Narrator: STEPHANIE TRAN VO

Interview: Thomas Alan Vo

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Transcript

TAV: Hi, my name is Thomas Vo and I'm a student at the University of California, Irvine. Today, I'll be conducting my interview for the Vietnamese American Oral History Project as part of the Vietnamese American Experience class—Vietnamese American Experience 151D with Dr. Thuy Vo-Dang. Today my interview subject will be—or narrator for this project will be my own mother, Stephanie Vo. The date is February 26th, 2012. The time is approximately 8:50 [P.M.]. And I will be conducting this interview in my parents own bedroom. We will go ahead and get started. Ok, could you please tell us your name, date of birth, and place of birth.

STV: My Vietnamese name is Tran Thi Lan, and my American name is Stephanie, but I get married so now my married last name is Vo. So Stephanie Vo. Date of birth, I was born February 23rd, 1959. So yes I just turned 53 a couple days ago. Happy birthday mommy!

TAV: Ok.

STV: What else?

TAV: Where was your place of birth?

STV: I was born in Kien Giang, Vietnam. It’s like a—very at the end, very south of Vietnam.

TAV: Ok and why did you choose the name Stephanie?

STV: The reason I choose Stephanie is because of Princess Stephanie.

TAV: Who’s that?

STV: Her mother is Grace.

TAV: Who?

STV: Grace Kelly. I don’t know, she has a daughter Albert—I mean the daughter Carolynn, the son Albert, and Stephanie. Monaco or something like that. Grace Kelly?

TAV: So did you choose that name before you came here or when you came here?
STV: No, I choose it just right before I become a U.S. citizen. And another thing, your dad’s name begin with a “S”, you know Son Vo. So I decide, “Oh that is nice”, so I’ll just pick a “S” and so Stephanie.

TAV: So you already knew dad when you picked your name?

STV: Yeah, we were dating, yes.

TAV: What are your parents’ names?

STV: My dad name is Tran Sy and my mom name is Dang Thy Lang.

TAV: How would you describe them? How would you describe grandma?

STV: Like what?

TAV: Like how would you characterize her? Or describe her to someone else?

STV: She’s a very loving persons. Very patient and cared so much for her children and her grandchildren. And adorable. And she worked really hard even though she is just a housewife, but she always make sure there is food on the table and care for us when we was sick. Her children you know, are her number one.

TAV: And what about grandpa?

STV: Grandpa is a little more---he caring but is not showing off. He’s pretty much, you know, typical Asian man. They love their children, their grandchildren, but they don’t show it. And to him, school is very important. He always make us study, study until we drop dead.

TAV: Ok so you would say grandpa is strict or…

STV: Oh, both grandma and grandpa very, very strict. That’s why I am here today. Otherwise, going to be like someone. Pft. You know what I mean. Maybe…never mind.

TAV: Ok, where did you grow up?

STV: I grew up in Ho Chi Minh City, which is now Ho Chi Minh City but before the communist took over, it’s called Saigon. So I left there when I was 15, left there in 1975. And it was very difficult I have to say. Very scary trip.

TAV: How would you describe Saigon growing up? What type of city? How does it compare to here?

STV: You know, when I was little, I did not have a chance to go visit because it was a different culture. And it’s not like here, where you go around on the weekend. Pretty much when I grow up, just study and go to church and just go local. And I have to say that Saigon in my mind is kind of, is crowded. To me it was crowded at that time, but now that I look back, I don’t think it is crowded. And the people are friendly. But recently, about 1998, when I came back, it is completely different, too many people. Can’t even walk, completely changed.
TAV: Would you say back then that it felt safe to walk around?

STV: Pretty much, pretty much. It was very safe. Usually when I walk around, you know someone that is 15, 15 at that time someone always went with me. It was not like I went by myself. But that’s all I can remember, we’re talking about almost 40 years ago, so…

TAV: Ok tell me about some of your childhood memories.

STV: I have to say that I was an Honors student…

TAV: Let’s go back further than that, a little kid before school. Do you remember...

