MC: Today is Friday, March 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2012. This is Mally Cheng with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project and I am interviewing Mr. Huy Tran and we are at his home in Fullerton, California. Would you please state your name and where you were born?

HTT: Sure, My full name is Tran, Tuong Huy and I was born in Ban Me Thuot, Vietnam.

MC: Can you describe your hometown and where you grew up?

HTT: Ban Me Thuot is a city in central Vietnam. It’s located in the Central highlands, which is pretty high up. It’s kind of like a Denver, Colorado where the climate is very temperate. It was a popular place for the Imperial King to go hunting cause it’s sort of like a wildlife type of an area. When I was growing up in the I was born in the late 1960s and I remember seeing the King’s palace next to where my mom worked and she said that was where he usually go hunting in the summer time. Because its so cool at night up here. And you know I, Growing up it was a small town I believe that it has since grew to a pretty large city. I remember loving that city growing up. A lot of my childhood friends still live there. I went to school from 1\textsuperscript{st} to pretty much 6\textsuperscript{th} grade there. So a lot of memories. And I got to go back and visit in 2005. Meeting a lot of former friends and families so that was pretty much it.

MC: Do you remember what you’re neighbors were like?

HTT: Yeah, but mainly the new neighbors that moved in after the war ended so I was born in 1969 so when the war ended in 1975 I was 6 or so. So before that when I was younger I can’t really remember a lot but from ’75 on I do remember quite a few of my neighbors were North Vietnamese. As you know, the war was between the South and the North. So when the North won a lot of the Northern Vietnamese family move South. And the North Vietnamese government basically confiscated a lot of the properties that were formally owned by the South Vietnamese. And they would move their families and so I remember quite a few of my neighbors were North Vietnamese and of course you know there were huge differences between us.
Language wise. We spoke with different accent. The way we approach certain things like how we worship. How we conduct ourselves in public and so we didn’t really associate much with them. In fact later on when I got a little older and my parents basically told me and my little brother and sister that they were pretty much our enemy. And we don’t really associate with them and we had to be very careful cause they can report us, and if they are not happy with us as neighbors they can make a big deal with people that they know and we can be very easily evicted from our home. So that’s what I remember while growing up.

MC: What age were you at that time?

HTT: So 1975 I was 6. And then I lived in Ban Me Thout until 1982 so ’75 to ’82 that’s like 7 years. So I left my hometown when I was about 12, and the reason why I left was because at that time my parents pretty much realized that there was no way we could stay in the country. We had to find a way to leave to escape the country, illegally. Because at that time there was no legal way to just leave the country and resettle somewhere else. So I left when I was twelve. Then we moved to Saigon, which was the largest city in Vietnam to look for ways to escape.

[Can I play with the ipad?]

HTT: Sorry about that, did I answer the full question?

MC: Where did you grew up, do you remember any local gathering or events, or celebrations?

HTT: Yeah, absolutely! You know, the thing about growing up in Vietnam during that time was that typically there was no electricity at night, running water sometimes would not be available for days. So as kids, as soon as it got dark, we wanted to go outside and play under street lights and so that is one of the things I remember the most just being outside with my friends just running around and of course Vietnamese were huge on things like tet, new year. I remember spending time with my grandparents, aunts and uncles, at my grandparent’s home. Just getting ready for tet making the traditional dishes, and things like that. And go to the temple. Also as kids, we loved the mid-autumn festival. Were we get to make lanterns and have candles inside and carry them around, parading them around town. So that is something that I remember. On the negative side, I also remember having to attend these sort of mandatory block meetings set up by the North Vietnamese government. Every week, we would have to report to a location so they can take roll kind of a thing and see if anybody have left town. And then of course they would give us propaganda. They will tell us American is bad, America is bad, we won the war. I remember sitting through those meetings until really late and my mom would have to take us because at that time my dad was in the camp. And we can talk more about that later. I remember hating these meetings. But we had to go, and there were no options. Also I remember because I was in school. I was in elementary school at that time, I remember we had to do sort of mandatory duties days. For example, there are certain days you have to meet up with everybody in the school and you would had to carry flags and propaganda banners and you would have to walk around town chanting slogans friendly to the government and then we had to do labor we
would have to on the weekends to go. Ban Me Tout, was very well known for coffee, and so kids like us we had to go on to these coffee plantations. We had to pick up the coffee beans that have fell from the trees and then we would have to turn these in to our school, and they would sell it. I remember those gatherings where we had to be in the sun for hours just doing these kind of things as a mandatory requirement as students.

