VN: Today is Tuesday February 21st, 2012. This is Brandon Nguyen with the
Vietnamese American Oral History Project and I am interviewing Ms. Quynh-Trang
Nguyen. We are at her home in San Diego, California.
VN: Would you state and spell your name?
VN: Where and when were you born?
QN: I was born in Nha Trang, Vietnam.
VN: What are the names of your parents?
QN: My father’s name is Nguyen Van Nghi and my mother is Tran Thi Bong.
VN: Can you describe them?
QN: My father was a very loving father, yet he was very strict and so was my mom.
VN: Where did you grow up?
QN: I was in Vietnam until 13. So my teenage years, I was growing up in the U.S. But
from the day I was born until 13, I was growing up in Vietnam, Nha Trang.
VN: What was your home town like?
QTN: We lived in a beach city so it was very peaceful and beautiful. We lived about 3 to 4 blocks away from the beach.

BN: Can you tell me about some of your childhood memories?

QTN: My best childhood memory was the summer time when we get to go to the beach everyday. We went to the beach after summer school and then we went to the beach after our piano lessons in the afternoon, and after dinner. So most of the time, we spent our time at the beach. So that was just the best time of my life.

BN: Can you describe traditions of music, story-telling, dance, or other cultural forms?

QTN: When I was in Vietnam, traditional music for me meant nothing because I went to a French school so I was very much influenced by Western music, so I didn’t know much about Vietnamese traditional music. The culture was also mixed because we were raised in a kind of a Western culture because all of us went to French school so we were influenced by the French. Story-telling most of the time took place at our dinner table. Our parents were telling stories about their childhood or stories about our grandparents. So that’s pretty much all the story-telling in our family. Very informal yet it was very fun and loving.

BN: What year did you come to the U.S.?

QTN: I came to the U.S. in 1975.

BN: When you arrived, where did you stay?

QTN: First we went from the airport Tan Son Nhat to Clark Airbase in the Philippines for about two days and then we were evacuated from there to Guam. We stayed in Guam for a week and then we went to Camp Pendleton in California. We stayed there for three weeks before we were sponsored to settle in San Diego.
BN: What was it like living in Camp Pendleton?

QTN: It was very strange. We had fun, but it was scary because we didn’t know what was going on, especially, you know, at the age of 13. I didn’t know whether I would get to go to school, where my friends were, what kind of new friends I would encounter. I was very worried and scared, but yet somehow I felt okay because I was with my parents and with my two siblings, so together we were still a family so that gave me a bit of comfort. The living conditions in Camp Pendleton wasn’t that great. We had to use portable toilets. It was really cold at night and we didn’t have enough warm clothes. We had to live in the tent. It was like military tents, so that was not very comfortable.

BN: Who sponsored you?

QTN: There was a family. His name is George Sabga. So that was our sponsor and we lived with them for a few months, and then after that we went to live with a second sponsor. His name was Mr. Thomas Hall. We stayed with him for about another year and then we moved out on our own.

BN: How did you know your sponsors?

QTN: I believed that we went through a process when we were in Camp Pendleton. My father, he spoke English fluently, so he was able to communicate with some of the people who came to the camps and also looking for families to sponsor. And also we were a small family. It was only 5 of us. Our parents, my sister, and my older brother. The process went rather quickly. And the fact that they knew my father would be able to get a job quickly. And also we were able to communicate with them. I think all those factors made the process easier for us.

BN: Did your father work for any American corporation while you lived in Vietnam?
QTN: No he worked for the American Consulate Office. He was the Chief Advisor for the American Consulate Office in Nha Trang, but he didn’t work for any American corporation or businesses.

BN: Where did you move after you went to live on your own with your family?

QTN: After I graduated from college, I got married. A few years after that I moved to Orange County for about 10 years, and then I moved to New Jersey.

BN: Oh I’m sorry, I meant where did your family move after you didn’t have to have a sponsor anymore?

QTN: You mean like after…Oh we moved out of our sponsor’s home to Linda Vista. It was also in San Diego, but you know, we rented a small apartment in a neighborhood where housing was cheap. Everything was cheap there. So we stayed there for over a year or two. Maybe almost two years. And then our parents were able to save up and we bought our first home. We moved back to the same neighborhood as our sponsor to live.

BN: What was it like growing up in the U.S. when you were a kid?

QTN: Tough. I remember I went to school the first week and it was summer school, and I was shocked because the kids were chewing gum in class, talked back to the teacher, put their foot on the desk. I was shocked. All that happened was the teacher would say, “Put your feet down! Don’t talk! Stop chewing gum!” And then ten minutes later, they continue to do so. I was totally shocked because when I was in Vietnam, any of those things happened, they would slap us and kick us out of the classroom. That was my first culture shock; it was the classroom. And also it was really tough because I didn’t know English, so every time I tried to communicate with the kids, if the words were similar to French, I would say it in French, and they made fun of me.
BN: Have you ever encountered racism? What was the experience like?