STV: Before school…oh. The only thing I remember…not really. Do you really remember when you was 2 years old? I doubt it. Let me see, I don’t think I have any toys. I don’t think I have any puppy. Pretty much just play with little kids you know. Make some kind of square on the ground and hopping and jump rope and play with rocks. Maybe chasing ducks and goose and cats. And smell the stinky pig. Pft, Very stinky, whoof!

TAV: How many pigs?

STV: Oh, there’s a lot of pigs, you know usually we raise pigs, it’s like bring in the income for the family and then the pig mother lay little piglet. And then we feed them, and then they grow and then we sell them. And then we also have chicken, you know chicken we can sell. And then ducks and rabbits, you name it. Any animal we can grow and sell. Even though we live in Saigon, it looked like a farm because we had a big piece of land. So we have so much animal.

TAV: So Saigon was more a city but you had a giant piece of land where you grew animals?

STV: Yes, that is a truth statement.

TAV: Did neighbors say anything?

STV: No, it’s in Vietnam, you know it’s more of we don’t have a freedom but it’s a freedom because everybody has to find a way to survive so we have the land and they don’t make noise, so…the animals don’t make noise so should be okay. It’s not like here where we have so many regulations, you can’t do anything.

TAV: So the animals you sold for income?

STV: Yeah, it’s not much but at least it help out a little bit.

TAV: Did you grow crops too or just animals?

STV: There’s no crops, but we have some kind of veggie so usually people come to our house to buy veggie. So pretty much, your great grandpa, you know that’s what his, what do you call it…hobby. So he love to do those.
TAV: So animal growing and veggies?

STV: Yeah.

TAV: Ok.

STV: And then we have the fruit tree—guava, mangos, lemon, orange, coconut, a lot of fruit tree because we have the big land.

TAV: How big is the land?

STV: I don't know, maybe like 10 time size of our house.

TAV: So our house is about...how big is our house? Isn’t it 3000 sq. feet?

STV: Yeah, so I don’t know how big. It’s a couple acre--it’s HUGE, very big.

TAV: And how did you get the land, how did grandma and grandpa own the land?

STV: They probably bought it very cheap at that time. I don’t know. It’s very cheap from the beginning so he own a lot of land. You know I never asked, “how did you get the land?” And they never tell us. Now they’re gone so I don’t know.

TAV: Can you describe any music, storytelling, bands, or other forms of culture from when you were young?

STV: When I was in elementary, I usually participated in like, I don’t know what kind of dance, but usually we go in front of the people and present it. So like culture, some kind of culture dance. And sometimes we have like the story, like the player. So usually I get involved in those things, and I like it. And the music, I likes the music that is upbeat because I hate you know, so many different kinds of music—the north, the middle, and the south. For me, the only thing I like is the upbeat, something I can dance to. Something that can get me up and crazy.

TAV: So dancing music?

STV: Yeah. you know, the slow music, rock and roll, and the twist. I like something that make me move.

TAV: Is it like the music today?

STV: No, no, no. Nothing is like the music today. It’s like the old thing, Michael Jackson, and it’s about 1970, 1980 or something like that; Madonna, Michael Jackson.

TAV: Were you listening to Madonna in Vietnam or when you came?

STV: No, no, Madonna was way later. I came here in 1975 so I listened to them when I came here. Now I’m more American. I have to say I’m very Americanized. I don’t listen to Vietnamese music, only American. I’m sorry I have to say that.
TAV: When you did the story time, is the story telling traditional stories or are they like just random stories? Or are they more like a folktale?

STV: Oh, the story?

TAV: Yeah the story you act out. Are they famous stories that everyone knows or...

STV: Oh yeah, is that called a folktale?

TAV: Yeah, they call it things like folktales.

STV: Oh yeah, it’s from generation to generation. So those they write it down and the kids read it. And just from, then they keep going generation to generation. It’s very famous. It’s something you know that teaches the kids to become better, values.

TAV: Do you remember any particular stories?

STV: Oh my gosh, not—I don’t have any. I don’t have any one right now that I could think of, you know. Since I don’t, but if I hear it, then it really bring back the memories but right now if you ask me, I can’t think of any right now.