MC: Can you describe the school in Vietnam that you attend, and the name?

HTT: I went to the school, elementary school and the name was Ba Trieu, which is the name of one of the heroines, that was very well known within the Vietnamese folklore, but when the North Vietnamese came, they changed the name and they replaced it with, the name Vo Thi Sau which is a young Vietnamese female soldier who had died fighting the Americans. Small school, I remember many of the teachers knew my parents, and then when the North Vietnamese came many of the teachers also came, new teachers came in, and I remember always observing the rift that was between the South Vietnamese teachers and the North Vietnamese teachers and you can tell, and I was very young and I can see the divide between my teachers who were from the South and the teachers who were from the North. But I think looking back, I was so young, I didn’t really know the difference between what was being taught. Looking back of course, I was taught material that were very one-sided, communist friendly, North Vietnamese friendly, but I remember have a great time just as kids. You just kind of go along with what was going on, so I, growing up, I had a pretty, just looking back, I was happy not knowing that my parents were going through a lot of pain. They couldn’t share that with me, because number 1 I was too young, and number two it wasn’t safe. So I kind of grew up going to school oblivious of what was really going on.

MC: Did you have any siblings that you shared these experiences with?

HTT: There was four of us. My sister is two years younger than me. My brother is four years younger than me so by the time I left my hometown, when I was twelve, my brother and sister was still too young for me to generally have or share these experiences with. They were too young, too little to do some of the things I was doing, so no, not really.

MC: What do you remember most about your parents and grandparents when you were a child?

HTT: I do remember a little bit about family life before 1975 like before the North came. My dad was an English teacher at the local high school and my mom was a nurse. We lived close to my maternal grandparents. My grandfather was a policeman. My grandmother was a shop owner. She owned a restaurant. So before 1975, I remember I was being pretty comfortable and well to do. I remember I was having a motorcycle, and I remember my parents talking about buying a car, which is a huge deal back then. But of course, 1975, everything changed. And I don’t know if you want me to go into how my parent’s situation changed at that time.

MC: Yes.
HTT: So you know, family. Our family was going pretty well. And then the war ended, and the North took over. And of course a lot of our properties were taken away. My dad lost his job. They basically said, well that’s it, you’re done. He was forced to go to something called a reeducation camp. Basically, it’s a labor camp. You get taken away. We didn’t know where he was for a year or so. The North Vietnamese called it Re-Education Camp. Basically they were saying, alright we taking you away, so we can reeducate you on the new states of our country kind of a thing. But basically when he came back, it’s basically a force labor camp. During the daytime, they would have to go out to the field and do manual labor. And then at night they had to have classes where the communist would force propaganda pretty much down their throats. I don’t know if you’ve ever had a chance to see the film called by a Vietnamese American director Han Trung called Journey from the Fall. Have you seen that movie?

MC: I haven’t seen it.

HTT: If you have a chance to see that movie, it shows, it depicts life in the camps. I was the oldest in the family so I got to accompany my mom to go and visit my dad. Every few months we were allowed to visit. So I remember seeing him, in his all torn, tampered clothing all coming out to greet us. He was pretty emancipated, emaciated I mean. He was really thin. He would tell us stories years later like, they were so hungry that it’s a lucky day if they can catch a bug they can eat or if they could catch a squirrel or a mouse in the cell, they would eat it raw or alive just to get some protein in their system. My mom continued to work at the hospital. But of course, the new leadership of the hospital from the North made it very difficult for her. They harassed her, they demoted her, and they all knew her husband was affiliated with the South Vietnamese education system. So they made it very difficult for her. But she kept working because she had to make a living to support us. My grandparents, my grandmother continue to run the restaurant. The government made it so difficult that she just eventually gave it up and relied mainly on money that one of my aunts who had done to the United States to study before 1975 and kind of just got stuck over here. She got a job over here and she would send money home to support my grandparents. That’s how they survived.

MC: So you mentioned the Reeducation Camp, can you describe the day that you visit was like?

