very proud that we are one of the only LGBTQ Vietnamese American nonprofit in the country. We are continuing to do our work.

(51:55)

KH: And you talked about the few people that got burnt out right? What did you do to get through?

HN: I think for the most part what saves me and what continues to save me [noise in boba shop of door opening] is really having clarity why I'm doing the work I'm doing.

KH: Mm.

HN: Which for me is creating a better Orange County. A better space. A better place for LGBTQ people. Especially young people. So having clarity on why I'm doing the work that I'm doing. Second, not personalizing things like I try not to personalize too much. I try to only take what's my shit and also recognizing what is other people's shit and leave it at the door. I have a very supportive partner. I have a pretty supportive family. So they help me a bit- a lot. They understand why I'm doing the things I'm doing. And VROC has created a second family, a chosen family for many of us. So I get that support. I think the sense of belonging is so powerful that when you feel that you are connected, when you feel that you are supported, and when you feel that you are protected, you recognize your power and you carry your power very differently.

KH: Mm.

HN: Right?

KH: Yeah.

HN: And it's that sort of mentality that- and VROC has a saying that we as a community are not complete without each other. And so even- and not to say that it is all perfect. I have days where I am like I am so tired.

KH: Yeah.

HN: I'm exhausted emotionally because you then carry a lot of people's wounds and you carry a lot of people's trauma as well in creating safe space, but I always try to remind myself which is it is my shit. What is somebody else's shit? And as much as I support people, I also need to leave their- people's stuff at the door.

KH: Yeah.

HN: And self-care.

KH: [sighs] Yeah.

HN: Is important. So self-care is important. Quality time. Hang out with your friends, family. It's all so important.

(55:36)

KH: Yeah. Okay. I'm going to go into my quick last speed round questions, okay?

HN: Okay.

KH: Okay. So tell me a story. A quick story about when you were most happiest. [laughs]

HN: Oh my god.

KH: It could be pretty soon too.

HN: Mhm. I would say most happy. I'm often not a reflective like I don't sit and reflect and process too much so this is giving me an opportunity to do that.

KH: Yes.

HN: And so in reflecting sort of like- the last- you know 'cause we just wrapped up our sixth- our photo exhibit of our sixth year anniversary of marching in the parade. We wrapped that up last week and we also marched in all sort of sixth parade as well and sometimes in this work in the sort of day-to-day grind, we forget to think about what all of this work means and what impacts it's been having. But one of the happy moments I experienced and other people in the group experienced too was this year as we're marching. You know wearing our- having our rainbow balloons which is always the kicker for everyone. They loved it. But also this year representing wearing áo bà ba and wearing the gánh, the basket to carry food.

KH: Yeah.

HN: Representing in our imagery was to represent the working class. Our tradition and our culture, Vietnamese culture have a tendency to only try to represent the best, the prettiest clothing, but never represent the other side of ourselves. The hard working side. The grind. So we represented the working class and as we were marching down, we were like telling people, like I was doing the horn- powerhorn, and I was like, "Có ai ăn che không? ăn che không?" Pretending to sell some things. "ăn vịt không? Bán vịt không? Mua hai, tặng một." and stuff like that. And just experiencing the reception of the people who are on the sideline watching us and the interaction back and forth and back and forth and how positive it was. Which it felt so wonderful, so beautiful, it felt so homey. It felt so community. We- One of the person on the sidelines who was an older auntie, she said, "Thank you." She said, "I just want to say thank you for your group. To march and to represent the working class. Represent the poor. And she was like, "I am so grateful because you're reminding me of my hometown. You're reminding me of-

you're bringing me back to that image. You're giving me that memory again." So that was so powerful. So that was beautiful for me.

(59:29)

KH: Yeah. Okay. What is love to you?

HN: Um, love to me is compromise. Love to me is patience. Love to me [someone else saying "hello"] is when my dogs greet me [Kelley laughing] when I come into the house. Love to me is when I'm so angry and with my trauma, I am yelling and screaming yet my partner is caressing me and holding me. Love to me is community. Love to me is friendships. Love is very expansive right?

(1:00:51)

KH: Yeah. What is your vision for the future? In your own future?

HN: My own future?

KH: Yeah.

HN: I'm going to step down from Viet Rainbow of Orange County and so we have a plan to do that by the end of this year. I believe that you can't lead an organization for too long. It becomes stagnant. The same person can't lead the organization for too long becomes stagnant. I believe in the young people. So stepping down, getting married, and having kids.

KH: Mm.

HN: That's what's next for me. But I'm okay if all that changes. I'm also flexible in that.

(1:01:54)

KH: Great. And last question, why did you agree to volunteer to be a narrator for the archives?



HN: Uhh [Kelley laughs] I think I believe that histories, oral histories, oral herstories, not just histories, but herstories need to be encompassing of all voices. Need to collect those stories from different people, different experiences. Sexualities, gender identities, gender expression 'cause I think that hasn't always been the case right? And when our voices are not collected and not archived and not a part of herstory than sometimes, it would be easier to erase.

KH: Yeah.

HN: Right? That's why I chose to do this and the fact that this is a Viet oral history. I think that's more important.

KH: Alright.

HN: Yeah.

KH: Thank you so much for doing this.

HN: Hopefully.

KH: Okay, bye [laughs].

-----End of Transcript-----