Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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Interviewer: Nhoylani Dolores Malaluan
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NDM: This is Nhoylani Malaluan with Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine. Today is February 26, 2019. I will be interviewing Patricia Nguyen at University of California, Los Angeles in Los Angeles, California.

NDM: Can you state your name, date of birth, and place of birth?

PCN: My name is Patricia Chau Nguyen. Born September 21, 1982. I am 36 [years old] and born in San Diego, California.

NDM: Can you describe your childhood experiences?

PCN: My childhood experiences, so both my parents are boat people. They immigrated to the United States via two refugee camps in Malaysia and the Philippines. My mom actually conceived me in one of the refugee camps. So, I was born shortly after they got here. My earliest childhood memories actually are actually being pasted around all my aunts and uncles. Because both my parents are the oldest of five. But they are the only ones who went to college in Vietnam. So, when they came to the US, they decided to look into educational programs and went to community college. My mom finished with an AA and my dad actually finished with a masters at UCI. But my early childhood was actually spent in family housing of UC San Diego.
So, I somewhat grew up there, just encountering different people because my parents were in school. Then before San Diego, I think both parents graduated from University of Saigon with degrees in Geology, but they didn’t think it would make them money here. And so, my mom became a registered nurse, my dad became an engineer. And so, we started moving for my dad’s jobs all over the place. He was going where work was but at the same time, I think he secretly wanted to be a writer. He wasn’t really happy being an engineer and because of that I believe it is why we grew up all over the place from San Diego, moved to San Jose the Sunnyvale area, where my brother was born who is six years younger than me. The moved down to Costa Mesa and Newport for his job as well. Then we had a long sit in Corona and the Inland Empire for a while. The other notable part of my childhood, I am one of three, I am the oldest, but it came to family gathering my parents are the worst. So, there's me, my brother VU who is six years younger and he was born in Sunnyvale, then my sister who is about 15 years younger than me, all same parents. But we all grew up in three very different socioeconomic classes. I grew up with starving college students then my brother were raised middle class. And now parents have relocated to San Diego, where we started, and they are in the upper middle class. Where I went to four or five elementary schools, my sister went to one and still has friends from preschool. But something that is really vivid in my childhood, is because my parents were the oldest of their family. The majority of my mom's family was already here. Mostly because both my grandparents were training officers in the war. So, they had to escape quickly because the family was too impacted given when the communist took over then it was the folks who were against them. Both my parents were put into the reeducation camps. The kids had to leave fast. My mom's side left really really fast because my maternal grandmother died really really early. On my dad's side he was the first to come here. So, growing up I was always aware that there was
family to bring here. And that is very very vivid in my childhood, from going to the immigration offices in Santa Ana and sitting outside of citizenship tests and sponsorship places to learn about sponsorship. That is very vivid in my childhood, probably second to sixth grade, no actually second to fourth grade. I also remember we always saved money; I didn’t get my first brand new set of clothes until I was nine because everything my parents were earning was being sent back as remittances to Vietnam. So, my dad could support his whole entire family, who were like three brothers and a sister who had a family and his mother. Because his father was put into a reeducation camp. Actually, my middle name comes from him and was sort of given to me from him while he was in the camp. Chau actually means precious stone. But in fourth grade I remember driving up here in Los Angeles and waiting in the airport to see this family who I have been always writing notes to but have never met. All I knew was that they lived in Vietnam and I was excited for them to come over, but I really did not know what that meant. And so, I remember receiving them, I remember my grandfather being so skinny, I remember picking up a sack of luggage that is a trunk. I actually have one in my house because I wanted it so bad. The whole family names written out and address in Corona, he painted it on the bamboo trunk. But they came here and had no place to go. So, my parents had bought this track home in Corona. It’s like suburbia no other, the three bedrooms house with a garage in front. So, the family moved in and I ended up in fourth grade almost into middle school. We had the whole family in the house. It was pretty much my grandparents in one room, my aunt and her entire family in my old room, I moved in the master bedroom with my parents plus my brother. Then I had an uncle in the garage, and it was just bonkers. It was 12 people living in a regular person household. Then I had a new set of babysitters at that time because they were around and so I had different uncles and grandparents walking me to school. Then they started finding their own homes and stuff that.
But the Vietnamese culture was intact because after that my mom had babysitter that were Vietnamese refugees too. So, I don’t know if I am going in the right direction but that is sort of some really crucial areas. The other one that stand out to me in the context of this interview, are the protest that were happening in Santa Ana. I do remember being their every weekend. Going with my dad because of that video store with the guy who had a picture of Ho Chi Minh. we were there outside doing not much but we were there. Once my grandfather came over, I talked mostly about my dads' side but my mom's side, my maternal grandfather was also pretty high ranking in the army. So, I also grew up in a very early era, been around the many Vet[eran] meet ups. So, all the meetups of people who were in the army and southern army. They would do these meet up groups in Santa Ana. I remember us driving up to them every weekend. Being around bunch of drunk guys on Hennessey and Cognac. They would ask me to come with them and say Hi to them and ask who you are. They asked if you ate hamburgers only cause you were born in the US. But those were pretty vivid. I would say that my Dad side moving into the house, going to all these Vet[eran] meet ups, were very vivid memories for my early childhood.

NDM: So, I am going to start off in the beginning at least. You said you are the oldest of two younger siblings. I am also the oldest. I kind of know how it is but obviously it is not like your situation. But can you speak on more about – So obviously you are the first American born. You have all these expectations and standards–

VCN: I was also first grandchild too.

NDM: Is that something that you had to exceed because of the expectations?

VCN: Most definitely

NDM: What did you feel like you had to do in order to excel?
VDN: I remember writing early notes and I think my dad still has these to my family back in Vietnam of that I was going to be a doctor. That was probably grilled in at the age of four. So, I do remember those expectations. I think there were also expectations that I was also going to do better, mostly from my dad. I know for some folks, “we came here for a better opportunity for you.” But I think for my parents, “you got to do better than them.” Both of them were already college educated, so there was never a “you are not going to college.” That was never a thing that was said, it was expected that I was going to get a PhD because I needed to beat my dad in terms the degrees he got. And also, strangely my parents went to college in Vietnam and the US but also my grandfather. So, my paternal grandfather because he was recruited by the southern army to be a lieutenant. To actually train officers, the US government actually had him come to Georgetown here in the US. So, actually the one thing that I inherited from him was his Georgetown diploma. So, I am actually third gen[eration] college student but in the most traditional way I am probably the first one traditional. In a sense, that I applied, went to high school, and all that. So, when you ask me the question whether I am living up to the expectations, I think with my particular family it is somewhat so unique because education has been such a strong value no matter what. It was not a means to an end; it was sort of the marker of us because actually my name is actually Nguyen Hoai Linh Chau. Hoai meaning awareness. And so, there was always this push of you got to live up to the Hoai part. Which is funny because it sounds “why”, but it also means awareness in Vietnamese. So, the expectations were definitely there. They are still are there to be honest. And to be honest being the oldest one who is not married, and I don’t own a home, I think resonates a lot. But they also see other things that are a part of our family within me. what I do currently with work is all around social justice. The fact that I am a PhD student right now. I think my parents really want me to run for office at one
point. The expectations are a little different in terms of I think there are those general things to be the doctor, lawyer, or whatever. But I think for our family because we are politically involved during the war and my parents knowing how politics effect the world, is actually an interest in mine. The expectations have changed. So that was that. But when it comes to being the oldest, I told you that I grew up with my aunts and uncles. Legitimately, I grew up with five moms and five dads, right. So, my parents were so busy that I grew up with my aunts and uncles who were not as educated. For some reason those two did it. But the rest of them didn’t. So, most of them don’t have degrees. Most of them are republican. My family is like a democratic family. My cousins, all the aunts and uncles, come to me to say “hey can you just talk to them about certain things.” I have been mostly the type to be like to know that I am here to make myself available. I’ve done college admissions. I’ve done stuff retaining stuff around students of color in college campuses. So, when they are ready and they come, I will be there for them. Typical expectations but I think there is a little twist to our family.