HTT: I remember my dad being taken away and we weren’t told where he was for months close to a year. The first thing that we got was from the government that kind of told is where he was and it says your husband your father is at such and such location and it happens to be town about two, three, or 4 hours away from where we were in the middle of a forest. They had build a camp. So they said your first visitation you’re allowed to visit your husband your dad on such and such date and so of course, my mom was ecstatic because she thought my dad died or didn’t know where he was. She grew really, really happy to prepare for the visitation. My mom would make all these sort of dry food. It’s kind of like smoked meat, smoked fish, and dry fruits and things like that. Then we took this 4 hour bus ride with all these things that my mom thought my dad might be able to use. Soap, toothpaste, toothbrush, and things like that. We got to the camp.
There were hundreds of other families waiting to see their loved ones. I remember my mom was just shocked when they took everything. You weren’t suppose to bring anything. So whatever you brought, put it in this room. And so they took everything. My dad did not get anything that we brought for him. We were allowed a couple of hours. I was young, maybe 6. So of course I haven’t seen my dad, and was like what now just running around. I remember looking at my parents, and of course my mom was crying the whole time. I think my dad was reassuring her that everything was going to be okay. The one thing I remember the most was how thing my dad was like he was sick. Even though I was really young, I remember very vividly, he was just like skin and bone. His hair was long because it hasn’t been cut. Facial hair growing. I remember my mom crying the whole time. Then at the end of two hours, when the visitation time was up, we were told alright that’s it. Time to go home, and of course you can see all the woman crying and waving. As kids, we didn’t know what was going on, so when we see our moms cry, we cry too. The men were taken away. It wasn’t pleasant for them to see a family having to leave in that state. Things did get better in subsequent visits; I think one every six months. In future visits, he was able to keep things that we brought for him like the fruits and the dry meat. Things like that. He was in the camp for three years. 1975 to 1978. He got out in 1978.

MC: What was communication like? Was it difficult?

HTT: There was no communication. We weren’t allowed to write letters or anything like that. The only communication was visitation every 6 months. I don’t know what would have happen if my dad got sick and died. I don’t know, maybe they would send something then. We weren’t allowed to write him, and he wasn’t allowed to write us. I’m pretty sure my mom was just hoping and praying for that six months that nothing was going to happen to him at the camp. Other than that, we didn’t really know what was going on with him in the camp until we visit him in the next time.

MC: So after the camp, was he released and was reunited with you guys?

HTT: He was let out. I remember we had like a little party welcoming him home. I remember that very night that he came home. I can sense that he was happy but I also felt something was going on. There was something. He was very antsy like him and my mom were planning something the very day when he got back. They would tell us to go outside. They would talk, and talk, and talk. Much, much later, I found out that the moment he got out, he knew that there was no way we could live in that country, but he had to find out a way to leave. They started the planning process the day that he got out.

MC: How did they plan it?

HTT: 1978. That was the beginning of what became known as the boat people exodus. A lot of South Vietnamese were able to leave when the Americans left in 1975. The last day that the Americans were in Vietnam was April 30th. I’m not sure if you have seen that clip with the helicopter, landing on top of the embassy of little Saigon and people climbing up on the stairs on
the last helicopter to be evacuated. Many Vietnamese were able to leave the last few days before the fall of Saigon. My family of course, couldn’t really leave because we didn’t have the connection to be evacuated by the American. The Vietnamese who were left by my family that wanted to leave at that time, the only way you could leave, that you could do something like this was by land or by sea. If you escaped by land you would have to sneak out by somewhere close to the border, so like a border town, like close to Thailand because Cambodia at the time was also communist. Laos was also communist so you cannot go into those countries. Thailand was the closest country you can escape. A lot of Vietnamese took the land route. Land routes were just like, I’m sure, and the Mexican immigrants are facing in the Arizona desert. A lot of people die trying to escape by land. The more popular method was by sea. Basically, you would have wealthy people; they would pay to build small boats, wooden boats. They would pay to make it look like fishing boats. What they would do is that they would organize certain groups. They were advertised underground among the friends and the family and networks. We were working on the boats. Let’s say we have 45 spots is gonna worth, or is going to cost you a certain amount of gold. You couldn’t pay with money. You had to pay with gold. If you’re an adult it would cost you, I don’t know if ounces would be the denomination. They called it kei. I remember it was like a thin piece of gold that width was about 2 inches, length about 5 inches and that’s how we would pay. The adult would be ten of them, ten of those gold bars and kids would be two.

[Hey what’s going on? Can I play with the iphone instead? Yes. Right here. Sorry about that.]