TAV: Mkay, what were your neighbors like?

STV: The neighbor, the neighbor pretty much….is not like here when you see the people you just say “hi” and “bye”. Pretty much, stay inside your house, you don’t know. But over there, the neighbor is just like the family. Whenever you need something, you can just go to the neighbor and ask for it. If you need rice to cook you go and ask and they’ll give to you. Or if you need sugar or anything, you just come and ask. Pretty much everybody knows each other. It’s very friendly, they watch over you if you not there or they take care of your house and stuff. So the neighbors pretty much a second family. It’s totally different from here. Here you hardly know any neighbor. I don’t know, that’s what I look around here and you just say “hi” and “bye”, that’s about it.

TAV: Do you miss having that type of relationship?

STV: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Over there kids can play in front of the house. Kids can go into other people’s house and play. You don’t have to worry about kidnap, or child molest or anything like that you know. I have to say very safe. Because every people know each other so you don’t have to worry. Even two or three years old can go half mile and still come home. They don’t have to worry about anything like that.

TAV: What jobs have you had when you were growing up?

STV: I did not do any job. I am only help out to the parents you know. If they said, “oh can you watch the house?” Then I’ll watch the house. But if they said “can you cut some veggie or some meat” and I’ll do it. But I don’t work. Actually my parents support me completely through school, you know. I don’t have any job, I don’t do any...pretty much spoiled.
TAV: So in, you said that in school you were an Honors student, is that here or in Vietnam?

STV: I was honors student...I’m not bragging but I’m honors student throughout elementary and high school because when I left, I finished my 9th grade. So when I over here, I also Honors student. So pretty much I’m Honor everywhere

TAV: Did any ever tease you for being an honors student?

STV: They get jealous, but what can I do. You know, your grandpa, very discipline; school is the most important thing. He values school because he believes without education you can’t do anything pretty much. So pretty much all of us have to study, even though we don’t have enough for other things, he always find money for us to go to school. He rather hungry and have education, because he very value education.

TAV: So what type of schooling did you have in Vietnam? What level of education did you have? Did you start in preschool or did you start in elementary school?

STV: Let me recall, no I went to kindergarten. I don’t think I went to prekindergarten. You start in kindergarten, and up to...you know, just same as right here. You know first kindergarten, then first, second, then go onto high school. Then you graduate. But when I left Vietnam, you know. I finished my 9th grade, so that’s what is that? Sophomore?

TAV: No, that is freshman.

STV: Freshman, I finished freshman. And then when I came here, I started sophomore.

TAV: So how was the education in Vietnam different than here? Liked based on what you know when I was in elementary school, how would you say it was different. Like what did they teach you?

STV: Oh, well if you compare the education before and now. I don’t think you can compare that. I know that when I left my country, when I came here, it’s pretty much almost the same you know. But now with technology –computer, even in Vietnam you have to have computer. You learn, it’s more challenging. The kid learn more now. But those days, when I left my country and came here, almost similar. The thing that I can tell you differently is that for example....in my country, when the subject change, the teacher, you know for example, you study English, you stay in the same classroom. The teacher come to the classroom. Here you go to the different, you know the student go into different---different room. And in Vietnam, you go to like the either to school in the morning or you go into afternoon, but you don’t go to both. Like the morning class starts from 7 until 11...11:30. The evening class start from 1:30 until 6.....so you know, we only go like one section. But then we go 7 days. You know, we learn all of the subject, but then we don’t have the P.E. In my country, every day you have 30 minute to play and whatever. That’s when you go out and free, you can jump rope and do whatever. Or if you don’t want to whatever, you can stay and talk. So you have like the 30 minutes everday and we call that the P.E. It’s not like here.
TAV: How were the kids, would you say....that they were like, like they are over here, or how would you describe your friends.

STV: The friends here and the friends there?

TAV: Well no, I mean like how would you describe your friends, if you can recall what they were like.