QTN: All the time. My first encounter with racism was in junior high school. It was in my geography class, and I had just started my first semester in junior high school in the US. And it was very difficult because geography, and I didn’t know any English, but I study so hard and it was a multiple choice test, I believe, so I did well. And I got a B on the test. And there was this African American kid sat behind me. He failed the test and I think he was a little embarrassed. He was a little upset. And then he pull my hair and he… I turned around. He say, “You stupid Vietnamese, go back to Vietnam.” And I was so upset, and I told him to go back to Africa. You know, I’ve always known to have a smart mouth. And I was glad that he didn’t punch me, but I was mad, and you know, I just sort of… I had to stand up for myself. And that was my first experience, and it was not pleasant. I was upset, and I went home and I lost sleep over it, but then after that I think that kid, he knew that I wasn’t anybody that he could mess around with, and he kind of left me alone after that. And then, you know, in my profession, I see that all the time. Without so many words I could tell… you know, for example, I was the only executive member of my team at my former job at IDT, and I remember people asking me questions like “How did you get here?” And I knew exactly what they meant… what they had in mind. And I just… you just give them a run around answer, “I came here just like everyone else.” And they go, “What do you mean by that? How did you get here?” And I said, “Oh this morning? I came here… I drove here.” And they keep asking and I knew the exact question and I said, “Oh you mean how did I get here because I’m Asian and I’m a woman?” And then they pause, and I said, “Well for your information, I did not get this job because of affirmative action, is that what you were asking?” And I think they
got a little embarrassed, but I get that question all the time. Or one time, I went to a meeting and I was a little bit late, so I asked my staff to start the meeting without me. And we had two or three vendors that attended the meeting, and they were trying to pitch us on their new products or something, and because I walked in late, so I was being quiet and I sat at the corner because I didn’t want to disturb the meeting. And at one point, I was asking my assistant what was going on, she was trying to prep me, and because of that situation, I think afterward, one of the vendors turn around and told me that if I would send some of the files and information that he needed about the company to him, thinking that I was that person’s assistant. And I looked at him and I said, “If I feel like doing it.” And he wasn’t sure what my intention was. And he asked my assistant, and my assistant was like, “Oh that’s my boss and if she didn’t want to send the information to you, I don’t think I can and you have to wait.” And I think after that he knew that he made a boo-boo, and he came to apologize, and I just laugh. And I said, “Well next time, just don’t assume.” Another situation was… I went to a meeting and I remember it was with the executive members of Disney. And they wanted to learn about the Vietnamese community, and I walked in with my assistant, Joe Byers. And because he’s 6’2, white, so everybody assumed that he’s the boss and I’m the assistant. And the whole entire meeting, a few people there, they just like… when they talked, they addressed to him, and they looked at him. They ignore me totally. And finally he turned around, he said, “She’s the boss, I’m not.” And everybody was very embarrassed. And I could tell the people assume simply because I’m a woman and I’m Asian, and I’m soft spoken, but, you know, I get over it, because for me, you don’t let those things get to you, or get in the way of what you’re trying to accomplish. Because normally I would come out ahead
because I’m being, you know, under valued or “whatchumacallit”, but it doesn’t matter, as long as I achieve my goals. That’s all that matters and I don’t let these things get into my head or become a weight on my shoulder.

BN: Where did you go to college?

QTN: I went to San Diego State University.

BN: What did you study there?

QTN: I studied linguistics and French because I was young and I was not realistic. I didn’t think of trying to major in something that would help land a job after graduation and so I went back to school and with the advice of my father this time, I tried to get a teaching credential. I finished all the courses. I finished all the requirements and also I had to do student teaching for two semesters. I finished all the requirements and then I decided it was not for me. I went back to school again. This time I attended Coleman College and got a degree in Computer Information Science and I was able to land a job right after that. So my father was happy because he thought this time he could make some sense out of me. That didn’t last too long either because after two years I decided that wasn’t even for me either, so I quit.

BN: What job did you have?

QTN: I had a job working as a programmer doing computer software. I quit simply also because that was the time I got married and then I moved up to Orange County. And I was like… well maybe this is a chance to do something else different because programming was okay. I made good money, but it was not fun.

BN: So you moved to Orange County?

QTN: Yes, and I lived in Anaheim after I got married.
BN: What did you do while you were up there?

QTN: First, I hung out at my former husband’s office because he was a television producer for a cable company, and he also had his own business doing productions. So I was hanging out around there, trying to figure out what I’m going to do next. Trying to get a job. I didn’t care. I was not serious of looking for a job. I was helping him around the office and with the production, and then I got hooked into television production.

BN: So this was about the same time you started getting into television and radio production.

QTN: Yes, yes, and that triggered me to start the Little Saigon Television. And then about 3 years later, we started Little Saigon Radio as well.

BN: And you enjoyed doing that type of work?

QTN: At the time yes. Now looking back, I’m not sure I can say that. I learned a lot. It was very interesting. It was very challenging. I learned a lot in media, particularly in running a small company with very little resources. Yet the tasks, and the requirements, and the expectation was enormous. It was very difficult. At the time, yes I enjoyed it. But there were times that I was tired and confused.

BN: So why’d you stop?

QTN: There were two things. Number one, I was doing it for almost 8, 9 years. And also I was looking for something new and there were a couple of business opportunities that came and I presented to the board of directors of Little Saigon Radio, but they didn’t approve. And I didn’t think the company would have a future had they not approved my proposal to move forward, so I quit. And I wanted to do something more. I wanted to
explore the media world, so I accepted a job with a company in New Jersey. So I started
the first Vietnamese satellite television 24/7 in the U.S.

BN: So when you moved to New Jersey, you did the 24…

QTN: Yes, I did the first Vietnamese Satellite television. It was called Vietnamese
Broadcasting Network on the Direct T.V. platform.

BN: So when did you move to New Jersey?

QTN: In 1998.

BN: So when you moved to New Jersey, why did you come back to Southern California
and when?