HTT: So they will make the arrangement you have to pay them in advance and then you just have to wait. You don’t know when or where you have to leave. You just know you have to pay and trust that they won’t cheat you out of your money. It happens a lot. My family, we were tricked by several of these boat owners. And the price of this is that you have to always be ready and packed, and in a way so that your neighbors didn’t know when you were going to leave. Then when it was ready, it could be like the night before. The organizers can send you like a little note telling you to meet at this location by this time, if you’re not there; we are leaving without you kind of a thing. Typically, you would have to go to a coastal town, where it was close to the water and then they would arrange you to go on these fishing vessels. Then somehow try to avoid the coast guards and hope to get through the international waters and then hoping by that time a passing ship will pick us up. My family tried that several times. We got cheated out of our money. My dad, brother, and I got arrested several time were we made it to the boat. Then the police would come and take us right off and take my dad to the jail for the older grown up. Me and my brother were taken to the kiddies’ jail with the woman. It happened several times. It got to the point where my parents pretty much lost everything. Finally, on the last trip we were only able to afford two spots. I was the oldest so, it was agreed that I was going to go with my dad. I remember travelling down to this coastal town and we had to hide in this one person’s bedroom the whole day. Of course the family worked for the boat owner so we had to stay in their place the whole day, so that none of his neighbors knew what’s going on. That night, I remember getting woken up at 11pm at night and being up and having to be really really quiet.
Our group had eight people and I remember they took us down to almost like a canal where there was like a little rowing canoe sitting there waiting. We all got on there, and they covered us with things like tarps. They were pretending to transport stuff into the market for the next day, but of course, underneath it was people. I remember going under what was like foot ridges and I can see from walking on top I can see the patrolling police people with their guns walking on top. I remember one of the couple in my group had a baby. Every time that the baby decided to cry they would hold, they would press the palm to her mouth just to keep her from making any sound. I remember even though I was ten or eleven, I knew they were going to suffocate this kid. Somehow we made it to the awaiting big boats. They would have these little canoes taking people from all directions, so each would have eight people, nine people so it would be hard to detect. The big fishing boat was kind of like anchored further out. All these canoes would take them out, we would call them taxis. These taxis would take them out to the big boats. And there was 98 of us who got on this boat at the end and we made it out. I can talk about that journey when we get there.

MC: Do you remember how long it took and where was the first place that you landed?

HTT: So I remember there were 98 of us packed into this 12 meter long fishing boat it took us three days and four nights on the water before we were picked up by an Indonesian oil tanker. I remember during the three to four days, each day we would get like a small bowl of congee, we call them keo. And I remember we were running so low on water it got to the point where each day each person would only get like a bottle cap amount of water just to stay alive. After the second day, the engine to the boat died, so we were just drifting. The hope was that someone was just going to pick us up. Luckily during that time a lot of the international ships knew about us, the boat people. Some of them do look out for us. But I remember seeing a lot of boat, a lot of ships passing by they would come close enough to take a look at us, and then they would leave. Some of them would give us a little bit of food, a little bit of water but they would leave. I didn’t understand why, until much much later. The reason why a lot of them didn’t pick us up because if you pick up a refugee boat, you’re responsible, so your country have to basically accept all those people into your country. Let’s say if it’s an Australian ship that picked up that boat, then Australia would be responsible. They have to take care of you, resettle you into their country. There were a lot of country that said do not pick up refugees that you have come across in the South China sea. We were lucky on the fourth night. I remember this huge oil tanker just approach us from afar. Every time you see something over the horizon you are always happy. We would wave stuff; we would burn stuff, just try to send a smoke signal. I remember seeing this little dot on the horizon, and of course we are all trying to make noise to get his attention and then that dot just kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. It became this huge oil tanker. They couldn’t come too close because they would capsize our fishing vessel. They sent a smaller boat just to check us in. Once they knew who we were they sent a little more and they picked us all up. The boat was owned by a German company but it was registered to Indonesia. We were taken to a refugee camp in Indonesia called Galang. That refugee camp became one of the largest refugee
camp in Southeast Asia during this period, a few hundred thousand Vietnamese actually pass by. We stayed in the camp for about a year, getting processed, we had to go to through interview process, learn English, and you had to wait your turn. When we arrived it typically took us a year from the day you arrive until the day it take you to resettle in the United States or some country that accepted you.

MC: If I remember correctly, it was only you and your dad?

HTT: Right this time, it was only me and my dad.

MC: Were the rest of your families able to reach where you were?

HTT: Yeah, my mom knew that we were leaving. She didn’t know that we survive or not. Little fact, I think close to a million Vietnamese try to leave by boat. I think close to 600,000 died. Over 50% didn’t make it. We were among the lucky 49% who made it. When we arrived at the camp, they had a postal system. It would take like a month so send something and receive something but we were able to communicate with my family and my relatives that were already in the United States. My uncle, my dad’s older brother escaped earlier, and he made it, and he resettled in Austin, Texas. We contacted him, and that was how we survived in the camp when he sends us money. We were able to communicate with the outside world once we reached the refugee camp. It would just take a long time like a month for mail to arrive.