NDM: So, you said you were always growing up with family in your house. Because they immigrated here, did they know English? Were you the translator between them, during those times?

PCN: So, this is where it is so different from a lot of folks that I have met. [Be]cause my grandfather speaks fluent English because he went to Georgetown, right. I am actually very lucky that the fact that all of his sons convinced him to write his memoir in English. So, I have a full, thick, self-published book from my grandfather that is written fully in English, to talk about his time in the reeducation camp. I don’t think a lot of families get that. But we do, right. And so, my parents actually learned English in college in Saigon. I didn’t need to translate for them. My dad actually speaks English with a French accent because he went to French Catholic his entire
life. You know the thing I come to learn, is that my family is very affluent in Vietnam. Of course, because I believe those that actually make it here had to have money of some sort. And it is this kinda weird thing for me as a social justice person, yeah even though we were initially low income. We grew up on very little money. My parents had a social capital from their life in Vietnam of understanding education, understanding language, and understanding culture. So, I did not have to do the translating thing.

NDM: Do you feel like you are privilege at that part?

PCN: Most defiantly!

NDM: You were able to communicate well, you know. You did not have to that second person, second parent essientially.

PCN: No, actually! My sibling are more literate in Vietnamese's than I am. I sound the least accented when I speak Vietnamese. But with my parents we do not speak Viet[namese]. It’s funny. It’s a mix. It a VietEnglish thing. My sister is fully literate. Again, socioeconomic classes changed. My sister grew up with solely my mom, when she wasn’t working all the time. Whereas with me, I was pretty much “keep her alive.” So, my sister got to go to Vietnamese school and stuff like that. And my brother is somewhat in between. But yeah, I didn’t have to do the translating thing.

NDM: It is a very surprising thing. Just because seen from other narrators, they have to be that second parent and mostly be closer to their parents in that relation. Do you feel like because you didn’t always speak Vietnamese that you were not really connected? First question, did any of your aunts or uncles know how to speak English fluently?
PCN: Yeah. So, the only ones that didn’t were the ones that were on my dad's side that immigrated later but even then, no issues in communicating because I understood Vietnamese fluently. Even with my grandmother who doesn’t speak, she still understands some English to an extent. I feel very lucky the language barrier isn't to the point, where I can’t say anything. Now do I wanna talk about deep things around how I am feeling with depression. I think that will be harder but everyday conversations of learning about who they are. I am able to navigate the language that way and they are also able to speak English in that type of way. And also, for my mom’s side, out of all my aunts and uncles, majority of them did not marry Vietnamese. So, English was somewhat a staple because you know our in-laws were not. I do feel very lucky I did not need to do the translating thing and I do not have a language barrier, when it comes to understanding my family. And even anything, the prior generations have helped it even more. Like I said, I have a grandfather who wrote a memoir in English.

NDM: Would you say because of that your parents or the people around you wanted you to be more Americanized?

PCN: No, not at all. I think they understood that there are moments of assimilation in our family. But I think because my parents have such pride in the country. Even though in some ways, it does feel so torn because our country is loss to them. But because they had such a strong educational background, they never ever, emphasized that I had to be more American or more Vietnamese. Actually, I think they were more surprise in terms of how I came to my own. So, when I was a college student, I was a part of the Vietnamese student association and stuff like that. Probably one of the moments that brings the story to full circle is that I was the first one to graduate in my family that was born here, my grandfather from Georgetown was coming and he got bored when he finally came here, that he decided to pick up some more AA degrees. So,
alongside his Georgetown wall, he probably has 7-8 AA degrees in web design and photoshop. One of the first things he made was my invitations to my graduation. But I felt some sort of way knowing that once I graduate on the field of UC Santa Barbara, the flag that is seen as a communist will be flying. So, I had actually work really hard to work with the Vietnamese student's association to see if we can get it taken down. The argument was because it was the countries that we studied abroad to, right. And it is what is internationally recognized. So, when I walked across the stage, I had the whole Viet[nam] flag wrapped around me and I think that meant a lot to my family, that it is one thing that we choose not to assimilate to. Then also, I grew up doing things that felt was a part of the Vietnamese culture. I was a part of a Buddhist youth group that was run in Vietnamese, I studied Vovinam, which is a Vietnamese martial art, I became a lion dancer and actually carried that through my college years and adult years. So, the culture piece was always there. I geek out on Ao Dai’s, which are Vietnamese dresses. I don’t think there was a push of being more American or not. It was just an asset that my family was pretty proud for us to have. My brother on the hand, not so much. Oddly enough, I am the only one with an American name. So, my name is Patricia Chau Nguyen. I did not self-name because most people ask if I gave myself my name because I had a hard name to say. But my sibling does not have that. My brother’s name is AnhVu, which he hates. And my sister is An. So, it sorts of can be seen as Ann, it flows. My brother really struggled with it to the point where when we went to Australia and forgot to put the first part of his name and had to buy a new ticket. He is always threatening to change his name. But I am not sure if that answers the question.

NDM: No, it does. You said that your grandfather established a memoir. Did you feel like you had to kind of share that and make sure it was known and written, for your future generations? Even for the people that do not know you family.
PCN: It is within the family right now. So, each grandchild has a copy. I have used it for school. So, I have shared some pieces. But I haven’t shared it openly, openly. I think I want to share it at some point of my life but right now it’s just not the moment. I have thought about it because it is one of those rare pieces. Do I feel a sense of duty to share it? Yes, that is why I am sitting with you. But I also have thought about bringing my mom and dad in the oral history project at UCI. I have somewhat been deemed to be the family historian now because I am the oldest and don’t have kids which means I have time to do things. I have done things like story core with my family and stuff that.

NDM: As you lived in a household full of family, were there any important lessons that were taught to you that you bring to yourself as to being the oldest, being someone who is the historian of the family? Did they teach you anything significant?

