Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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[Interview #2]

CN: This is Cynthia Nguyen with Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine. Today is March 14th, 2019. I will be interviewing Alexander Tran at the Heritage Park Regional Library in Irvine, CA. Alex, please state your full name, date of birth, and place of birth.

AT: My full name is Alexander Vuong Tran and I was born on March 8, 1984 in Orange County, CA.

CN: Alex, what were some memorable events you had in your K-12 education?

AT: I know you gave me these questions beforehand—

CN: You can take your time.

AT: I moved around a lot, so I never really had the chance to develop long-lasting friendships with people my age. But there was this one girl that I had a crush on in sixth grade and after sixth grade I moved to another city and lost touch with her. But interestingly I ran into her again probably fifteen years later, as a makeup artist. I was helping a friend how to do makeup for a wedding and we went to this house, we walked in, and she was the bride. And we hadn't interacted since sixth grade, but when we looked at each other, we recognized each other right away. And I think all that crush came back, just in the way that we looked at each other. I think if I had a straight crush it would've been her. But, I wanna say my childhood was pretty typical.

CN: Was there ever a career you wanted to have when you were a child?
AT: I had always wanted to be some type of artist. Particularly, I wanted to be a painter. But my parents, of course, never wanted me to pursue that. It was always something like, *You need to be a lawyer, or a doctor, or an engineer.* One of those three. Something practical. That's what I eventually tried to go to school for at UCI was to become an artist.

CN: Did you ever tell them, "No, I don't want to be this"?

AT: I did. I actually, when I first dropped out of college and sort of disappeared and was living on my own and basically had spiraled into substance abuse and my health wasn't so good, my parents had found out about that because I ran into my uncle and I guess he told them. And my parents reached out to me and told me, "We'd rather know that you're safe and happy and doing what you wanna do and have you back in our house and have a son, than to lose you." So I came back and lived with them and went back to school to become an art student.

CN: This is kinda similar to the first question, but were there any significant events that happened in your childhood that you can remember?

AT: Any significant events. What really stands out to me was when I started to discover my sexuality. That was probably around puberty, maybe middle school, 13 or 14 years old. I had these feelings and thoughts that I knew weren't acceptable in broad society or among my parents, within my family. That was around the time the internet was first becoming available and I went online, looked for information, looked for affirmation, because there was no one I could talk to. There were books in the library that I tried to check out or read secretively because I didn't want anyone to know. I would actually go to this library and look for books and then put them inside of another book because I didn't want people reading the covers and being like, *Oh my god he's gay.* I was really ashamed and afraid. The internet was the most perfect place for me to stay anonymous, but to find support and get affirmation. I was going through puberty and that's a
difficult time for anybody. I think people who are not discovering that their sexuality is not acceptable or different, who are ashamed about it, are already going through a difficult time. For me, I went on the internet and I was going through chat rooms and talking to people and I had reached out to this one person who told me it's okay to be gay. And he had written to me an email and I had printed it out and stupid me I left it on my printer. So my parents found it and they confronted me about it and they were really upset. I remember my dad looking at me and I had never seen him so disappointed. He had said to me, "I feel like you shot me in the heart." I think that was the start of when things started to unravel for me. I wish that I had understanding parents. I wish I didn't have to go to the internet and talk to people who didn't necessarily have my best interest at heart. But I felt like I had no one, like if I talked to anyone about this, I would for sure be ostracized and made fun of and I think that's a problem that a lot of queer youth run into. I think we all need to, when we're coming of age, to be heard and to be able to talk openly about our struggles and what we're going through. With the internet, there's so many predators out there. It's such a danger. I was actually part of a panel and this one parent was telling our group, "I think my son is gay, I don't know what to do. He's talking to people." This was also a Vietnamese man and this was like a Buddhist group at a religious community and at that time, I wasn't out and I regret not speaking up and saying, This is a very delicate time for your son. I don't expect you to completely embrace or accept this. It's as new to you as it is to your son, but he needs someone to understand. He needs someone to listen. He needs someone to walk through this with and you don't want him to find that person at the other end of another computer who doesn't have his best interest at heart. That's kind of what pushes me to get into LGBT queer work, to put myself there, put myself on the line because I don't wanna see anyone else have to go through what I had to go through.
CN: Did your parents have any rules or advice about dating or relationships?
AT: They did and theirs were very different from each other's. My mom was definitely more conservative and my dad was more like a macho, chauvinistic type of guy. When my dad saw that I was getting depressed and struggling with self acceptance and self esteem, his advice was, *Alex, you need to get out there and you need to date as many girls as you can. Who cares. Have fun. You need to talk to some more girls.* And my mom, when I first came out and she still held onto the hope that her son might be bisexual, he might turn around. When we were at church, my mom would be like, "Oh, that girl is cute. She'd make a great daughter-in-law." But before I came out, they were really conservative like, *Sex and dating, you don't have time for that. You need to go to school and get your education and make money and then you can start dating.* But as soon as they found out that I was gay, they wanted me to date and have sex with girls, so that completely flipped its script. Their advice for me and my sister was very different. They definitely treated boys and girls differently. When it came to dating, they were much more protective of my sister and instilled this idea of modesty and purity, when it came to just giving her advice.