MC: What was it like leaving your home country? How did you feel?

HTT: I again, was 12, I remember when we made it to the big fishing boat, I had the feeling that we made it. I knew that we were not coming back. Even at that young age I remember being really really sad. I remember crying, I knew, I knew, being 11 this could be it. I may never see my homeland. I may never see my mom again. I may never see my brother and sister again. At that time, if you leave the country you are gone. You are not allowed back kind of a thing. I knew of course when we made it out that we might not even survive. I remember being really really sad and of course when you’re young and you’re leaving on a trip you have to say goodbye to your parents, brother, and sister for about a week. The moment the car drives away you start to feel really really sad. You can imagine how I was feeling knowing that this could be it, never being able to see them ever again, never being back. I was even at a young age I was overcome with a tremendous sense of lost and sadness and I remember just being really unlucky, and wondering why me? Why can’t my family just be together like other family? Yeah, so that was my emotion at the time.

MC: What were some of the challenges you experienced starting a new life in America and or home in the United States?

HTT: We were sponsored by my uncle who lived in Austin, Texas. I remember flying in, the first destination was Seattle, that was our first entry point. Seattle, Washington. We were processed.
We were given warm clothing. Then we got onto another plan and flew to Austin, Texas where my uncle lives. He had escaped prior with two of my cousins, two boys older than me. My dad, and I, my uncle, his two sons we lived in a one bedroom apartment. My uncle worked as a handy man, you know, cutting grass, fixing things, painting, you know, that’s how he made a living. My dad got a job working at a semiconductor company. I think it was AMD or something. And I started junior high school, I started 7th grade. Back then, there wasn’t the type of support that you would commonly have being an immigrant like today. For example, there were no translator; there were no such thing as E.L. programs. There was no language aids. This was Austin, Texas. I remember there were a handful number of Asian students like myself. Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian. Mainly refugees’ families who were sponsored over. I didn’t speak any English. I came in the school maybe around the end of October. I was just put into regular classes. There was an 8th grader like a campus aid. She took me around with the little schedule showing me room this, that this was 1st period, this was 2nd, 3rd period, this is where we have lunch, this is where you go to wait for your ride at the end of the day at school. I remember my teachers tried to communicate with me, but they just couldn’t because I didn’t speak any English. They just put me in the corner; they just gave me a seat in the corner. The thing is looking back; I don’t think I remember feeling any sense of wow. I just remember really wanting to fit in and being part of the class and know what was going on. My dad went to the local Vietnamese super market and he bought me a Vietnamese-English, English-Vietnamese dictionary. In the front the first half would be Vietnamese-English. The second half would be from English to Vietnamese. I would use that dictionary to do my homework. I would look up all the words, the directions to the assignment, whatever. I remember I would start my homework at 3, 3:30 after I got home from school and sometimes it would take me from about 10 o’clock to finish my assignment. I don’t remember really how I survive or how I got through it. It’s a blur I just remember snippets of that certain period, but one thing that I remember very vividly because I kept in touch with some of my junior high school teachers. They told me stories later that I came to school not speaking any English. At the end of the year, I won like a lot of awards. Like my English teacher gave me like best student, even though I didn’t speak any English. I think I won like some math award, history award. I think my teachers gave me the award because they saw how hard I worked, not because I was the best student. I remember I had to take an elective. I think the only thing that was available because I came in late was the cello in orchestra. I was tiny, I was small for my age. I was given a cello. I remember it was so huge for me to carry it from the orchestra room to where my uncle picks me up or to the bus stop where I had to take the bus stops on some days. I basically had to strap it onto my back so that I can carry it because it was that huge. Really funny story that my orchestra teacher told me was that, three years later. I started not playing the cello at all. I don’t know if you know, but in orchestra, there is like a certain hierarchy. So like the best player go to play first chair which was like in front. If there was like five people, then the worst person would be the fifth chair all the way in the back. So of course, I started all the way in the back. But by the end of the year, I was first chair. I remember the boy, that was pretty much first chair for the full year, I think he hated me. Because who is this Asian kid that has sort of
dethrone me? My teacher would pick me to be part of like an ensemble to compete in like an orchestra, and all these concerts, and we won all sorts of metals. I won some in 7th and 8th grade in Texas. My dad decided to move us out to California and I started high school.