QTN: I recently moved back to California to be closer to my family members, and to help
out my mother because her health is deteriorating. And it was a promise that I made to
my father before he passed away that I would help take care of my mother when she
needs me, so I’m here now.

BN: Do you vote in U.S. elections?

QTN: Which one? I’m just kidding. I did. When I first got my citizenship. That was in
1982, I believe. And then I participated ever since. There was only one year, one election.
I forgot what happened. Oh I was traveling, I didn’t mail in my ballot on time. But I
participated in every single one there after.

BN: Do you keep in touch with family or relatives from Vietnam? If so, who and how?

QTN: I do. I had the privilege to visit Vietnam a couple of times. A few times they were
work related; a few times I was traveling on my own as a tourist. And each time, I visited
my cousins and my mom’s relatives. The first time was in 1991, and that time I came
back as a reporter for Little Saigon Television. That was my first trip back to Vietnam after the fall of Saigon.

BN: What was the experience like going back to Vietnam?

QTN: Uh amazing, because I left as a little girl and I came back as a women with very different view and perspective of the world of what I learned outside of Vietnam. And coming back at that time, Vietnam was still very repressed and also there was many oppression as well. So I saw how a couple of my cousins didn’t get a chance to excel in school because their parents were a former military personnel or were former army officers. And that really saddened me because they didn’t have the opportunity that I had and that bothered me a lot. And also, Vietnam at the time had not opened up to the outside world so people were very poor. It was just not the same Vietnam that I loved, although there were no war. But the whole country was really poor, and everything was really depressing in my opinion.

BN: What traditions or customs have you made an effort to preserve? Are there traditions that you have given up or changed?

QTN: I try to be a person that I think that regardless whether you’re American, Vietnamese, you know, regardless your race, you should be the person that always have respect for elders or family members, and for people in general. So I don’t know if that’s a good traditions or bad traditions, I just think that it’s a right thing to do. So when people asked me if that’s a Vietnamese tradition, I would pause because to me that’s not a tradition, that’s something that anybody should have or carry with them as a person in general. So yes, people often say that Vietnamese families have better traditions. Well I think, you know, in any race they have good traditions and respect your parents, the
elders… you know, your siblings. Just respect people in general. To me, that’s important. And it has always been in my family. So that’s something that everybody in our family… you know, we all preserve that. So I don’t know if that’s a tradition or it’s just teachings that been carried on in our family for different generations. And I think part of it also has to do with the fact that we’re Christians… we’re Catholics. That’s really important that we respect our parents, and to me, regardless where I am, I will always carry and preserve that.

BN: Are you very religious?

QTN: I’m not sure about the term very religious, and I don’t know how people define that, but for me, religion is very important to me. I am Catholic. I go to church. I praise god. I pray. I do everything that I think a good Catholic should be. And I’m not just doing it because there are rules and regulation, and there are laws, and there are things that the church requires you to do. I do it because I know that’s the teaching of the bible and it’s the right thing to do. Of course I go to church, and of course I pray. I try to be a good Catholic, so I don’t know if that’s defined as very religious.

BN: Is there any difference of how you practice Catholicism here and how you did in Vietnam?

QTN: No, because the… you know, Catholics are Catholics, and the Church is the Church. So we pretty much the same, except in the US, you know, the Mass… everything, if you go to American Mass, than it’s in English, and if you go to Vietnamese Mass, it’s pretty much the same as in Vietnam, unless, you know, there are changes by the Church, than yes, you have to adopt all the changes. But in terms of practicing Catholic values and traditions and beliefs, no, there’s no difference. But I would go a
little bit further to explain that it’s a little easier here in the U.S., because in Vietnam, being a Christian, or being a catholic, is being a minority. So when I go to school, I believe I was the only Catholic in my class. And so kids didn’t understand, you know, that I don’t go to the altar and burn incense and… or at home, we don’t have an altar with our ancestors. What we do is we go to church on their… on the day of somebody’s death, you know, the anniversary of our great grand parents or grandparents death, and we pray for their departed soul, and that’s all we did. We didn’t have an altar, so that was very different from the rest of my friends’ family. And I remember when I was in Vietnam, kids made fun of me because I’m Catholic, you know, just being different. It’s very difficult as a young kid. But here in the US it’s very different. People respect your religion, and if you say you are a Christian, or you’re a Catholic, it’s pretty much, so be it. Okay, that’s who you are, and I think it’s a little bit easier here in the U.S., not that when I was young I was ashamed of my religion or anything, but because it was not very popular, and it was hard to explain to other kids why we didn’t do certain things as people who were Buddhist or Confucianism, where they worship their ancestors. We don’t.

BN: Do you belong to any church organizations?

QTN: In California, yes. I belong to a parish and I sing in a choir at St. Therese of Carmel in San Diego.

BN: How do you identify yourself in American society?

QTN: I consider myself as a Vietnamese American and not Asian American. Vietnamese American.

BN: Why?
QTN: Because I’m very proud of my heritage. I’m very proud of who I am. And I want to make a distinction between Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, and other races, you know. And I don’t like it when people just lump us all together as just Asian Americans. Yeah I can see as a society you can do that, but why do you say… you know you have Mexicans, you have other ethnics that being identified as their own ethnic group… community. And when it comes to Asians, they just go, “Oh, Asians.” Well, yes, Asians, but they’re Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Filipino, you know. So I am Vietnamese American.

BN: What do you think about all the things the Vietnamese community has been doing? Like with Little Saigon, and all the events that are being held every year.