PCN: Man, there is so much. I don’t know. I don’t think they were explicit lessons. I think the whole concept of resilience is one that marks Vietnamese American experience. I think I understood more about social justice issue because of the turmoil within Vietnam and the Vietnamese American community. So, even with the work today, I work with communities of color and help them uplift their own community. That sounds great on the outside but to actually do the work is hard because within the community they do a lot of fighting. Which happened a lot in the house, people fighting. And over differences, I had an aunt that converted to become Catholic. You know my grandma is the only prostituting Buddhist I ever met. She harps on it where it does not feel Buddhist. Those type of lessons of learning how to talk through differences within a community you look like was a really big lesson to me. I learned some pretty bad stereotypes of Chinese folks, I learned the value of an education, so much because both my dad and grandfather really hounded on that. But not in the way “you need to do this for
a means to an end,” it was really to just become a better person for this planet. What other lessons can I say? I think a lot about love and trauma. Trauma was big, I think. I know that both of my parents suffer from PTSD. I think my mom has found ways to deal with it professionally. Dad not so much. So that gives me a lot of insight to think about, of if I want to address depression. These are parts of depression that are hard for me to address. Sure, there are systematic issues that I want to change but unless you live it you don’t feel how it impacts everything else. Yes, there are paid wage gaps, there is all this stuff. But you know to see someone's sense of freedom and sense of wanting to navigate the world in the way they want to, and they can’t because of their trauma. I think that has been a really hard lesson for me. But it came a lot later, I didn’t sense it back then

NDM: As your parent were college students in Vietnam. Obviously, they knew much more about the war and knowing more about what was happening, compared to people who were just kinda leaving and fleeing. From there knowledge and coming here, did it feel like it, in your sense, did you think they needed to make a stance that they are not just “boat people” but are people that know more than people think they know? Sorry, if that does not make sense.

PCN: I think I know what you are saying. Keep clarifying. I will help me flush it out.

NDM: So, because of their knowledge, they obviously know their rights as coming into America and being in refugee camps as to being told that there is a war, instead of being the helpless refugee–

PCN: Oh. Oh. I see what you are saying. They have never set themselves out to be the victim. That has never been a narrative that was in our house. My dad and mom follow the news quite a bit. They have a lot of political commentary. My dad is much very on the moderate-liberal side.
My mom follows sweet. I have never heard of it from a victim standpoint. You know “this happened to them,” “this got taken away from them,” that was never the narrative. It was like a political difference and if we did stay, things would have not been great. That is sort of the extent of the story that I hear. But it is never life “oh my god I miss this, I miss that.” I mean there is still things around communist. My grandmother still has that “communist will do this. All these bad things.” I was a flagship director for Asian American center for Cornell. I was trying to tell my grandma that I was working with the Vietnamese population. And she told me “you need to be careful of them because you know they are probably on the communist side of the government.” So, there was really no victimization more so of anger expressed at those of that won.

NDM: And kinda going back to how you say how you parents had trauma from the war. Can you say what there copying mechanism was?

PCN: It was terrible. It was terrible. I mean I think it was the big reason as to why my dad moved around so much. When I really think about my father, I think of his story of what he really wanted to be was taken away so early. He wanted to be the doctor; he still does. At one point when he got laid off from engineers he was actually going back to school to see if he can be a Psychologist or some sort of doctor. And I think he very much projected that dream on me. But to be honest I grew up in a physically abusive household. My parents did not turn to substances, but physical violence was defiantly in the house. Quite a bit. My dad lost his temper quite a bit. And we moved around a lot and I think those are sentiments of trauma. With my mom, I think there were so many things conflating, right. You got this trauma piece. Then you got someone who is being domestically abused. I think she learned how to survive it all. It’s funny, I put a verse in her card for her 60th birthday of how you can see her face change across time. She uses
humor, like no other. She works out like no other. I think we all cope in all different way. If you think I speak fast, she speaks 100 times faster. She did that actually to hide her accent. She is a registered nurse, leader of a pediatric area and she’s on the phone, helping people talk though STI’s if they are teenagers. But I would say they cope, my dad being an unhappy engineer, physical violence, and my mom just trying to survive it all and using humor to do that. You know they would rely on their family networks, but you know family will side, one point or another.

NDM: Sorry, I just lost my thought.

PCN: I know I just dropped something heavy and now you are like ahhhh.

NDM: Have you been back to Vietnam?

PCN: Oh my gosh that is actually a pretty bad story. So, when I turned 25. We all went on a intergenerational trip back. So, it was my dad, my mom, and my mom sister. I grew up with two other cousins that were half white but my brother and them, all went back. And I think for us, as the kids it was sort of awesome. we are somewhat connecting but for them it was a sad journey because they revisited their old home which turned into government buildings. They felt out of place. there was no nostalgia. my mom says she will never go back, she sees no point in going back. So, I have gone back and with that trip. But I have friends over there that are researchers. I am hoping to go back some point without my parents, to see if there is a different experience. But I do feel very lucky to have gone back with my family. To see them to go back for the first time in 25 years. It was heart breaking to watch them.
NDM: Did you feel like—? You don’t have to speak on it. When you saw them did it feel like they lost themselves there, obviously because they had to move and kind of reinvent who they are. Did you feel like you saw them kind of remember who they were at that time?

PCN: I don’t think so much of a loss of identity because my parents are very stubborn. I don’t think it was so much a loss of identity as it was a loss of a home. Right. I feel like my mom fully sees the US as her home. my dad goes back and forth. The way he talks about it is “man, like I would have been so rich if I didn’t move to the US,” like that type of thing. But my mom, I think she is so anti her time there. She probably considers herself more American and she would comment on things like, “Vietnamese people are so rude—” But I don’t know if it is a loss of identity as much as it apart of their journey. And I don’t know maybe for my mom it is a different comping mechanism because she lost her mom when she was 20. And she was the one who lead the house after that. So, I don’t even know they even have a chance to reflect on that. I try to with them now and some of it starts to come out. I am hearing more traumatic stories of their time on the boat and stuff like that. But yeah, it felt less of a identity and more of a loss of a home.

NDM: So, you are the historian of the family, you said. How were you able to know more about your family? Because obviously, sometimes people do not want to talk about it within the family because it is hard to talk about.