STV: Well, you know, I’m pretty much because the when I came here....the cultures is different. The language different. And I was so homesick. I don’t have much friends. To me friends, something that you know, growing up from when you were little. So all my friends left there. So when I got here, I just talk, say pretty much “hi” and “bye.” But I don’t have anyone pretty close, where I can share anything. But now, I look back....you know like in Vietnam, usually girls play with girl, and boy play with boy until you were a certain age. Then you start dating. So when I was that age, pretty much we like to separate, we don’t mix you know. But now if you ask me, I don’t know what to say, because I don’t’ want to mix what I feel right now and what I feel at that time.

TAV: What would you....how would you describe your teachers? Were they very supportive or were they just kind of just there to teach?

STV: The teacher over there consider like, second parent. Your parent is priority and them, you know, they pretty much discipline you. They have all the power. And support, I don’t use the word support. If you don’t do homework, they can spank you and they talk in class, you know, and they say don’t talk and you talk, they spank you. So they has all of their powers. At that time and I don’t know now. So maybe they change. All of the powers even if you 15, they can make you lie down and spank you.

TAV: So, now we’re going to talk about your family and relatives. What do you remember most about your parents and grandparents when you were a child? Let’s start with parents first, what do you remember most about them? What sticks out?

STV: My parent, I know they does, they always care for us. Even my older brothers they already over 21, you know, they in the air force. But every time they come home, visit, the parents always take care of them from A-Z. They always treat them like their baby. So I have to say, that you know, that sometimes they don’t have the food to eat, you know, they just save them up for us, you know. Which is, I’m pretty much, you know, I treat you guys the same. Pretty much, what do you call...

TAV: Selfless?

STV: What is selfless?

TAV: Like, you give your everything for us.

STV: Yeah you can tell, like whatever I learn and observe from your grandparents, now I do the same thing and I hopefully, you know, you do it for my grandchildren. I don’t expect you sitting there and eat like a king and letting them sit there looking at you. And they say “dad can I have this and that.” So we’ll see.
TAV: How, how about your grandpa and grandma?

STV: My grandma?

TAV: Yeah your grandpa and grandma. How would you describe them?

STV: They the same. Grandpa and grandma coming down. They care for, for my...for my parents but then they also care for their grandchildren which is us.

TAV: So what about, what about, you know....do you remember both sides? Your dad’s parents and your mom’s parents?

STV: No, I did not see my grandparents on my mom’s. Because they still in the North. They were not able to escape to the South. So I pretty much growing up with grandparents on the dad’s side. But not on my mom’s side. They still left in Ha Noi.

TAV: When did grandma move to the South?

STV: You mean my mom?

TAV: Yes.

STV: They move in 1954, that’s when the North and the South split. They move to the South in 1954.

TAV: And it was just....who came over with grandma?

STV: Bac Can? Bac Thung? Bac Tien was born in the South and I was born in the South and Uncle was born in the South.

TAV: So grandma and grandpa were already married in the North?

STV: Yeah, so they came to the South, they...well actually when they came to the South, they have four more kids. But 1945, 1944 is World War one or World War two, whatever. So all of them born and they die from hunger. They all die. Not one month old.

TAV: So they were older than Bac Tien?

STV: Oh yeah, yeah.

TAV: Wait, they were younger than Bac Thung?

STV: Yeah, somewhere. No, I think one of them older than or maybe younger than Bac Can. They all old, they all born around 1940 something.

TAV: And they died during the transition from North to South or when they were still in the North?
STV: No, when...when the Japanese invade and the French invade Vietnam, so that’s when the hunger. A lot of people in the world were hung, no food so that’s when they die. And then also the polio, I don’t know. I forgot what grandma told me, but they all died, you know, one month or two months old.

TAV: So you didn’t know any of them?

STV: Oh, I did not know. I did not know any of them.

TAV: Ok, so what do you know about your family name? And by that, I mean are there any history or origins about the last name Tran?

STV: Well, you know, you know, I really don’t know, but every people look at your grandpa and then your great grandpa and look at me, they always think we have French blood. I don’t know. There’s no way that in Vietnam, you can ask questions like “am I mix?” It’s not like here, it’s very open, and you can ask whether “am I mix” or something. But in Vietnam, they very...they don’t talk about those things.