MC: Which location did you move to in California?

HTT: My dad had a few friends who were working as gardeners in downtown L.A. in the dodger stadium area, Allegiance Park. So we moved in with them, and I started, oh wait! Let me take it back. The first location that we moved to was to live with his friends who were gardeners, in a little city called Duarte which is a town off of the 210. There is a famous research hospital called Hope and Duarte is a city which was right next to it. I think it was just north of Pasadena. I started 9th grade at Duarte in Pasadena High School. After a year at Duarte, my dad decided to move to another location to live with another one of his friends. We moved to Los Phyllis, Griffith Park area. I started 10th grade at Marshall high school in Los Phyllis. That is why I graduate at John Marshall High School up in L.A.

MC: So when you finished high school, was your whole family together at that time?

HTT: I graduated high school in 1989. So no, my entire family has not come yet. My mom and my siblings were, the boat people exodus was over. All the refugee camps got closed down. Even if you were rich you still weren’t allowed to leave. A lot of the countries stopped receiving refugees. The only way to bring in my mom, and my brother and sister was to sponsor them. We started the paper work process and they were, and they were able to come over in 1994. 11 years after I saw my mom and my siblings. We were reunited. By that time, I had already gone to college and graduated from college and then started working.

MC: Where did you go to college?

HTT: UCI. So I went to Marshall then of course, I applied to all the UC schools. Got accepted to a few. We decided to go to UCI because my dad had decided to, he found out about the little Saigon area. He knew that was were he would like to live, would like to settle. I really had no choice. I was accepted to a school that was a little bit further away. I would have to live in the dorm. My dad pretty much would have no say in that. It was just the two of us, we had to stick together. UCI was kind of the default choice. I started UCI in 1989, graduated in 1993.

MC: Have you encountered racism when you were going to school?

HTT: Absolutely. Starting in junior high school. The usual. I think a lot of what I was subjected to was really intentional. Kids would call you the typical chink, gook, you know just on the playground. But I knew they were just derogatory terms. I knew that they only used those words towards Asians. I knew it wasn’t anything positive. I just dealt with it. The most hurtful thing that you could ever hear as a kid is when other kids were upset at you for something or when you get into an argument, they’ll say go back to where you came from. Well I’m from here kind of a
thing. I was never subject to any violence types of racism or discrimination. The name calling, never getting picked for teams on the playground. I remember my first day in P.E. when I was in junior high school. I think we started playing basketball. I came unprepared, I didn’t have athletic shoes or socks. I had a pair of shorts, and I had my dress socks and dressed shoes on. And all the other kids they were laughing at me, but hey all I could do was play basketball in my dress shoes and socks. I always get picked last for everything. In high school because of where I went to, Duarte, there was a lot of Mexicans. Marshall was like a melting pot, we had Pilipino, we have Hispanic, we have Caucasian, African American, Asian. When I moved out to California, it wasn’t something that was noticeable to me because of being discriminated against because I’m Asian.

MC: Are you married?

HTT: I’ve been married for 1999 to now, so going on to thirteen years. You met my wife earlier.

MC: How did you meet your spouse?

HTT: The two of us met at UCI. We were both UCI students. I’m a year older, I’m a year ahead of her. We met by doing a lot of the community things together. We did VAC together. The way that we met, we that we worked on The VAC newsletter. She’s a poet, she wrote some stuff, and I remember reading some of her work. So when I was writing, I was like, who is this woman? I got to meet her. I did, and one thing led to another.

MC: Going back to your experience in arriving to the United States, what was the most distinct culture shock that you experience?

HTT: Just how big everything was. The roads the highways. Cars. I remember growing up back in Vietnam, you only get to go on taxis for special occasions. I remember being really happy when my uncle came to pick us up at the airport in this beat up Pontiac. It was a huge car, I could care less. Going to the super market, seeing everything there. All the fruits. Vegetables. Milk. Drinks. Pretty much all of the culture shocks were positive. Oh yay! This is kind of a cool sort of thing.

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

HTT: I think getting older, has made me more aware. I think as I grew up as I get older, I think it is still important to retain what is still Vietnamese that is in me. When I was younger, I think I lost a lot of the language, you know I hated going to the temple with my parents. I hated a lot of the traditional things that we would do as a family. But as I got older, and when I was in college at UCI and doing things with my friends who were Asians, and sort of being more aware of who I am, I started making the effort. I started to read Vietnamese newspaper. I listened to Vietnamese radio. I tried to communicate with my parents more. At this point, my wife and I,
and my children we would try to be as Vietnamese as we can get. At home, we try to speak Vietnamese with the kids. We do all the traditional stuff, Tet, and all the offering to the ancestors. Things like that. We try to attend a lot of the Vietnamese American functions that would help our kids remember where they came from.