QTN: I think the Vietnamese American community in Little Saigon has come a long way. Before 1975, you know, Westminster was a dump, seriously. And because of the Vietnamese Americans, the economy has been boomed ever since. The real estate value has gone up, the economy… just everything in general. So I think Vietnamese community here has done a great job. And compared to other ethnic groups that have been here the same amount of time, I think the Vietnamese Americans has done a tremendous job. However, there’s just so many issues and things that been going on in the community that’s still happening now versus 10-15 years ago. And it’s just… the political divisiveness, and just still a lot of personal attacks on people political beliefs and stuff. I wish there would be less of that, but then again, we live in a free country, free speech. People can voice their opinion however they want to, and that’s part of exercising democracy. But as a community, I don’t think it’s healthy. And if people keep attacking each other on a person level, for whatever reason, I don’t think it’s going to do any good for the community. But if they think that yes, they need to voice their opinion, or the
community needs to get together to voice certain political opinion because of the
humanitary situation in Vietnam, or because of political oppression in Vietnam, than
that’s fine. But just because somebody has a different opinion than the other person, than
you automatically label that person as pro this and pro that. To me, that’s just not healthy.
BN: Do you ever, or have you ever gone to the Tet Festival?
QTN: Yes, when I was the president of Little Saigon T.V. and Radio, we sponsored many
Tet Festivals. We broadcast some of the programs live on our television as well. I think
it’s a fun activity. And then after that, there were more than one Tet festival, so we
stopped sponsoring them because it was just too difficult to sponsor one and not the
other. But we were very actively involved with the Vietnamese Students Association and
their Tet festival, because I think that’s the most legitimate one, and that was the first one
that was organized. So, I tend to lean towards the students more. Give them support and
broadcast the programs live, and plus, all the proceeds usually going to good cause.
BN: Wait, why did you think that the Tet Festival held by the V.S.A. students was the
most legitimate one?
QTN: Because they were the fist one to organize such festival, and they were very
successful. And also, they did it because they wanted to preserve the culture. So I think,
you know, Vietnamese people in the community, particularly the elders, should support
that, and encourage them to continue to do so by different ways of helping them, either
lending a hand, or volunteer time, or encourage them to continue the tradition. And, if
anything, their purpose is to preserve the culture and the tradition. So, you know, that’s
legitimate to me.
BN: So you think they do well in preserving the culture?
QTN: In a way, I think they put in very good effort. And they try, but sometimes because lack of guidance and direction, things could go wrong. And also because, back then, you know, the internet and the information on the internet was not very rich, so there were a lot of stuff it was hard for them to do the research and understand the culture, and going back to the roots and learning about Tet and all the traditions. So there were a lot of conflicting messages because of information that they received from different people in the community. But now I think there are more archives and information on the internet, and also in different public libraries, where people can do research, and you know, talk about the culture. For example, like they didn’t understand why Ba Muoi Tet, we have the tradition of cung, you know, there’s an altar of the kitchen god, and a lot of people did that without understanding the tradition behind it, and why were the beliefs and stuff like that. So, these are the things that to me it’s very important if you were to do something to preserve the culture, you got to do the research and really understand the history of it. And then back then, you know, there weren’t a lot of publishing materials, but they try so, you know, I always support the younger generation when they involved in a cause like that.

BN: Do you and your family celebrate Tet?

QTN: We do if it falls on the weekends. If it’s on a weekdays, you know, we all still have to go to work, and then maybe just have dinner, but we don’t take off on the first day of the New Years just to celebrate Tet. So we usually just postpone it, so we’ll celebrate on the weekends.

BN: Is that a tradition, taking the first day of Tet off?

QTN: In Vietnam, we have ten days off.
BN: Ten days off…

QTN: Yes. And it’s like the biggest celebration in the lunar calendar year. But, you know, here we try to do as much as we can but, you know, we live in the US, we have to go to work. You know, you can’t just take off, you know, just to stay home. If people have vacation days, some people would do that, but some people don’t, and it doesn’t matter really. To me, its… like, if you’re going to do it on the weekend and your intention is to preserve the tradition, that’s all that matters.

BN: What traditions do your family keep? Like Tet traditions.

QTN: Li xi, all the kids love that. That’s the tradition that all the kids love. I particularly always call my aunts and uncles, my parents, you know, to wish them good health and prosperity during Tet; it’s a sign of respect. And I’ve done that through all my life, and that’s the one tradition that I’ve always kept.

BN: In your opinion, what will become of Vietnamese culture in America?

QTN: for the older generation, I think that they will always preserve what they brought over from Vietnam: certain traditions, certain nostalgic memories or feelings. For the younger generation, I think they will focus a lot more on building their own community with friends and relatives. That is, more family traditions and less focus on the political aspect of the Vietnamese community here, because they have not experienced the war, and I don’t expect them to. And I think they will have a much broader view of Vietnam, of the community. And mostly, in my opinion, they will consider themselves as Asian American more than Vietnamese American, because they see that their culture, Vietnamese culture, or Vietnamese American in the U.S. is very similar to Korean American, Chinese American, just other Asian culture. But for Vietnamese American,
older generations, it’s very different because of the war experience, because of many things they brought with them in terms of good and bad memories. Their thinking and their way of living is different.

BN: What are the most important things that future generations of Vietnamese Americans should remember about their past?

QTN: I think that they should remember why they’re here, why their parents are here, what was the reason, what was the history behind it, learn from the past and try to avoid the mistakes, but always embrace the future.