TAV: Is it because they’re ashamed...or...

STV: Yeah, yeah something like that. Like if in the family, has the person that gets married to the foreign, that’s a no-no. Pretty much they stay with the culture. But now these days, it’s different.

TAV: So wasn’t...don’t we have French blood though?

STV: That’s what they look at us and say you know, I look like mix.

TAV: Who in the family had French influence?

STV: We all, we all speak French. That’s the thing, the thing you have to learn in high school.

TAV: Didn’t you say that, great grandpa lived in France or something?

STV: No, they look like they French. They look like they mix. They all look like mix.

TAV: So none had any...

STV: I don’t know, I didn’t ask you know.

TAV: Okay.

STV: But like Uncle, you talk to Uncle. He say we all have French blood somehow. I don’t know. Maybe they know something they didn’t tell me. I don’t know, I never ask.

TAV: So for all you know, you were born pure Vietnamese?

STV: Well, you know my dad look a little bit like French. So I don’t know what....his dad look a little bit like French. But I don’t know the great great, great dads. What happen, I have no idea. We all look like a foreigner. That’s what people said. I look mix. Do you no look mix?
TAV: I get that.

STV: So...

TAV: Okay. What language do you speak? What language...do you speak a different language...so when you were at home or you were at school, did you speak differently or did you speak the same?

STV: You mean in Vietnam?

TAV: Yeah.

STV: Well in Vietnam, at home we only speak Vietnamese. But then we learn English and French in school. So you know, when people say “bonjour”, we “bonjour” back and when people say “how are you?”, we say “how are you?” you know. But we speak Vietnamese at home.

TAV: So who did you speak English to?

STV: Well if my brothers say “hello” in English, I’ll say “hello” in English. I’ll just reply.

TAV: So did you guys speak English for fun, or why did you speak in English then?

STV: To impress people that we know.

TAV: Is that the same thing with French?

STV: Yeah.

TAV: So you didn’t speak to like Americans or to French people?

STV: No. We don’t, we don’t, we don’t...because you know. We speak Vietnamese. But if Americans speak English to us or in other language we can communicate you know, but they don’t.

TAV: So did you see Americans?

STV: Oh yeah, we saw Americans there.

TAV: And they didn’t really talk to you?

STV: Usually, usually the adults say “stay away from them.” I don’t know why.

TAV: What about French people?

STV: I, I think French and American they look the same except for when they speak. I can hardly tell if they American or French. Can’t tell the difference.

TAV: What memorable stories have your family members told you in the past. So any, any stories about the family that is something, something noteworthy.

STV: Something not worthy?
TAV: No, noteworthy. Like something...very special stories about family that no one really knows about.

STV: Mm.

TAV: Maybe dark secrets, I don’t know.

STV: I, I don’t have anything. I don’t think there’s anything secret.

TAV: Well it doesn’t have to be dark secrets, just anything memorable, anything special, or anything about grandpa, grandma or great parents or anything.

STV: Your great grandparents from your mom, my mom’s side from the North. And, and you know. And your uncle, Bac Can, Bac Thung, went to the U.S. a couple of times to study. Bac Can fly you know, pilot. And Bac Thung, you know, like U.S. Navy. So they all came here. But usually those things you can’t bring or otherwise, you know, they might...I don’t know. But usually, in Vietnam, we don’t tell a lot of people when you have a high position because they might do something to you, you know to the kids...to the children.

TAV: So, Bac Thung and Bac Can went to the U.S. to train or...?

STV: To train, yeah. Bac Can went to the U.S. three times.

TAV: What year was this?

STV: 1960 something. When I was very little.

TAV: What do you mean by high standing? Growing up, did you consider yourself rich or were you middle class or...

STV: Well, not very, very rich. But I...middle class yeah. We not very poor, but we have food on the table. We have money for school and all that stuff.

TAV: What jobs have your family members held in the past in Vietnam?

STV: Ok, grandpa work for American. And...and grandma just...just housewife.

TAV: What do you mean by grandpa work for American?

STV: He work for the American, the company in Vietnam.

