

Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: TONY LY

Interviewer: Courtney Franco

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CF: This is Courtney Franco with the Vietnamese American oral history project at UC Irvine.

Today is Monday February 18th, 2019. I will be interviewing with Mr. Tony Ly at his place of work in Pasadena, California

CF: The first couple questions are pretty easy just, what is your name date of birth and place of birth?

TL: My name is Tony Ly and I was born in Fountain Valley, California and my birthday is March 1st 1988.

CF: What are your parents names?

TL: My mom's name is Hwang Tran and my Father's name is Sue Ly.

CF: When did your parent's come to America?

TL: My parents first arrived to America in September 1987.

CF: So that was right before you're born then?

TL: Yeah

CF: What is your hometown and can you describe?

TL: My home town is Garden Grove so I grew up in Garden Grove and that's where my family has been the whole time ever since they came over to America. And fairly small city but not too far away from Garden Grove is Little Saigon where it's a pretty highly populated area of the Vietnamese. So a lot of people who came from Vietnam to America and lives in Southern

California all kind of settle around there so it's a place of community for them.

CF: So when your family came over they pretty much directly came to Garden Grove then.

TL: Yeah.

CF: Describe in your own words what your childhood home look like.

TL: My childhood home was fairly packed I suppose with the Asian Community they like to stay together and in the big families it's a really large families like stay in close knit and so growing up there was about 15 people in one house and it's like my mom, my dad her brothers and sister so it was just like my aunt uncle and my grandma and my grandparents are in the house and so everyone just kind of went there and the people who didn't live in the house they would still stop by on a weekly basis our house is like the main hub so there's always traffic coming through it and out various people where is relatives coming out.

CF: Did it stay like that for a quite a long time until?

TL: For quite awhile. Yeah. So until probably when I was in my early teens, my uncle started to venture out. You know they got married had their own properties soon after but even though they had their own properties if still within the 5 mile radius. (laughs)

CF : So family is very important then. What was your community like? Like outside of your family. Were you involved in community as a child.

TL: Involved in the community as a child? Suppose not so much. All I do is just to go to school and so I guess making friends at school or or do my best to get to know the teachers growing up. And improving my English. That was the sense of community. it's like oh school go home.

CF: So basically this community was really just family. Okay. How do you feel your family shaped your identity?

TL: My family shaped my identity I mean they taught me a lot values number one being family.

(laughs) Family is the number one value. Cause, I guess there's always there, you know? I guess growing up I didn't see the big picture of the- What about what family means before it's like are there so many people around there in my space. But now that I'm older and more mature I kinda understand like no matter what they're always there for you and they can do whatever they can to help you with it get you what you want in life.

CF: Tell me some of your favorite childhood memories.

TL: Childhood memories. Being the youngest in the family. I have two older brothers and knowing that I was the youngest early on I can get away a lot of things. So I was pretty much the troublemaker in the family and so- There is a story my mom always shared with me at night I do remember it too is that, My grandpa would enjoy watching shows on television or-or movies on the VCR. So video cassette tapes. And I would record my cartoons on the video tapes too. And so when he would be watching his shows and would go to the bathroom. I would immediately change out (Laughs) his [My grandfather's] shows with my shows. And being so young they didn't think I was able to do it. Until he secretly pretend to go to the bathroom in was picking at me from a distance and seeing that by observing you know, him changing the video tape and observing my other uncles change it so I can pick things up very quickly and so every time they would change the shows or anything with the TV they would always look behind your back make sure I wasn't around to cause any mischief.

CF: What do you remember most about your parents and also family members such growing up that you lived with as a child?

TL: my parents. I know my parents did whatever they can for the family and so coming over here a big barrier was the language barrier for them. And so not being able to speak English fluently, they worked whatever jobs they were able to get and so I only saw them in the morning

and at night because they will be working all day. And overtime my dad settled down to work as a chef in a restaurant and my mom was a nail technician and they would go to work at 7AM in the morning which was just around time school started and so they would walk me to school drop me off go back home prepare for work and then I would come home from school around 3 or 3:30 and I had chores to do so I clean the house finish my homework and I had to get that all done before they came home from work and I would read to them and they would just kind of put me in bed. And that's my memories of them

CF: So what about any of your other family members within the house?