PCN: They do not think I understand. Okay, so I am the first child right and there was no one born for another six years. So, with that gap, I was always with the adults and I would be sitting at the tables and I would listen to it all. It’s weird because even to now, today, since there is such an age gap between the rest of the kids and me, people have such a hard time placing me as one the adults. Because I don’t have kids myself and like the younger cousins. Because my younger
cousin just—the youngest one just turned eighteen. And so, I am 36, right. So that is a spread on my mom’s side. And same with my dad’s side. I don’t think a lot of them assumed I understood. But I know the stories because they would talk about it. And I started asking them much later. So, I lived on the east coast for about ten years. And when I came back it is then when the historian stuff started kicking in more for me, right. So, every year now and I tried to do this—I haven’t figured out with the men but with the women, my mom and her sisters. I do a Mother's Day trip. So, we go to Joshua tree, I pay for everything. Palm Springs, whatever. And I just like sit, and they are just like “oh my gosh, she is going to do it again. She is going to make us cry.” [Be]cause I would bust my phone out and like “hey can you tell me about this and this?” Some of them are not so historical. Some of them are like “hey what is your best piece of advice, to your future, you know, daughter who is going to be a mom?” or “what is one thing your mom did?” or “what is one thing you are proud of in terms of raising us?” Like that stuff is what I am collecting. And sometimes the stories come out within those. I can never ask about it directly. And I think that is an API (Asian Pacific Islander) help seeking thing in general. But I typically ask about it as a future question, but they end up going backwards anyways. I just haven’t figured out how to do it with the men. But this Mother’s Day trip is something they always looks forward to every year. But they know there is a trade off because at one point I am going to make everyone cry. Because they are going to be talking about their lives.

NDM: Did it feel like when you were asking the questions, they didn’t want to answer because it just brought back memories that they did not want to talk about?

PCN: Yeah! You know what is weird, I feel like they don’t think they think I know much about what I know. Let’s put it this way, when I was a kid, I told you my aunts took turns babysitting me. I also went on dates with them, right. I got to know them probably differently than most
people in our family. Because yeah, I still remember the first time my aunt got asked out by her current husband. Like I was there. They were watching me. I feel like I have nuances of their personalities. And I would say something to my mom, and my mom can’t keep a secret worth crap. So, she would out a lot of the family history about her sisters to me, but her sisters don’t know that I know. So, when I hear them in the oral histories, I know the back context as to why they say certain things. So, for example, I have an aunt who is most likely, from what I gathered, was probably raped by a Buddhist monk, right. And so, when she sorts of talks about religion, I can sort of see the remembrance of that, in her story. But she doesn’t know that I know. I know that so when she freaks out about her daughter being out at night, I can sort of see why. But her daughter doesn’t know. So, in some ways, I don’t know, I sort of feels like “Joy Luck Clubby.” There are all these inside back stories that I think I know because I listen, and I didn’t speak a lot when I was a kid. But I think everyone thought I didn’t understand but I did, and I am able to sort of use that now as an adult, to sort of get a different context of the stories. But do I see people struggle, yes. Yes. There is definitely– it is never a point to crying but sort of anger more so. It is like “man, I can’t stand this or that.” They were messed up and a lot of curse words, of stuff like that. Which if I think about their story more then I get it. I get the anger piece. But it is never been like a break down, meltdown type of thing. But I think it is mostly anger. And to be honest, I think that is how my family has coped with it. Is through anger.

NDM: Obviously, I mean there are different mechanisms, do you think anger was healthy for your family to go through?

PCN: You know the one thing I had to unlearn as a second generation Vietnamese American, is that I am not surviving any more. now that you talk to me, I think the biggest lesson I learned was survival. Like oh my god. It was so hard growing up in a house where pretty much your
parents telling “you can’t trust anyone.” Which I get. I get completely. Given they were from a war ridden country. So, everyone was an enemy no matter what, if they were not inside the house. Double that with domestic abuse in the house, right. So, if your own family treats you this way, you are going to be more scared to go outside. So, one of the biggest things I had to unlearn from them is that not everyone is bad. That I can trust people. And so, do I think it was a good coping mechanism? I think it was good for them in order to get in a place where they are financially secure but now thinking about their emotional health, no. But I am guessing it is better than turning to other things. Because I don’t have a lot of substance abuse in my family. You know. I think that anger became that channel. That anger manifested in ways that were unhealthy for the family too.

NDM: Sorry, if I am going back and forth.

PCN: No, no. It is totally okay.

NDM: You said you had vivid memories of you being in immigration offices, right. How was that like? Can you say what age you were?

PCN: I was probably –the earliest I can remember was probably seven, eight, nine, around that area. [Be]cause I remember just sitting outside on these plastic chairs with these little grid marks. I remember because I would just be sitting their counting them with little animals on them. They were some random neon colors, hot pink and blue. But I remember sitting there [be]cause my parents were trying to get answers to the citizen ship test. They would be sitting there and be like “so you just took the test?” You know, stuff like that. But the paper work stuff, I just remember them going. Paying a lot of money. My dad complaining a lot of money. And then me writing notes to – I don’t know. Like write a note to your grandparents. Write a note
back to your family back home. Addition to all the paper work that was happening. I do remember when they finally came, one of the biggest issues that my dad had was he sending back money for them to learn English. And he found out the money wasn’t being used that way. And a lot of them did struggle with English when they first got here. And I remember that being a big blow out. The immigration office, I remember it being hot. I just remember it having a ton of people and the testing.

NDM: Did you know what was going on? Like were you just there to be with your parents?

PCN: I knew because they made me write letters. I knew we were there to do something to help bring my family over. Sponsoring my family over. The other one that is also very vivid, is the vet[erans] house. The vet[erans] meet ups.

NDM: How old were you at that time?

PCN: I was probably of age because there was definitely a lot of inappropriate comments said. So, probably my pre-teen years. The one thing that I do take away from that was really endearing was like, wow, these men fought side by side. Still gathering in the Unites States. Still wearing their fatigues. I don’t even know how they even have some of these things because I know for our family, they had to burn a lot of things. But they were coming and sharing war stories. But a lot of Hennessey. Is what I remember mostly. But you know they had presentations of certain people turning a certain age. A lot of funerals I have gone to have somewhat a military burial side to it too. Which has been really interesting as I have become older.

NMD: At the meet ups, where were they? Were they in San Diego?

PCN: They were in Santa Ana. You know, I do remember growing up a lot of us driving to Vietnamese places. Maybe that is why I feel like we never assimilated to. I know for some
families, that didn’t have family, they would travel to see other Vietnamese people. But for me we had a lot of family here because we did not have a lot of family back in Vietnam, besides my dad's side. Who eventually came over. So, we would visit each other but then go to Little Saigon, go to Santa Ana. I remember like the Vietnamese channel on at home. It was on after the Armenian channel. My family never really pushed it down our throats, but the culture was very much imbedded. And the war was part of it. War was very very much a part of it. There was one memory actually. What grade was it? You do a country report. I don’t remember what grade it was. It was fourth or fifth you. What was it? World history?

NDM: I don’t know. I know it was not along for me, but I don’t remember.

PCN: So basically, you had to do report on a country. You would make that science board thing. That would have the flag in the middle. Then certain points of history. What they grew in the country. I took it upon myself to do Vietnam. But I guess, at this point I didn’t have a connect with the things I learned from the Vietnamese language from my parents and the stuff in English. So, I went to the school library. I checked out a book on Vietnam. I brought it home. Drew the red flag with the yellow star. Stuck it on the board. My dad walks in. Chucks the book in the trash can. And he goes “what are you reading? What is this?” And trashed the whole project. That was actually a very vivid memory for me. And I think that was my social awakening as to understanding everything you read in book aren’t real. But that was a very strong strong strong memory. Given I grew up with always visiting the Vietnamese community, always on the weekends. Just carried with me. Even when I went to the east coast, I went to school in Vermont. I connected to the Vietnamese refugees there too. Sorry, I am like all over the place.