TAV: What did he do?

STV: I don’t know, I never ask. So the boss is like American.

TAV: Was it a high paying job or...

STV: Yeah, yeah pretty decent. So that’s when you know, right before the Communist took over. American going to take him, family, and Bac Can. You know, your uncle has transportation from his Air
Force. And Bac Thung has transportation from the Navy and Bac Tien has from the Air Force. But the last minute, because the curfew they was not able to escape.

TAV: So did anyone else have jobs in the family or just grandpa and grandma? Did Bac Thung or Bac Can have any jobs?

STV: Well Bac Can was teaching and Bac Thung also teaching college kids. Before they join, you know, the Air Force and the Navy. Because they are... Bac Thung want to become a lawyer but did not have the money to support. So that’s why he end up into the Navy. So he was teaching college kids.

TAV: So Bac Thung and Bac Can both went college in Vietnam and taught afterwards?

STV: Yeah, and we did not have the money to support them, so that’s why they entered into the military.

TAV: What degree did they have?

STV: What degree? I don’t know, they have maybe second year of college or something. They all have college.

TAV: So there’s no Bachelors of Science or anything?

STV: No, I don’t think, I don’t think they finish it. They finish high school; all of them finish high school. I was the first one graduate from college.

TAV: How did your parents meet?

STV: I don’t...I think probably it’s matchmaker. Pretty much matchmaker. There’s no such thing as dating at that time...at their time. I am very very sure...very very positive that it’s matchmaker.

TAV: Do you know when they got married?

STV: Well Bac Can was born 1945 so probably somehow, somewhere before that.

TAV: So would you say grandma and grandpa were very happy together?

STV: They have no choice. I don’t know.

TAV: What about your grandparents? Great grandma and great grandpa.

STV: Well they just like any normal couple. Married and raise the kids.

TAV: So was their marriage also arranged?

STV: I am very, very sure that they all arranged. I don’t think, I don’t even think you’re dating. There’s no such thing as dating at that time.

TAV: So how would, how did grandpa and grandma feel about you dating then?
STV: Well we are growing up in a different generation, no choice when I came to the US.

TAV: Did they ever attempt to arrange a marriage for you?

STV: Oh no, that’s a no, no to me. Nope. Same with Bac Can, there’s no arrange, and no arrange for Bac Thung, and no arrange for Bac Tien. We are pretty much modernized.

TAV: So grandma….was okay with all of that?

STV: If I stayed in Vietnam, then maybe you know, but I came here so…they was in Vietnam. I was survive my own, care for myself.

TAV: What year did grandma come?

STV: Grandma came here 19….1990. Just when you was 13 days.

TAV: So…everyone was already married by then?


TAV: In Vietnam, did your family do a lot of reunions or gatherings of everyone?

STV: Oh yeah, that is an absolutely. Every times a New Year or death anniversary. Or any occasion, that’s when we get together. Or, or when someone come to visit you know, then they have like the gathering. Pretty much that’s how we stay, you know. I would have to say that, the relationship of the, of all the siblings—grandma, grandpa, uncle, auntie are very tight. We live very, very tight. Now you can tell, every time we have a party—all of us, 15, 16 people. Not like we a few people. That’s the culture.

TAV: How far, who came though? So besides, you know….was it just your aunt and your uncles and your grandparents that came? Or was it more distant than that?

STV: It’s like even you know, three generations before that all come together and party.

TAV: Did everyone live nearby or how long or how far did you have to travel?

STV: I have to say, maybe two or three miles. You can go by bus, or you can go by motorcycle or bike or walking you know. But we be there.

TAV: So how was this organized? By phone or…..

STV: Whoo…that’s a good question. There’s no such thing as a phone. I think usually, your grandpa going around and tell and another person tell and another person tell.

TAV: Did you celebrate any holidays we celebrate today?
STV: We celebrate Christmas, is a very big one. And believe it or not, Easter is another big one. Usually we go to mass at midnight and after that we come home and eat. And the New Years is big one. I don’t think we have Thanksgiving though.

TAV: What about birthdays?