BN: Are you involved with the Vietnamese community in the U.S.?

QTN: I was. I was very involved when I was the president of Little Saigon T.V. and Radio, but when I moved to New Jersey because my work related and also were I lived, there was not a lot of Vietnamese people around so I kind of lost touch. But you know I still keep in touch with a few friends and people I know here so I’m quite aware of what’s going on in the community, but I’m not involved anymore.

BN: Was your father involved?

QTN: He was. My father was my editorial editor. And also he wrote a lot of commentaries for the news for Little Saigon T.V. and Radio.

BN: What do you know about your family’s name?

QTN: Nguyen. That is such a common name. The Nguyen Dynasty reigned for over 140 years. It’s not anything special. It’s a common name. From what I’ve learned with Vietnamese history, my ancestors could be a Le or Tran or somebody, and when the Nguyen took over, because they were afraid for their safety, a lot of them changed their name, just like on my mothers side. I think their original last name was Le, and not Tran,
but during the war, a lot of the Nguyen, when the Nguyen Dynasty took over, they did
kill a lot of the enemies with the last name Le, during the war. So a lot of people changed
their last name. And it could very well happen to my ancestors too. I don’t know, but I
just know that from my great grandfather down, we were all Nguyen.

BN: What languages do you speak?

QTN: When I was in Vietnam, I went to a bilingual school, so I did speak Vietnamese
and French when I was young. When I came to the U.S., I learned English. I tried to keep
up with my French, but I don’t speak it regularly, so I’m losing it. But my Vietnamese
and English are okay.

BN: What memorable stories have your family members told you in the past?

QTN: For me, I thought it was so cool when my father told me that my grandfather stole
money from my great grandfather and went to Laos and just spent all the money with his
younger brother because my great grandfather was quite wealthy. I thought that was
pretty cool. I know. I know. It was unheard of for a Vietnamese family that has kids that
would steal money and go to a foreign country and spend it all. I thought it was kind of
funny and cool. Not that I’m proud of it, but I just thought he was different. He got in
trouble.

BN: Which occupations have your family members held in the past?

QTN: My father was a high school principal. He also taught French and Vietnamese
literature, geography, and ethics. Not business ethics, but just general ethics. Citizenship,
things like that. And then he also was a Chief District for certain central areas in
Vietnam, and then after that he was jailed. He was a political prisoner because of the
overthrow of the government of the First Administration of the Republic of Vietnam.
And after that he was in jail for three years, I believe, and then after that he was recruited by the American Consulate Office.

BN: So your father went to prison?

QTN: Yes he was a political prisoner, sadly, of the Vietnamese Administration, Second Administration, because he served in the First Administration.

BN: How was your family supported when he was in prison?

QTN: Luckily my mom was a smart woman. What she did was she rented our house to foreigners, and we all moved to the back because our house was quite big. We had about, I believe it was like 7 bed rooms, and then we have two huge family rooms. I think she rented out 4, 5 bedrooms to other people, foreigners, and she used that as an income to support us while my father was being jailed, and sent all of us to French school.

BN: How much education has your family had in the different generations?

QTN: My father, as I said, he was a high school principal. He went through the whole French education system. And when he went to the U.S. he got his masters here at SDSU through the French department. And then he also had a scholarship to finish his Ph.D., which he did. He did half of his, the first two years, I believe, at UCLA, and then he went to UCSD, but then he got very involved in a political movement with the Vietnamese community and so he never finished his thesis because he was too involved in other things. But that’s how far he’s gone in his education. And my mother, during the war, she had to quit school after her elementary school, I think it was 5th or 6th grade, to help her parents raise her younger brothers and sisters, so she didn’t get to go to school after that, but all her young brothers and sisters finished high school, and some even started college in Vietnam.
BN: You said your father didn’t finish his Ph.D. because he got involved in a political movement?
QTN: Yes.
BN: Which political movement?
QTN: During that time, there was a lot of opposition with the Vietnamese Communist government in Vietnam, so he even got involved with some of the senators in Sacramento. I think it was Senator Torres, if I’m not mistaken. So he went with a few selected people with Senator Torres to go back to Vietnam, and he asked to meet up with the Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, at the time he was Archbishop of Vietnam, who was also being jailed in Vietnam. And so he focused more on the humanitarian effort to help a lot of Vietnamese political prisoners to get released from the education camp or being captured in prisons in North Vietnam. So for him, at the time, it was more important for him to be involved and to help people under those circumstances than to finish his Ph.D. And I think after a while, you have “X” number of years to finish your thesis, if you didn’t, then you pretty much drop out. So he never finished his Ph.D.
BN: In Vietnam or America, does your family hold reunions or annual gatherings?
QTN: Yes, we do because were Catholics so we always have family gathering and reunions for Christmas, particularly, and also on the anniversary of our ancestor’s death. And we go to Mass, and we pray for departed souls, and we have small family dinner gathering. Now, every year now, we gather for the grandchildren’s birthdays. So I attend, on an average, 15 to 20 of them per year. 10 grand kids, and then kids from our cousins.
BN: Does your family have any special sayings or expressions?
QTN: There’s one saying that I always remember to this day, is what my father always told me. He said, “You understand why God gives you two ears, two eyes, but only one mouth?” And I thought he was being sarcastic, but he said, “God wants you to listen and observe, and process more than voice your opinion. And talk less.” And I think he said it particularly to me because I have a tendency to be very vocal and I say what’s on my mind.