TL: My grandma was always around so while my parents are at work she was always at home taking care of me. Coming from school, she'll meal prep for me and she was just share stories from Vietnam growing up so that's always nice to hear. My grandpa passed away when I was in 2nd grade. And so it's pretty intense for me. That was the first death experience I've had so there was definitely a lot of grieve in the house. And for me it hit me pretty hard because my grandpa was always there to protect me from my older brother's every time they would pick on me or kinda of like bullying me around my Grandpa would step and would kinda knock them away. And there's a one Uncle, name is Justin, and he'd always watch television and preferably tennis he's a really really athletic. And so I always kind of sat next to him and watch him watch tennis even though I don't understand what's going on but I just like being around my uncle's. And they took care of me too. But when I was a troublemaker and cause mischief it was a lot of yelling and (Laughs) disciplining going on like getting sent to the room.

CF: And both of your parents are ethnically Vietnamese correct?

TL: Yes.

CF: Do you know what your parents did for a living in Vietnam? what can you tell me about the

education levels?

TL: My parents when I had asked them a while ago about the education levels.

I remember they told me it wasn't High probably middle school they never made it to high school. In Vietnam my grandpa owns his own business. Regarding Pottery or Ceramics still making dishes and bowls. And so they were able to have their own business over there and my mom ran business with my grandpa and everyone just kinda helped out doing the labor the work and all that and so fairly successful and coming over here they kind of had to start from scratch over again and so.

CF: so did they grow up in the city or the country then?

TL: I think a little slightly outside the city it's about an hour away from the Saigon and the city specifically name is Bình Long that's what they called it. Yeah. (laughs)

CF: And you said as your dad came over he worked as a chef yes and your mom worked at a nail salon.

TL: Yes

CF: What do they do now?

TL: They're both retired. Yeah.

CF: Do they both still live in the area then?

TL: They still live in the area. And they retired because I have an older brother who has a degenerative medical condition. And so they stay home and take care of him now

CF: And do you know how your parents met and married?

TL: I know that it was through in an arranged marriage. much more than that I do not know.
Yeah.

CF: So they don't really mention or talk about it that much then?

TL: No I remember seeing pictures of their wedding day and I just see my mom's face. Like she was really unhappy.

CF: And it it never really brought many problems in the relationship?

TY: I mean, I think every marriage and relationship has there own issues here and there, you know, but a lot of respect for them for sticking together and doing what's best for the family and for the kids. I mean, I do remember growing up and hearing them kind of have arguments here and there, but they are bilingual, trilingual. Now they speak English, you know, and they taught me and my brothers Vietnamese, but they are also very fluent in Mandarin.

CF: You had mentioned before that coming from Vietnam, they had lived in the Philippines for awhile. Did they speak anything while there?

TY: In the Philippines, like Tagalog wise, they didn't really learn to Tagalog. Leaving Vietnam they spent a week in Thailand and then after that they went to spend six months in the Philippines and that was to improve their English or learn about American customs and what to expect when they come over here.

CF: What lessons did you learn from your parents?

TY: The biggest lessons from my parents that they taught me is to never give up and always work hard. Right. Coming over here, they know that there wasn't much talent they can use. But through hard work and, and building their skill sets, they were able to do, whatever it takes to provide for their family, you know. And the biggest thing is that, you know, if you have time to sleep than you have time, so your time can always be used productively. Right. Or if it's you don't feel productive, then where are you being aware of what you're doing with your time and

what you can change. You know, we all have choices and so they always made the best choices they could in that moment in time for the longterm of the family.

CF: Who is your oldest relative you remember as a child? What do you remember about them?

TY: My oldest relative?

CF: Yeah.

TY: I guess it would be my grandpa's brother. I think on the family tree wise it would be a great uncle and I think he lived to be close to close to 90 and, he lived in San Diego and so there'll be occasional family trips down to San Diego. And that was always fun. I guess the biggest memory, well the main thing, we'd go there to visit. It was like during new years. And so as a little kid I was always excited to go in there and collect my red envelopes. (laughs) And also at his house, he had a, a Koi pond. And so I would always look forward to going down to San Diego and going to the backyard and feeding, feeding the Koi fishes. And so that's really exciting.

CF: You had mentioned this before actually you have two older brothers, correct?

TY: Yes.

CF: And you're the youngest. How or how different are the ages exactly?

TY: The middle one is five years apart from me and the oldest one is eleven years apart from me.