NDM: No, you are all good. When you did that project, if you remember, did your dad tell you what was wrong with that, at least? Did he tell you what he thought of it?
PCN: I think he was too angry that his child's education, what he thinks was infiltrated. Like what the communist do, you know per say. He’s like “oh my god. We moved away from this and the propaganda is still strong. I think that was his concern. He never debriefed it. Actually, I never talked to him about it. But I do remember it very vividly. The only time my parents were explicit was my mom. When they were going to community college, we lived in a very very poor, probably boarder line projects community. And she would take me in a stroller to the library because no TV, no nothing, and there was like too many people in the house. I do remember homeless people yelling at us saying like “go back to your country.” And I think at the very young age of five. And I actually still remember this. My mom sat me down and was like “were just different. People are angry because we are here. Because something bad happened where I come from. And we have to be here to be safer. But just know that you belong here. Even though people will say you don’t.” So, I do remember that. I don’t know if that answers the question.

NMD: No, it does.

PCN: My parents were very explicit around certain things.

NDM: That’s good. So, you grew up in college campus housing, right? How was that? Because I notice that people tend to “stick with their own people” and move with them, you know.

PCN: Yeah! Lesbian, black babysitters. I actually used that as a part of my narrative, of who I am as a person now. But I think that is why I never left the higher ed[ucation] setting because I grew up on it. It was great. Like they had a community garden. My parents–I don’t know what it is with Vietnamese culture–just had a conversation with another Vietnamese person yesterday, of like “we are never going to get it together because we always fight with each other.” So, my
mom always made friends outside and actually my early childhood friends were African American/Latino. Because my parents' friends were African American/Latino. So, we grew up in a pretty diverse area and also my dad had connections with his—not only did I figure out he went to a Catholic school. I also figured out that he went to a French Catholic school, that was training priest. So, that is a pretty big fraternity, itself. We got to meet a lot of folks from different countries, as well. I do remember college students watching us and doing art and activities and stuff. It was very welcoming. Because I think the war had such an impact on the US. The only native instances I had were on the street around me being like “go back to your country.” But on a college campus, it was so different. I think everyone was like “this was awesome.” You had the people who were protesting about the war on our college campus. So, my parents were very much embraced. But then again, they didn’t have a language barrier. I think people got a kick at how my dad speaks English with a French accent, you know. My parents were translators in the refugee camp.

NDM: Oh wow. In both camps?

PCN: My dad like speaks German, English, and French. My mom speaks French.

NDM: And he learned all that in Vietnam?

PCN: Mhmm. Yeah. The language facility—

NDM: Was not a problem. Wow.

PCN: It wasn’t a problem. They were translating. I wasn’t translating.

NDM: Did that influence you as to who you are today, at least?

PCN: Most definitely!
NDM: Being surrounded with a diversity and not just with the Vietnamese culture/community?

PCN: Oh, most definitely! But I will say my mom will be upset if I bring a Vietnamese person home. And I also have tried to come out to her, which is a whole different story. But has it? Most definitely. It is something that I take great pride in. When people ask me, “why am I in social justice?” I say, “it is because I am a Vietnamese American and also a Buddhist.” I think a lot of it has to do with this, I have a very complex understanding of what society can do to Arabic people. I also know my family comes from a lot of privilege. I am very aware of that. From the language facility, to their education, to their finances, you know. And the complexity of understanding their experiences and what had really informed me. In terms of how I can help other diverse communities. I think there is also a fighter spirit to Vietnamese Americans because honestly, they took down the French, took down the Chinese, and they took down the US. A country only falls apart when they start fighting each other. I think that understanding political history, like I always announce myself as an Asian … I am a socio … my identity is that I am an Asian American but social politically I am Vietnamese American. Because that has always been rooted. Like the identity is political, no matter what. So, I don’t know if that helps.

NDM: No, it does. So, kind of switching tracks of who you are, at least. What kind of education did you have? Did you Vietnamese school, while you were younger?

PCN: No, because I didn’t have time. My parents worked so much. The only close thing to Vietnamese education I got was the Buddhist youth group, which I was a part of for about three years. Then I started training Vovinam, which is a Vietnamese martial art and I did that for about five [years]. Did I ever do the language piece? No. So, I am completely illiterate in that. But I grew up speaking it semi.
NDM: So, you said you went to college. After high school where did you go?

PCN: Thinking back of the choice I made. I grew up in San Diego. Went and grew up all over. But then decided to go to UC Santa Barbra because I wanted to go to a school that felt different from where I grew up. And to this point I still believe UC Santa Barbra is the whitest UC. So, I went there and got the expectation piece you asked, you know. I was a chemical engineer then went into cellular biology. Then graduating with cell biology with a minor in ethnomusicology. Didn’t know what I was going to do. And then ended up working for UC Santa Barbra. Then after a while found the world of student affairs and diversity work. And then decided to pursue graduate degree. So, I have a graduate degree in higher student affairs from University of Vermont. And I primary focus on helping students of color. Particularly around retention rates and addressing everyday racism. Then after that went to Cornell. Then came here. And I am currently a PhD student in higher education. Mostly how systems effect campus climate.

NDM: Obliviously, it is a switch. A whole different 360. So why did you pick kind of science compared to where you are now.

PCN: Science was all because of that immigrant, dad wanted … more so not the immigrant but my dad wanted a doctor. And he just kept it in my head. It took me two years to not do it. I graduated and I was floating around for two years and figured out I was going to go into education. The education piece, more that I think about it, they are to blame. Grew up on college campus, grandfather went to college, they went to college. College was always seen as this access point of not only for social gain but a better understanding of yourself. And I wanted to be like my grandfather and my dad. They are very well spoken. My dad wrote my scholarship essays. Yeah that is completely …. and you can talk about translating. My dad was like ghost
writing scholarship applications for me and I didn’t even know. So, I think I really admired the way they …. like they always imbedded reading. Like I always got books. I grew up in a house that probably had 500 books in the house always. And they were always reading. So, I think the transition feels natural because they always put in my head that Universities were this great place, where you can learn more about yourself. And that is what I do for a living now.

NDM: So, why did you decide to go to the east coast, to like Vermont? Out of all places?

PCN: [Be]cause I am a five way Scorpio and I want different things. Like my UC Santa Barbra experience because it was the whitest UC, my claim to fame there was to help re-develop within their residence hall systems. Like multicultural commence program. I got really enamored with their white ally development. So, I wanted to develop racial justice folks that were white. So, why not move to Vermont. The whitest state in the US. White not only because of the snow. It is about 96% white and the schools were worse than that. And I went there and to be honest, I also got a full ride to go there. But I wanted to do things around social justice, and I had spent most of my time in California which is racially diverse. Why not spend time in the other place. It felt like a study abroad trip. Other known as white immersion. But I end up not working with any white people. They put me with the multicultural center. It was great. I got to know more about the African American/Latino community because I was doing work in Queens and the Bronx and getting students acclimated.