BN: What special food traditions does your family have?

QTN: What special what? Can you repeat that please?

BN: What special food traditions do your family have?

QTN: My parents are from central Vietnam, Hue, so we have a lot of traditional dishes from Hue like: Bun Bo Hue, Banh Beo, Banh Nam, Banh Bot Loc. I’m sure you’ve had some of those. That’s traditional dishes from Hue.

BN: Have any of these recipes been passed down to you or your brothers and sisters?

QTN: Yes, only dishes that we like. I know how to make bun bo hue, ban bot loc. I’ve never tried banh xeo or banh beo or banh nam, but banh bot loc and bunh bo hue, I know how to make them.

BN: What family heirlooms and mementos do you possess?

QTN: Sadly, when we left Vietnam, we didn’t bring anything with us except maybe two pair of pants and two shirts. So we don’t have any heirlooms. My mother gave me a ring, but that’s all. For me it’s not important, but the memories of my father, I consider to be my heirloom.

BN: Your mother gave you a ring?
QTN: Yeah, she gave me a gold ring. You know a small one. I think she brought that from Vietnam. It doesn’t cost much, but I think she gave that to me when I was 15 or 16. It’s like a tradition where mother would give daughter jewelry when she turns 16.

BN: How did the war in Vietnam affect your family and community?

QTN: You mean like my family and community in the U.S., or my family in Vietnam? During the war time, or after war?

BN: During. During the war time.

QTN: It was tough. I remember when I was 5, my first day in school, my father didn’t take me to school because he was in jail. And that had a great effect on me as a young kid because other kids, you know, they went to school with both parents, or at least the father. I didn’t, and I remembered my grandfather took me to school. And other kids asked me about it. And I didn’t know the difference between being a prisoner, a political prisoner, and a prisoner. And in my mind, and the kids mind, a prisoner is somebody who’s done something really bad. They kill somebody, they stole something, you know, they committed a crime. Well my father is in jail so he can’t take me to school, and the kids made fun of me. And I was so upset, I was so mad. I was so mad. And I didn’t know why my father was in jail, and I couldn’t explain it to anybody. And I hated it. But after school, the kids, their parents, either the mother or the father, would come pick them up after school. And I didn’t have anybody, so I usually just hang around, and either my grandfather would come by and pick me up or one of the helpers at the house, he came pick me up after school, and I was not proud of that. So I kind of like waited until everybody, all the kids, left, and then I would come out and then go home. That was like the worst childhood memory for me.
BN: Do you remember your last days in Vietnam?

QTN: Yes, vividly. I remember we had recently escaped from Nha Trang to Saigon. And we were staying at this hotel, and that night… that afternoon, my father called from the embassy saying, “Get ready because we going to leave today.” So we already made dinner, but I remember we were so hurried that we didn’t even eat dinner. And so we just grabbed whatever we have and we went to Tan Son… we went to the embassy, and we stayed inside of the embassy. And then we were… we got on a bus, a military bus, and we were taken to the Tan Son Nhat Airport, and we stayed there for a day. I think we slept on the ground. And then on the 25th, we were airlifted to Clark Airbase, it was late at night, out of the C-130, which is a military airplane. Those airplanes were used to transport arms, not people, so we were all lying on the floor. There were no chairs.

BN: They were used to transport what?

QTN: Arms.

BTN: Arms, oh okay. What was going through your mind while you were…?

QTN: I remember as we were ready to take off, I was tip toeing and look at the outside of the windows, just to look, because I had a feeling this would be the last time that I would see Vietnam. So one of the, I think he was a marines or something, he picked me up and he pointed outside. So he picked me up so I can see, and then it was late at night. And it was sad, it was scary. And then he looked at me, and I just say… you know, I just look at him and I didn’t say thank you or anything, and he put me down, and you know, I saw my parents and everybody was so scared and afraid. It was not very pleasant, but I knew in my heart that would be the last time that we would be in Vietnam.

BN: What was the journey like coming overseas? Was it…?
QTN: It was a long journey. Scared. Worries. Not knowing what the future’s going to be like. Left all of my friends and relatives in Vietnam. Not knowing a language. Just facing the unknown was really scary.

BN: Did you know where you were being taken?

QTN: All I knew was we were going to America. And at the time, you know, we all looked up to my father, so if he said we were okay, we believed in our heart that we would be okay. And that was the only comfort that we had was our father.

BN: So did you leave any family members behind?

QTN: Not… Yes, my oldest brother was stuck in Vietnam for a year, and then he escaped. He were one of the first Vietnamese boat people who escaped from Vietnam. The reason he got left behind was he… it was his fourth year of college and he was to take the final test in May, I believe, and so he wanted to stay behind so that he can take the exam and graduate from college. But you know, we thought that, okay well, we were going to go to the US and things in Vietnam might settle down, might be better, and then we will come back. And also my father… my brother, at the time, was at the draft age, so he couldn’t leave. So, you know, we thought that if anything happened, maybe he can escape with one of my uncles who was in the military, and he was in the air force, so we thought that would be his safety net. But then it happened so fast. The fall of Saigon happened so fast 5 days after. And that night, I think, I was told that there was bombing all over, and it was so unsafe, and they didn’t leave the house so they got stuck behind.

BN: So he was one of the first boat people that came?

QTN: Yes, he escaped from Nha Trang to the Phillipines in 1976.