STV: We don’t celebrate birthdays, we hardly celebrate birthdays. But now it’s a new generation, and they do for the kid you know.

TAV: So what did you do at the parties? What type of things, activities, besides eating...I’m guessing...

STV: Yeah we do plays Pai gow, we playing bau cua, tu sac. It’s like Asian, some form of gambling you know it’s fun.

TAV: Carte too?

STV: Carte, domino....well those things.

TAV: So since you were a child, did you play with the other children, or did you play with the adults?

STV: Oh no, adults with adults, children with children, we don’t mix. Adult play with money, children just playing for fun.

TAV: So that’s all you and your brothers would do, is gamble too?

STV: No, usually we young, we play like different form of game. Just like you have Monopoly. We have the different kind of game, I don’t know how to translate it. And when the girl get together, they have their own stuff to do. And the boy get together. There’s tons of stuff to do, play inside and outside of the house.

TAV: What were some of the things the girls do?

STV: The girl usually they play some kind of rock you know. I don’t know how to explain it, you pick up the rock and they throw it up and grab more rock. And then see who can hold it. And they play the, whatever, you know, you draw the square.

TAV: Four square?

STV: Yeah whatever.

TAV: Hopscotch?

STV: Yeah. Something like that. And jump rope. And they use the hand to jump so you don’t touch. That’s a lot, I forgot.

TAV: So boys and girls play the same games?
STV: Yeah. But usually boys they play with something more, make the rooster fight. Or they have the fish fighting. Those kind of games.

TAV: So did you do anything like we do here, like make-up stuff or anything very feminine?

STV: Usually I don’t, grandpa make me study. I hardly play. The only time I play is when we have an hour break. Pretty much study throughout my life.

TAV: At parties, did you ever tell any stories?

STV: You know usually when you little, like you under 10 years old, usually the grandma or grandparents go and tell stories like at night. You sitting out and looking up at the sky and you see the moon and the star. And they start telling the story and you get cozy and sit on their laps and they tell the stories.

TAV: And were these stories real stories or were they fictional stories?

STV: No, just the stories from generation to generation. So just when you make believe it, you make the kids become a better person.

TAV: So they taught you morals?

STV: Morals. Yeah.

TAV: So you are married, how did you meet dad?

STV: How did I meet dad? One day we went to the restaurant, and your dad came and talk to me. That’s how I met him.

TAV: And this is in California?

STV: Yeah, it’s in California.

TAV: Long Beach?

STV: No, Westminster.

TAV: What restaurant?

STV: I don’t even remember the name.

TAV: What did dad say?

STV: He just come and say “hi” and talk and he ask for the phone. Typical man, ask for the phone.

TAV: In English or Vietnamese?

STV: Oh, of course in Vietnamese, we don’t speak English.

TAV: Do you remember what he said?
STV: No he just go and talk, “where do you live?” and “what you doing?” and stuff like that.

TAV: This is while you were eating?

STV: Yeah, I was with my friend and he was with his friend.

TAV: And did you think it was weird?

STV: No. No.

TAV: Was this normal?

STV: It was okay, I don’t even think of anything. To me if I like the guy, it’s okay even if I don’t like it, it’s okay. It just a conversation, I was pretty much Americanized at that time.

TAV: So what year was this?

STV: Probably in 1979, or 19—wait take it back. Maybe 1980 or 81. I don’t remember.

TAV: Do you have children?

STV: Yes, yes I do. I have the three kids.

TAV: Okay, and what do they do?

STV: Okay, Ryan...Ryan Vo, my most favoritest one. Ryan he finish four years in bio at UCI, he dream to become a doctor someday, especially become a cosmetic surgery doctor. And I said “Ok, mommy going to be volunteer. You make mommy pretty.” Now he change his mind.

TAV: What does he do now?

STV: Now he’s up North with his girlfriend and study Masters in Computer Science and Information Technology. And my second one is the one interviewing me right now, Thomas. Yes, the handsome Thomas. And he is, he also study bio but he also, like Ryan, want to become a doctor. And I’m so blessed, he’s going to follow that footstep. Whatever he wants you know, I’m just the support. If you can dream, you can do it. And the baby one is, my baby one is Ashley. First year at Cal State Long Beach. Want to become a nurse, and she said maybe—she said, her counselor said need to have plan B. So for her Plan B, she probably going to become DO or PA.