NDM: Did you feel you were out of place in that are?

PCN: Oh, heck yeah.

NDM: I know they put you in the multicultural center, which is kind of like a box.
PCN: I mean if you grew up knowing that you are holey Vietnamese and your able to say that and people understand that and go to place where you can go and see another non-white person for two weeks. You learn a new part of your identity. So, actually my move to Vermont, helped me because it helped me solidify my identity as a person of color. Cause like legitimately, if you weren't white you just bonded. So, it became like the most racially diverse group of friends I ever had in my life in Vermont. Cause everyone would miss holidays and there weren’t supermarkets or restaurants around. So, we were home cooking things for each other.

NDM: Was is kind of a cultural shock?

PCN: Oh, it was! Most definitely! Legitimately, I have ran into people who never seen an Asian person.

NDM: Wow!

PCN: Constantly say Asian phrases to me. I had never had that much in California but there legitimately they have never seen a person. And for a while, I was consulting with the Bible belt. I was traveling with an Atheist and I am a Buddhist. We lead Abrahamic conversations. Which are conversations between an e-mom, which is Muslim, a rabbi, and a priest. So, I went to these places where they never seen an Asian person. But I will say the Vietnamese identity helps because they are able to contextualize because people still have memories of the war. So, they are like Vietnamese and a lot. It usually has to do with the war and Vietnam. I actually took a class at UC Santa Barbra which was a religion class that paired white vet[erans] with Vietnamese students. A very jarring experience actually. I was told I looked like someone they shot. With a reflect with you, I actually have always have a curiosity about my own identity. So that helped. I always thought of my brother and sister and they always thought it was the same.
PCN: It is actually something that I am looking into. There are college reunions for Vietnamese Universities now. So, my parent has been going for the last three years. A meet up of those that they graduate with at University of Saigon. Their meeting in Australia, Germany, Thailand, and the US. So, next summer they are actually going on a cruise with their classmates from college from University of Saigon.

NMD: My grandma. This is off topic. So, I am Filipino. She went to college in the Philippines and lately she has been going to a lot of–

PCN: They are doing meet ups!

NDM: She’s like “oh it’s my high school thing.” Like “oh, really you still keep in contact with them?”

PCN: It is pretty cool actually.

NDM: So, kind of switching back to it. So, you said that you father always put into your head to become a doctor. Did you ever had the ability to want to be a doctor at least?

PCN: Yes.

NDM: Just because of him or–?

PCN: What do you mean? Did I want it myself? I did. Cause in the end I wanted to help people, but you are not very much exposed to different careers that help people. So, I think the spirit is still there.

NDM: Do you think he kind of brain washed you into that?
PCN: Do I think he kind of brain washed me? I think he had a very strong conviction he wanted that. We gotten into several fights. Like really bad fights. About “all you had to do is become a doctor. Why couldn’t you do that?” There are definitely moments like that. Like I ran away from home actually because of that. Man, I haven't thought about this story in so long. So, when I got a full ride to Vermont. I didn’t even tell my parents I even way applying to Vermont. I waited till we were on a vacation in Hawaii on a beach. I took one deep breath and told my parents I was no longer going to med[ical] school. I was going to pursue education but don’t worry about it, I got it all paid for and I am moving in two weeks. Sort of got disowned after that.

NDM: Did they expect that at all?

PCN: My mom being in the medical field. Didn’t want me to be a doctor. She didn’t like what she saw. My dad didn’t know any better. He just wanted that. And so, he got really really upset. We actually didn’t speak for a very long time. We actually have a very strand relationship. Because till this day, we recently had a talk, more of a serious one, of his own happiness. Cause what I am trying to encourage for him, is his dream of becoming a writer doesn’t have to stop. Like he is 60. He still has a lot of time left. Maybe in retirement he can do something else. So, actually I am encouraging him to go back to school. But a lot of his sentiments that he expresses is “well everything has been a disappointment in my life.” Including me in terms of me becoming a doctor. And he is like “why should I even try?” I don’t know if that answers that.

NDM: It does.

PCN: Its painful. It's mostly painful. It really hurts that like no matter what I do. I don’t think I never heard the words “I am proud of you.” Probably until my late 30s. It’s weird cause I have a sister that is 15 years younger. I told them that if you want her to succeed you have to be
affirming of her time and what she is doing. I actually had this break through with my mom, where at one point she apologized for the way she raised me. And I am like “why are you saying this? This is too much.” But I think my mom took lessons learn with me and applied them to my sister. Like I think my sister grew up in a different way. She is like an art technology major at Santa Barbra. She's a college athlete. Like my dad still holds on this sentiment of meritocracy and like this is what you are supposed to do, and he is still pretty upset that none of us are doctors. But he tells us all the time that he can’t die happy till we are all taken care of at this point. He is all like “the least I can expect. Will I ever be happy? No.” Cause then we would all become a doctor. Which I am like, “why don’t you become a doctor?” Like I am becoming a doctor but not the type you think I am going to be.

NDM: Between all you siblings, there is no real acceptance more of making sure you are ok–

PCN: My mom focuses more of happiness because I think she understands. Like we have had conversation to the point where that matters. But my dad, it’s that survival thing about being a refugee. He just wants to make sure that we can provide for ourselves and he feels like he cannot rest until that happens. He has given up the dream of having doctors. Which is terrible because his sister has a doctor in the family. Which is really hard on my brother because they are the same age. But with me, I somewhat got a pass because I am older.

NDM: So, his expectations were never met?

PCN: They are never going to be met.

NDM: Did you guys ever feel like you ever had to though?

PCN: Oh, all the time! See I can broker it differently for my sister. I can translate what he says to her differently. Do I feel the pressure? I did until my mid 20s. Like I fell into depression I my
early 20s because of it. Like I was like I am never going to make my parents happy. I think for me I had to do with how much moving around we did. I actually graduate valedictorian at my middle school. But once we switched high school, I didn’t work well for me. And so, my grades would drop and at that point once they start dropping, those dreams start to become more distant. But I could never talk to me parents about it. I don’t think I really talked to them till after I graduated grad school.

NDM: So, kind of speaking on mental health. What is hard for you to speak on it because no one … I mean I feel like in the Asian American community it is hard to talk about. Did you feel like wanted to talk about it or had the chance?

PCN: Why I find this series so different, is that you are talking to people in their thirties. And I think it is hard to talk about any of this stuff when you are still in the child … how do I say this? Your parents are too busy getting you to be an adult and those conversations are really hard to have, I think. But I have arrived, I have my own career. I don’t need them. Those conversations are more readily available for me. Like I can talk to my mom about mental health issues. You are also talking to someone unique because I have a career in mental health. My last job prior to here. I was the assistant dean for students at Cornell. And helped open their Asian American center. Their Asian American center was started because there were 13 suicides amongst Asian Americans and the most sexually assaulted group was Asian American women. That is what I brought there to fix. So, the mental health thing has always been one for me. As also having a brother who tried to commit suicide. So, mental health had to be something that had to be talked about. And I feel lucky because my mom worked in a pediatrics department and mental health is talked there. And she didn’t understand it until my brother tried to commit. So, I also feel very lucky that my mom is whole aware of mental health issues. And we do talk about it, quite a bit.
You know we talked to my dad about being on anti-depressants and stuff like that. Is it a hard conversation to have? I don’t think so because my mom works in the medical field and I come from a training background that talk about it.