CF: where are your siblings living and what are their occupations?

TY: So I mentioned earlier, my oldest brother has a medical condition, so he lives at home with my family and my parents and they take care of them. And I still live at home because I still kind of take part in the care taking for him as well. And the other brother, he currently resides in like LakeWood, California and he's married now as well.

CF: Given the age difference, they would have both been born in Vietnam, is that correct?

TY: Yes. So they were both born in Vietnam and i was the first one to be born over here.

CF: It come in all right here. Do you think that made a big difference in your life growing up at all or would you, was it pretty, because they were born in, lived in Vietnam a little bit. Was there any kind of differentiating growing up at all or?

TY: A part of it is just not knowing the family history. Like all I know is what my life was in, in America and I was like, I, the older I started hearing stories and bits and pieces about how life was in Vietnam for them. And still to this day I have not been able to come back to Vietnam and see their old house or you know, via it was like for them. I know I was very fortunate to grow up in America and have the opportunities that I've had because it would not been the same if I was born in, grew up growing up in Vietnam.

CF: You kind of talked about this before, but is there any special a relationship since you had, with any of your relatives and maybe share some of their memories?

TY: A special relationship?

CF: This could be with like a sibling or an uncle or?

TY: I guess one of my aunts got married, so an uncle by marriage, owned video shops. So he owned his own business. And so growing up, any kind of new releases, movies or video games, mainly video games that would come out, I can just request it and he was able to bring it home for me or my very first like video gaming system was like a super Nintendo and he was the one that, that bought it for me and then provide you with the games. And so, um, I was able to enjoy the games for a few days and then you'd have to take it back. But I never had to invest in video games. So it was really, really fun. And then if I did well in school, then he would reward me by taking me to the video shop. And that was located in Pomona. And so driving there, you drive through fields and then you see a lot of cows and he would, he would always roll down the

windows in the middle of horse meat. They smell that, the cows in the maneuver. And I'm really happy for that because that smell doesn't bother me. (Laughs)

CF: So everyone in your family had quite a variety of jobs then it seems?

TY: Yeah. Really different. Different jobs.

CF: plugged into different trades coming in from vietnam?

TY: Yeah.

CF: What were your parents rules and advice for like dating and marriage and relationships growing up, especially being an arranged marriage themselves.

TY: Their advice that was given to me growing up is because, being in a different country and respecting the rules and the culture is of, of both sides, mainly because they were coming over here looking for opportunity, a different opportunity for a better life. And they always had me focus on school. Don't worry about dating or being relationship with anyone until you finished school, college and have a stable job. Really. So that was their advice. (laughs) And so for the most part, that was true until I entered college and you know, and networking with people, meeting new people and just experiencing college, you meet a lot of people and then, you know, feelings develop and over time I think breaking away from the culture and the traditions a little bit, kind of almost being like a rebel, not listening to my parents like, well this is what they know, but it's different over here. Well, I always kind of ask questions or really pushed my boundaries, like how, how much can I do and, and not be punished for it.

CF: Speaking of relationships, and family, you don't have any children, but would you like to have children one day or maybe marry someone one day?

TY: Yeah. Right now I don't have any kids and it's something I've been thinking in my last couple of years, whether I went to one children's or not, I'm kind of indifferent. Like if I have

kids, yeah. If not, it doesn't really bother me or anything. Right now there is a lot of, I feel like a lot of chaos in the world right now. And to bring someone up in this world at this point in time is probably not ideal. So it's, I'm, I would be okay with not having, having kids, but yeah, I would love to be married one day. And that if someone to experience life with.

CF: You had mentioned before that you had, you haven't visited like the old old places that your family has been or in Vietnam. You visit Vietnam before though?

TY: No, I have not. I have never traveled to Vietnam.

CF: Do you guys currently have any families still located there?

TY: Yeah, there's still a good part of our family back in Vietnam and with technology nowadays they can just do video chat over the Wifi. And so I've seen my relatives through the phone, you know, but of course I don't know who they are, but they knew who I am because my parents would always talk about me. Growing up and showing them pictures and whatnot. And so, but in a sense they're strangers. But still family. There was one time I did travel to Taiwan just for fun, just to see. And my aunt or my mom mentioned I had an aunt living out there in, in Taiwan. And so not knowing or meeting her ever before, I was able to meet her-