BN: Do you know how he escaped since he went…(inaudible)?
QTN: Yes, he and my aunt, my uncle, and their kids, and another family, who’s also a
friend of my father, they all bought a fishing boat, and they pretend that they were go out,
go fishing, and then late at night, they just took off from Nha Trang to the Phillipines in a
very small fishing boat.
BN: What did you think of U.S. policy during and after the war?
QTN: For me, I think the American government had a very good intention going to
Vietnam, but the execution went all wrong for many reasons, and that’s a topic for a
different day. But if you were to ask me if the U.S. should or shouldn’t be in Vietnam, the
answer is yes, they should, and the answer is no, they shouldn’t have done some of the
things that they did. They should be in Vietnam to help stop communism for expanding
throughout Southeast Asia, but there were some really bad policies that were executed.
BN: When you came to the U.S., how did your dad make a living to support you?
QTN: Because he knew English, and I’m using past tense because my father’s already
passed away, so he was able to get a job right away, and he worked as a social worker for
a while, and that’s how he earned a living the first year. And then after that, he taught at
Montgomery School as one of the bilingual teachers. And also that was a junior high
school, and that was also the school your mom attended, I believe. And then after that, he
taught as an adjunct professor at San Diego State and also at UCSD in French, French
Literature, and Comparative English and French, I believe. And after that, he worked for
Little Saigon T.V. and Radio as an editorial staff. And then after that, he did a lot of
translation work as well.
BN: What are some similarities between your old community and your new one?
QTN: My old community would be the time that I was working as the president of Little Saigon T.V. and Radio. They were very vocal. Very… they would politicize everything. So it was different. And now im more involved in the Vietnamese community, basically with the church and just, you know, local community doing a lot of social work stuff. So it’s not to that magnitude were I have to deal with a lot of issues, social and political issues. Just mostly a lot of charity work, so it’s very different.

BN: You once mentioned that your life was being threatened while you work for Little Saigon. Why was that?

QTN: Because I was trying to be objective and professional. So I remember in one of our broadcast from the BBC, and this is just a live broadcast relayed directly from the BBC in London, where one of the Vietnamese reporters interviewed of the Vietnamese high ranking officials from North Vietnam. And so a lot of people in the community reacted to that, and they didn’t think that I should of allowed, and I use the word allowed, an enemy to speak freely on little Saigon radio airway, because I had indirectly broadcast and gave the communist a voice. And of course I reacted to it differently. My reaction was, no im a broadcaster, and little Saigon radio is professional broadcasting company, so we have to be objective. And it does not matter whether we agree or disagree, but it is news worthy, and so we believe the people in the Vietnamese community have the right to hear what the other side has to say. And whether they agree or disagree with this particular official is up to them because I respect their opinion, and as a broadcasting company, we should respect that, because to us, that’s the first right amendment.

BN: When you were being threatened, what were some of the threats?
QTN: I personally received death threats. People would either call in to my assistant and said that they would kill me, or they would leave, you know, messages on my answering machine, or they would call in to different lines through my radio and television staff and threatened that if I don’t stop broadcasting the BBC, and that I continue to be liberal in my broadcasting news, they will hurt me. It got so bad to the point where I had to report, you know, a lot… some of the treats to the police, and I remember the Santa Ana Police Department sent somebody over, and they asked me to come over to the station. And they mapped out, you know, different directions, and they recommended that I should take different routes home for my own safety. I did it for about two days, and it was just too much hassle, and I said forget it. And also, I was recommended to have a bullet proof vest. And I said well forget it because they can always shoot me in the head while I’m driving, so no use. And my philosophy is that I’m not going to show any threat, and I’m not going to yield to these people because I’m in the right, and if I show that I sweat, they will continue to threaten me. And after a while, you know, they stopped threatening me and they knew that, you know, I’m being… the police kind of look after me. And also I had to hire a security guard to stand in front of my office. And that cost a lot of money because that’s, you know, an expense that I didn’t need. It was very tough, and I was very upset, but I was not about to yield to that. And after a while, it went away. So people attacked me on different topics and issues. It got to the point where my competitors also attacked me for being a communist sympathizer.

BN: So you’ve earned a lot of achievements in your life, can you list some of them?

QTN: Professionally, maybe. Personally, I don’t know. Professionally, because I think I am a very responsible person, so whatever I do, I would give it 110% of my effort. And I
think as a result of that, some of my efforts are being recognized. And I always thrived to be the best. Competitively, not with others, but mostly with myself because I know that if I can do something better, then I will always try to, you know, do that... to reach that goal. So I believe I was being honored as the Women of the Year from the California State Assembly. I was awarded as Women in Business by the Orange County Business Journal. I was being interviewed by the NHK. It’s a Japanese public television station in Japan. And I mentioned an interview by local television and also local newspapers. And I think the last award that I received a few years back was the Most Influential Women in Radio by Radio Ink.

BN: So how do you feel about coming over to the U.S.?

QTN: I consider myself and my family are the luckiest ones because if we were still in Vietnam, I don’t know what would happen to me and my siblings. Because I remember when we escaped from Nha Trang to Saigon, the moment we arrived to Saigon, my father’s boss told us that he got news that the communist already executed my father, and that made him very nervous. So he was very happy that we were able to escape and got to Saigon safely. So I knew that my father was on the priority list of the Vietnamese government, communist government. So, you know, if we were still in Vietnam, I don’t know what would happen to our family. I am sure that my father would have been jailed, and probably would have been killed. So I consider my journey, you know, despise all the things that we suffered, I think we’re very lucky.