MC: Do you visit Little Saigon often, and if so, then for what purpose? And what do you think of Little Saigon?

HTT: We visit Little Saigon very often. I’d say several times a week. In the past it was mainly for food. Groceries. Restaurants. And things like that. But for the past I would say, for eight or nine years, we’ve been a lot more active in terms of the community, just being a part of a lot of the things that are going on there. Like we both are on an organization that is called VAALA. The Vietnamese American Art Letters Association. I think Dr. Vo Dang is a part of that. It’s an organization that tries to promote and maintain the Vietnamese culture, but doing it in a way that is attractive to the younger generation. We have a film festival every couple of years. We have art, we have art exhibits. Now when we go to Little Saigon, it’s to be a part of all the activities that we want to be a part of. Then of course the food thing is still there. We go there to eat, and my parents live in Little Saigon, so when we visit we go down there. What do I think of Little Saigon? I think it’s great. I’m proud that we have that little area and how it has developed over the years. It has become almost like a cultural icon for this area. Now of course, the traffic is crazy, the people are crazy. You know you go into stores, they don’t stand in line, they push they shove. People drive recklessly. But there is something charming about all that. I love that area. Do I want to live in the middle of it? No. But yeah, I like Little Saigon, it’s a part of me. It’s me.

MC: In Vietnam or America, does your family hold reunions or annual gatherings, I know you visit them.

HTT: My immediate family, my mom goes back every few years because my grandmother is getting older. So every few years she goes back and visit my grandmother when she gets really sick just in case kind of a thing. My dad not so much, he came back once to work. Believe it or not. He actually got a job for a non profit organization that helped Vietnamese that were stuck in the Vietnamese refugee camps that no countries accepted them. So they were returned, they were repatriated back to Vietnam, because they had no where else to go. My dad got a job at an NGO that helped those people get readjusted to life in Vietnam. Here, I see my parents every week. We see my in laws every week. They come and visit. My immediate family we see eachother pretty often. Reunions in terms of extended family, not so much, because my extended family we are pretty much spread out. Here San Jose, Houston, Texas, Virginia, East Coast. Every couple of years, we might meet at somebody’s house for Christmas or something like that. But not a regular thing.

MC: What do you think that are the most important that future generations of Vietnamese Americans should remember about their past?
HTT: If they remember. Just hope that future generations, I would put myself in this category too because I kind of grew up here. I really have to work really hard to get back to where I kind of know where I came from. My hope for the future generation is that they continue to have a deep appreciation for who their parents, how the process that their parents did whatever they could to get here. I think the younger generations here, we take a lot for granted. For example I teach junior high school students and when I talk to the Vietnamese students, they don’t know how their families ended up here. When some of them go home and ask their parents about how they ended up here, they hear the stories about the boat, and how hearing about how the story was. I think they gain a deeper appreciation for what the parents have gone through. I think that would be my number one hope that the future generation just continue to have an appreciation for what got them here because if you have that, then there will always be a burning desire to know more, and to do more to reconnect with your roots. If you don’t have the sense of appreciation then, you will drift away.

MC: Can you briefly describe your occupation and what you do.

HTT: I am currently teaching junior high school. I teach 7th and 8th grade math. Pre-Algebra, Algebra I, Geometry to 7th and 8th graders. I’ve been doing for, since 1997, so close to 15 years. So yeah, just teaching, teaching full time.

MC: Where at?

HTT: Anaheim Unified School District at a school call Orangeview Junior High. We are known for being Tiger Woods Alumni. He went there for junior high. That’s our claim to fame. That’s a junior high school about 3 miles south of Knott’s Berry Farm.

MC: Is your occupation no related to any inspiration as you were growing up?

HTT: No. My dad was a teacher in Vietnam, but he never encouraged me to follow his path. Because I think I remember him telling me that you know, teaching is too hard here. You don’t make enough money. It’s hard work. It’s not like teaching in Vietnam, where teachers are worshiped in Vietnam, and very well respected.