CN: Oh, I should've started with this, but what are your parents' names?
AT: My parents' names? My mother's name is Loan Phan and my dad's name is Phil Tran.

CN: What are some important lessons you've learned from them?
AT: That's a tough one. It's not something I really thought about because it’s been very difficult—I don't know.

CN: You can pass.
AT: Yeah.

CN: What is your relationship with your siblings?
AT: So I have a younger sister and a younger brother. My younger sister is about seven years younger than me and my younger brother is twelve years younger than me. With my younger brother, I wish we had a stronger relationship, but I think the age difference had something to do with why we're not as close as me and my younger sister. I'm super close to my younger sister. She's actually almost done with medical school. I'm really proud of her. She's surpassed me in her education and I'm not jealous. I'm actually very happy for her. I have to say I love her the most out of the family and she was one of the last people I came out to. My parents had already known, of course, but it wasn't until I was probably 30 years old that I finally came out to her. I was very drunk when I did it and I wish I wasn't. I wish I didn't need that liquid courage to come out and tell her. I wanted to tell her for years, but rejection hurts the most from those that you really care about the most. She was the last one I told. And she cried and I cried and we hugged. She was like, "I kinda knew and I was just waiting for you to tell me." I feel like that has brought us much closer. She would hint at it too. She would talk about her gay friends around me all the time. She had confessed that she was trying to create situations to make it easier for me to come out to her, but I was still afraid. I didn't know. She had gay friends and, as understanding as she was, and she worked in the gay community, I was still afraid. It could be her friend. It could be someone outside, but when it's like someone in her own house, her own brother, I was afraid she wouldn't accept me. She was like my main support in my family. The one I loved the most. The one I felt closest to and to lose that, I feel like I'd have nothing. We have a very close relationship and we can talk almost about everything now.

CN: I'm sorry what's her name?

AT: Oh, Sophia [Tran].
CN: Last question. Was there a specific moment where you realized you were Vietnamese American?

AT: When I realized I was Vietnamese American?

CN: Like that you were not like others?

AT: I think that feeling of otherness came from a very young age. It was something that my family, especially my parents, made sure to point out. That we were different; me, my sister, our family, and other people like us. We were not American. We were Asians. We were from somewhere else and we had to work harder to make less money and to be less successful. And that we would never be like them and they would never accept us, as one of them. That was something that was instilled in me at a very young age. I remember my parents telling me like, *You have to work harder. You have to make A's. The white kids, they can make C's, but you're Asian. You have to make an A because your A will still not make you as successful as a white person's C. Because you're different and you'll never be accepted. So you'll always have to work harder for less.* I do feel that in some cases that's a reality, but I also acknowledge it as that self-fulfilling prophecy. Like, if I'm gonna think that, that's what's gonna happen. As soon as I left that bubble of the household and went to school, I knew I was an Asian American. Does that answer your question?

CN: Yeah, is there anything else you want to add?

AT: No.

CN: That’s it.