NDM: You said you were the assistant dean of students at Cornell. Can you talk more about that?

PCN: You know one story I didn’t tell which is not one that I tell often. I usually say it in more sweeping way. So, when I joined the Vietnamese Student Association at UC Santa Barbra, I actually got sexually assaulted my first year by someone in that club. It was really hard for me because when I went to the rest of the members for help: 1. They didn’t have the resources what to say to me and 2. somewhat me deny it. Because they didn’t want to ruin the reputation of the Vietnamese Organization. And that really sat with me for a really long time, to the point where I never wanted to do anything with Asian American's. Because it was a crucial part of my affirmative year. And great I can't rely on the community I look like? And so, when I was in grad school, I told you I worked mostly with the African American/Latino community and actually felt safer in those communities to do the work. So, when I got the job offer to go to Cornell and open up an Asian American center. It was a completely 360 stand point of me thinking about, “ok, so all those issues that I dealt with. I have a better understanding of what is going on within communities. I have been doing this for communities that I don’t look like. Am I ready to do it for the ones that I do look like?” Cause it is easy to do it in spaces where you don’t affiliate with, right? Like it is a little less personal. So, my decision to become the assistant dean at Cornell to do that was kind of a 360 revisit to me addressing my own identity issues, when it came to that. And having to resolve. Like what is this? I am legitimately given a job to addressing sexual assault within an Asian American community. So, I was brought there for that reason. Like I
really loved that job actually. It was five years. It was really hard because it was started by students who lead a protest against administration. So, they finally got a position, but once students protest for a position that means the University is not fully behind it. So, I got it, but it wasn’t very well-resourced center. Like I got barely any money to do what I needed to do. But I worked with 75 Asian organizations, both Asian American and Asian International. To think about intervention points of thinking about creating less rape culture and also a culture of help seeking. So, that was predominately my job, but I did it through a racial justice lens.

NDM: What was your takeaway?

PCN: That job? You know what is funny? It sounds so stupid, but I feel like our society has gotten it all wrong. Like “parent have the expectations, they are the reason as to why mental health issues are happening with our Asian Americans. No one is talking about mental health.” I didn’t experience that working with parents at Cornell. I thought that was one of the intervention points. I did a lot of parent workshops. I did a lot of parent conversations. And the most part honestly parents just want their kids happy. But because the cultures don’t do a lot of talking, everyone is not in the “know.” And the cultural clashes are real. Like the new short, Bao, that came out. The way a parent is going to ask you if you are doing okay is, “did you eat?” And so, I have been able to do some cultural translations between sort of this generation of college students and their parents. So, I have told parents you can ask then “have you ate?” but you should ask them beyond grades and try talking to them like “are you making friends?” “what are they learning?” Then actually where I feel my biggest take away for me cause I had to live it my own life, is at some point you must re-negotiate that relationship with your parent. Cause at one point this is all going to go the other way, you are going to be having to take care of them. When they get older. That does not happen overnight. It slowly transitions. And I tell a lot of college
students, they have the agency to change that relationship right now. So, I always work with students. What do you want your parents to ask you? How do you want your relationship with your parents be? Don’t tell me “never go to happen because they are just this way.” It is just like friends. Like dating. You got to work out a relationship differently and so, what can you do to change that relationship with your parents? So, that they know that you are not that six-year-old anymore. Not that sixteen-year-old anymore. But an adult that is going to take care of them at some point. So, that I think was the biggest take away for me and I had to help them with those conversations. But I also had to have that conversation with myself too. I took my mom out. And had a five-hour road trip and locked her in a car with me. And sort of just talking to her about our relationship. It takes intentionality and it is not always something that we are forwarded. But I don’t have a language barrier again.

NDM: What do you do now?

PCN: So, most of the jobs that I have had through my career has been in higher ed for about 15 years. I’ve taken on starting new diversity initiatives. That’s what I do for a living. I get brought to places to assess what is going on and create some sort of “thing” to address an issue around diversity. So, in all my experiences, funding was always an issue. So, I would end up rely on alumni to help create the Asian American center or social justice center. So, why not try this. I actually never knew this entire field existed. But someone found me because I was doing work with the Cornell Asian American Association. But what I do now, is that I convene all the different identity-based alumni associations for UCLA. I work with Black alumni, Latino alumni, Asian, Filipino, undocumented, LGBT to figure out how they can positively affect campus climate. So, the lessons learn were if I can't get help from the University maybe I can get
help from alumni. And so, I am doing that now, here. I have a full-time staff of four and all we
do is engage diverse alumni. Which is pretty awesome actually.

NDM: Back at Cornell were you working with alumni as well?

PCN: No. Do you have a multicultural center at UCI?

NDM: Yeah!

PCN: I ran one of those. That’s what I did for a living. But sometimes institutions never had
resources for you, so who can you rely on? Alumni of color.

NDM: How did you find that out? They found you right?

PCN: This job? Yeah, they found me. It was weird because I only worked with college student
my entire life. And am like, “you want me to do what?” But they are like “it is pretty much
running a multicultural center but with alumni.” I was like okay. Let give this a try. It’s a little
different. But I think at that point of my life I was looking at …. how do I say this? When you
work with college students, your constituents you work with never change in age. They are
always 18 to 21 years old. But you get older. I kind of wanted out of that because I think it sort
of warps around your identity. You are always around really awesome people that feel like the
world is in their hands. And that is a great energy to be around. But as you get older, you start to
think like “I’m not around any 30-year olds. I’m not around any 40-year olds.” This job I feel
entirely lucky because I work with people as young as 18 but as old as 80. I get to see life spans
differently. Like yesterday, I was sitting downstairs and having a conversation with three other
Asian American women all from different decades of life. One was 80, one was 50, and I was
like 30. The wisdom that was gardened from that is awesome.
NDM: Working with alumni. Does that shape who you are?

PCN: Does my job impact the way I see my life? Yes, because like is said I used to work with 18 to 21-year olds. When you are around that, you think “what can I do to change the world?” and now I am working with people who have changed the world. I worked with people that are freedom writers. Worked with people who were trying to find reparations for the Chinese railroad workers. I get to see how people manifest now. And I learned that from particular immigrant families, life feels very linear. You are living your life to attain something. From preschool to eighteen. From college to job. But his job has really made me realize that life is more cenacle. It sort of comes from chapters of 10. It makes you look at life differently. Before you thought there was only one end point and now you have chances, multiple chances to do something different. And I worked with a bunch of diverse alumni's and so I learned a lot from different communities. Like i never knew so much about the Native American community and seen much more and learned what it means to be an ally for other communities.