[No Mak go inside and see mommy. ]

HTT: The reason how I became a teacher which was really by chance, so after I graduate from college. I got a degree in political science. I thought about law school, and but somehow, the drive was just wasn’t there. I did some research, and it wasn’t for me. So I started a company with a partner. What we did was, we did some computer consulting, we did word processing, we were own of the first groups that did the OCR thing where you scan something and then it translate into text in word or whatever. We worked on contracts on getting news and newspaper. And I hated it. I mean the money was okay, but I was working long hours. It was just a job to make money. I was hating it. Then a friend of mine who was a teacher, just over dinner, asked
why don’t you, have you always thought about teaching? And he knew how tired and I am, and how sick I was from my job. And he said if you hate what you are doing so much why don’t you give teaching a try. I was like are you kidding me? I never thought about teaching. And then he said you know, why don’t you come and visit me tomorrow in my classroom. And I came, and visited him, ended up helping him in the class room, and loved it. Wow! I really like working with kids. This might be a possibility. I came back and helped him for a few more days, and each time loved it a little bit more, and by the end of the week. That was it, I quit my job, I told my partner that I sold my stake to him, and I went back to school, to get my teaching credential, and I’ve been teaching ever since. So it was one of those chance thing that I became a teacher.

MC: Was there any other motivation?

HTT: No, not until I started working with kids in my friend’s classroom. Once I started helping him in the classroom, and working with the kids, I think that’s when they started to become my inspiration. I found out that I like to be around young people. I like to work with them. It was kind of like a hands-on type of inspirational kind of a thing. I was just hooked at doing what I was doing in the classroom, in my friend’s classroom.

MC: Last but not least, how has the Vietnamese community changed? And which direction do you think it will go into?

HTT: I think the Vietnamese community has gone through several changes. I think of course, very early on we were tight knit, and then we were fragmented because of the different groups, different fractions, having their own agenda, and Little Saigon not big enough for everybody to get what they want. You have situations like that, the video store owner put up the picture of Ho Chi Minh. That kind of things tore the community apart. But then at the end it kind of brought everybody back. So, I have seen the community very tight knit, then being very fragmented, but at this point I think we are in a pretty good place. I think for the most part we are the younger generation, growing up becoming leaders in the community. I think younger people, we have learn to be more democratic, to be more cooperative, we are more into group dynamics. I think the future is bright. The future is bright for our community. My hope is that we can maintain this area in such a way that my generation, and my children, and their children will always have this as a base for them to come back with and connect with their roots. We are working hard, just like my wife, and Prof Thuy, I think everything we do in outside of our 9 to 5 job that we do in the community is out of love for our community. We want to do things that will make the community strong. That is why I love this project because I think this project is one of those important gems that will go a long way in providing that base for the future generations to come back and reconnect with our past, our heritage.

MC: If anything were to happen in the future, how would you leave your mark as to what you want to be remembered as?
HTT: I think Vietnamese, we are very family oriented. I just want to be remembered as first and foremost as a good husband, as a good father. On the personal side, as a good son, a good brother, a good sister, but as I do other things in the community I also have that side of my life that I thought about. I do want to be a collectively remembered as part of the generation that did a lot to maintain the Vietnamese culture that helped to sort of enhances the Vietnamese American experience in this area for our generation for our parent’s generation, and for our children’s generation. Just being part of this wave of people that are doing things to contribute to the community in productive and positive ways. That’s all.

MC: On a final note, is there any a last story or things you would like to share before we close?

HTT: No, not really, like I said I really like the idea of this project. I wish that one day I will have the opportunity to listen and partake in stories that others have told you guys. I love the fact that you are not Vietnamese, but you are taking Vietnamese American experience class, and you are doing this. That goes a long way in saying something about you as a person and as Asian Americans as a community, like hey you know what, I think we all have sort of common threads. Unfortunately, politicians and people in the media use race as a divisive factor. Ethnicity and things of that nature is often used as divisive instruments towards very selfish agenda. So I love this, this is the complete opposite of that. So, I’m just happy to be a part of the project and like I said I look forward to finding out more about it. I’m on the webpage so I look forward to being a part of it, being a part of the process, being a part of the larger group, and eventually be able to share it and some of the other stories that other people are willing to tell because I’m sure I can learn a lot and get a lot out of those stories as well.

MC: Okay, thank you again and I will look forward to providing you with what we just did.

HTT: Good! And I wish you guys the best of luck in the project. Pass along my best wishes to your professor. She’s awesome! I love her! I think you guys are going to get a lot out of her class and hopefully you guys can come down and see some of the work that we are doing in Little Saigon, and you guys can be a part of it.

MC: Thank you. That would be cool.

HTT: You’re welcome. It is my pleasure.