BN: What do you do in your free time?

QTN: I love to read, listen to classical music, play the piano, play tennis. Just hang out with my family members and a few close friends.
BN: Are there any other memories or stories that you would like to share?

QTN: Here or in Vietnam?

BN: Either.

QTN: I have a lot of beautiful childhood memory… memories when we were in Vietnam. Although, you know some of the stuff that we did, I thought… now that we talked about it with my family members and we laughed and we thought how silly we were. But to me those were like the best memories of my childhood. Just to play with the neighbors. We would go to the back yard and just catch snails. Just little stuff that we do. We get into fights with the neighbor kids and stuff like that. Just do a lot of silly things that we did. It was a lot of fun because back then we didn’t have video games, we didn’t have a lot of toys, so we had to invent our own games and toys. We even played cowboys and Indians, and, you know, it was silly because we learned that from some of the American episodes and television that we watched, or movies. And we lived like close by one of the high schools. There was like three high schools around our areas. And we always go from the back door of our house into the school yard, and we play there. We played soccer. We just got a bunch of the neighbor kids together and just play a lot of silly games. It was really nice. It was beautiful. We got in trouble all the time with the neighbor kids and the parents because we were being kids, and we got into fights and stuff. To me, that was like very peaceful time of our lives in Vietnam. And when I came here, we didn’t have much because, you know, we didn’t speak English, we didn’t have a lot of friends, we had to start all over. And I had to start working when I was 13. I worked every single summer. And then in high school, I worked after school throughout high school and then college. So for me, it was school and work. And I literally didn’t have any summer breaks or
anything throughout my teenage years and also college life. So life was rough for me growing up in the U.S.

BN: What jobs did you have when you were…?

QTN: I’m glad you asked. When I first arrived to the US and I was going to summer school right after we came to live with our sponsor… I went to summer school, so the school offered me a job at the library, and that was wonderful because I love books, so that was an ideal job for me. But the job only lasted for about 7 weeks and then summer school was over. So the head of custodians asked me if I wanted to work and earn some pocket money. We didn’t have any money, so of course, you know, I said yes. And I ask him what would I have to do? And he said oh it’s so… you know, you just have to clean up the classrooms, and preparation for the school year in September. So the job was about for a month, and I was like oh I don’t mind cleaning up classrooms, how hard can that be. Well the next day I show up to work and he told me to clean the toilets. And I did it, I came home, and I cry because when we were in Vietnam I never had to lift my fingers for anything. We had two maids, and you know, I didn’t have to do anything. I didn’t even have to put my plates away and my bowls away after I eat and you know. And so, you know, that was just like humiliating. And so I told my father I’m going to quit, I can’t work, I can’t clean toilets, it’s just out of the question. So he sat me down and he said that he was very sorry that he couldn’t afford to put… you know, to give me the comfort that he gave me when we were in Vietnam, cause things change… situations change. But he said he wanted me to remember that because I think this kind of jobs is humiliating, I will always try to remember to get a good education so I would never have to do this again as a… you know, as a profession for the rest of my life. And he thought
about it… I thought about it over night, and the next day I show up to work, because he said… also said that was a… it’s an honest job, though it’s not very glamorous, but it’s an honest job, and I shouldn’t be ashamed of that simply because it’s not glamorous, as long as it’s an honest job then it’s okay, but then, you know, if I don’t want to ever have to do that ever again, then try to get an education. And that was like the biggest lesson for my life. And then when I was in junior high and in high school, summer jobs was okay. I got a job with the unemployment office for youth. So what they did was they placed summer programs for young kids, you know, to work in different areas and different types of jobs, offices jobs. So I helped processing all the paper work, and then placed the kids for different programs. And then in high school, I was a interpreter for a health clinic to help a lot of Vietnamese who came over during that time as refugees, to go through all the process, you know, to get their health check, take them to the hospitals, and do a lot of translation. So I became the full time interpreter for the clinic on the weekends, and on weekdays I worked part time. And then in college, I continued to work as a front office person for a dental office, and also I taught piano on weekends. And after college, I worked as a software programmer, and I worked as president of Little Saigon T.V. and Radio, and vice president of operations for the satellite network. After that, I worked as chief operating officer for Liberty Broadcasting Radio Network, Senior V.P. Studio Operations for Stars Animation, Senior V.P. of IDT Internet Mobile Group, and now I’m a business consultant. I’m on my own. I do contract works and schedule my own times and projects.

BN: So what do you do for a job now?
QTN: Now I work as a... how do I say... as a business consultant. So I help businesses that need people to come in and help them either revive their business plans or... I consult mostly for media companies, and... or help them with social media strategies, marketing strategies, or sales strategy to help them boost their businesses. So I accept a client project. So sometimes I rewrite their business plans. Sometimes I go in and I train their sales people. Sometimes I go in and I help them with marketing strategies, how to market their products. Sometimes I work with the entire executive team to help them put together strategies for the whole business, and in some of the... in cases, I help them bring their business overseas.

BN: And you’re content with your job now? You’re not...?

QTN: I am because I pretty much schedule my own time. I have free time now. And I’m at a point in my life where I like to have more time for myself and for my family. Sometimes, you know, with these type of projects, sometimes you work for 6 months and you work 12-14 hours a day, and sometimes you only work for 5 hours a day. But if I’m too busy, I can always push back and say no, I can’t finish this in three weeks, I need a month, or I need 6 weeks. So, I’m pretty much, you know, able to schedule my own time with different projects.