NDM: Do you feel like when you first started at Cornell and working with college students was because of the gap between your brother?

PCN: No. I just really liked Universities. I really liked the spaces. I really liked working with that age group. It fun. It's that age group where you are coming into your identity. Not only career wise but what you want to be and the person in the world. I felt like as someone who wanted to help people and make an impact on the world. That felt like a really awesome place to be and why not work with people who are forming what they are going to do with the rest of their life. I love work around identity development. That’s my favorite thing to do with students is having them realize who they are and not be ashamed of it. That’s the stuff I love doing the most and still do that will alumni. Like I helped this trans women who is in her sixties, pick crop tops at
the bookstore. Those are the things I love and adore because so many forms of oppression have made people feel like they cannot be their full selves. Honestly, that comes from the Vietnamese Identity. We have always fought for who we are. The fighter spirit lives deep. I think that is what make me a proud Vietnamese American.

NDM: Back when you used to live in San Diego. You were around a very diverse community. As of right now do you feel like you want to help the Vietnamese or was always wanting to?

PCN: It was more of a collective. Actually, that is how I started. I never wanted to just help Vietnamese. I feel like I actually have a harder time with that. I feel as if I am more affective in the more general people of color space. Being an ally and that face where Asian American were particularly not in those space a lot. I think legitimately here in LA when I am at a non-Asian event, I think I am the only Asian in the room.

NDM: Kind of stepping away from work and stuff. How would you describe yourself to someone who doesn't know you?

PCN: It’s so funny because I just wrote this myself because of a stupid Instagram bio thing. And someone was like “you need to shorten it.” And I'm like why? If I were to describe myself in a sentence, I feel like I am a space maker for change creators. That is what I do in all sorts of forms. Not just in work but in life. If you were to look at my friend group, I'm pretty nomadic but I love introducing friends to friends and they end up hanging out. I like bringing people together, so they don’t feel less and that is who I am. I do always say when it comes to social identities, I say “I identify, first and foremost, as a person of color. I identify as an Asian American and Vietnamese American social politically. I identify as queer. I identify as a third-generation
college student. Core to my being I just like being creative and creating a space for people who want to do something good.

NDM: In a sense did you ever put yourself in a box? Because you use space to connect people.

PCN: Of what?

NDM: Of like who you are?

PCN: Okay so, how do I say this? Social identities in general is a two-way street. It is how you perceive yourself, but you wouldn’t perceive you self a certain way because you don’t want people to perceive you in a certain way. Like those are my personality traits. I think I am a geek; I think I am creative, and I think I am compassionate. But when it comes to social identities it is a two-way thing. If no one treated me like I am a woman, I probably wouldn’t know I was a woman. So, do I choose to select those boxes? Yes, because they have given me the agency to understand myself better. You learn to understand yourself in the face of community. The minute I am Vietnamese American now I have access to understanding of, okay I know what it means to be Vietnamese American, I can talk to Vietnamese American. If I choose not to check that box, then I don’t have an entry for myself to go do that. The minute I check the queer box. It opened the box of where is queer resources. What does queer identity mean? It has opened me up to those things. So, checking those boxes in for me, even though you are boxing yourself in, it had given me better language to understand who I am.

NDM: So, at my CC (community college). We had this assignment of being queer and how it has actually changed definition throughout time. What is your definition of queer?

PCN: I user queer because lesbian and gay feel too white centric to me. Queer feels more fluid. I like living a life in gray. At some point I identified as pan-sexual but then people would ask me if
I would date dogs. “This I just too much, I cannot handle y’all.” But queer has a socio-political identity too for me. So, queer is a socio-political identity that is out of the norm of what a heterosexual relationship looks like. So, you know, I dated trans-men, dated trans-women, dated women, dated cis-men. It is more fluid. But it is not only about who I love but it is also who I identify politically with.

NDM: Would that be accepted in the Vietnamese community?

PCN: Man, you know how many times I tried coming out to my mom? She’s still in denial. It’s funny because I think she is asexual, and she has a lot of butchy friends. And I think a lot of her friends like her cause I think they are lesbians that like her. I think because that is what I grew up with. My dad probably doesn’t care. Although I haven't explicitly expressed it to him. My mom thinks its gross. But she isn’t going to hate on me. She’s like, “there you go with your activist things. Vermont made you gay and now you think your gay.”

NDM: From the broader Vietnamese community?

PCN: From the Vietnamese community? Uh. No. Because there is a strong catholic base to it. I think around the Buddhist side to it, there is nothing around Buddhism of “bad”, but it is not very accepting either. Like the Dali Lama, the way he interprets it is like, “you don’t use body parts to use them for things you do not intended to use them for.” So, like you would probably be anti-anal sex. But he would also be anti-oral sex. It is never specifically said. I think being a Vietnamese Buddhist helps in that way, but would it be accepted in the Vietnamese community? I think gender fluidity would be more accepted of sexual orientation. Like most of my Vietnamese friends are gay. It seems accepted because they are all gay.

NDM: My last question for you is … what is … I mean I feel like I’m missing a lot of questions
PCN: No. It’s all good. If you ever want to do this again. I am happy. Because I know what this feels like. I have been on the other side. I feel like I am in a unique space because not of my family background but because of my age. I feel a sense of duty being who I am. Given watching my sibling that we are going to have to be at this bridge that is going to keep the history going. Because language facilities are already dropping at people my age and it is pretty much gone with the newer generations. So, I feel like I am going to live on being a Vietnamese American through my work for sure. So, fighter spirit around social justice. When I do think about the cultural things. I do worry. Because someone like me is supposed to do things like, these are things you are supposed to do at a wedding, these are the things that you are supposed to do when you are at a funeral. I feel very unfortunate because none of my family members are organized. I actually had to organize a tea ceremony for my cousin and like I don’t know a lot. It’s like thank god for the internet but also try to double check things with them. I guess when you say, did you miss anything? I am still on this journey of how I can still hold on to the Vietnamese culture. In the face of what is ahead in terms of what this country does. In terms of assimilation and stomping out culture pretty fast. And also doing it with a culture that has a hard time talking. It would be so different for me if I was a different Asian ethnicity. I think there is something about growing up with a generation that has been so affected by war and PTSD that the loss of culture feels a little more dire. I feel a big sense of duty to figure that out right now.

NDM: Last, last question. What is maybe you want to say to future generations that maybe listening to this?

PCN: Like what I just said. I really hope everyone takes a moment to understand as to why they say they are Vietnamese American if they say they are Vietnamese American. Like really understand the full story of why you even want to say. And hopefully that really encourages
them to reconnect with people. To better understand that. Like I told you, I am very lucky that I have family I can talk to and I have family who has written things. For me to hold on to that culture and hold onto that history and hold onto that identity. It is too easy for identities to slip. That’s okay if that is it but if you choose to call yourself a Vietnamese American understand why.

NDM: That is, it. Thank you.

---End of Transcription---