TAV: Do you ever talk about your history to Ryan, myself, or Ashley? Like what we’re talking about now, but have you ever talked to them about it before?

STV: I don’t recall, but I remember Ashley went to the retreat and I share with the retreat candidates up in Mt. Rightwood, so Ashley heard my story, childhood, and stuff like that. But I don’t know, if you and Ryan heard.

TAV: So we’ll move onto culture, tradition, and religion. Does your family have any special sayings or expressions?
STV: Like what?

TAV: I can’t think of any, but...do they have any customs or stuff where you tell me “veggies make me handsome” even though it doesn’t really make sense.

STV: Let me see. Oh my God, you caught me. I’m pretty sure there’s something. Let me see, oh, always greet the people when you come to their house and when you leave. When you come in you have to greet them and when you leave you have to bow to acknowledge them that “I’m going home.” Before you eat, you have to politely ask people “eat?” And when you done, you have to say “thank you”, stuff like that. Those are pretty much. And what else...and another thing is about grandma and grandparents. Always pray and believe in God. I don’t know what you call, but very religious. Pretty much believe in, you know, without God you can’t do anything. So keep praying. Which is, you can see most of the people, during the war, you know, at least one person die in the family. But for us, we so blessed that none of my brothers die from the war. So they are, they so believe in God.

TAV: Does your family do anything...can you think of any foods you liked growing up? Food your family maybe cooked often?

STV: I have to say when I little, like you, I hate rice. Now I’m growing old, I love rice. And it’s funny that grandma cook noodle or pho, grandpa doesn’t like it. He like something raw, like the sushi, or some beef that raw. To him, he like raw stuff, which I don’t understand how he eat those. I’m pretty much...egg roll, chao vit...you know, typical thing we cook for you. I don’t know what to say in English, but what do you like, what I cook? Tofu?

TAV: Mhm.

STV: What else do I cook that you like?

TAV: That’s it.

STV: That’s it? I cook the good fish and bake and stuff like that. I don’t know, I don’t like cooking. I don’t like to cook, but when I cook, I’m pretty good. I don’t like to cook, I like to study but not to cook. That’s the last thing I do on Earth...cooking.

TAV: So what religion was grandma and grandpa?

STV: We all Catholic.

TAV: So was grandma and grandpa both raised Catholic too then?

STV: Yeah. Your grandma and grandpa and great, great grandparents are all Catholic. And we are very, very, strong in our faith in God. We are a tight family. We believe in Jesus. But not your dad though, your dad’s side, they worship ancestors. I remember one day Ryan said, “mom can I have the religion that’s like grandpa, you know your dad-dad, because he like stay home and doesn’t want to go to mass on Sunday or Saturday.”
TAV: How often do you go to church?

STV: You talking when I was young or now? When I was young, pretty much every day. Even in the summer, you know, I have choice whether get up to study or get up to go to mass at five in the morning. So, sometimes you know, when you little, you want to sleep so badly. But your grandpa...so that’s how I am I am now. Before sometime I hate it, but now I look back, I have to say “thank you” so much for making me the person who I am now.

TAV: So did you attend Sunday school and stuff?

STV: Oh, when I was in Vietnam, I attended Catholic school; from Kindergarten until the day I left Vietnam, so I was pretty much growing up Catholic school girl.

TAV: So we talked about this, but is there any special foods/traditions that have been passed down in the family. Maybe secret recipes that Uncle or Bac Tien or Bac Can know?

STV: I have to say Bac Can, Bac Thung, and Bac Tien, and Uncle and me...we just cook. I’m sure your grandpa has so much recipe. He’s the very good cook cause every time we have the party, the people, the neighbor, and the relatives, like two or three of mine call grandpa to cook because he is a fantastic cook. But passing down, right now, we just cook. We eat and we taste and we see what’s there. If it doesn’t taste good this time, we can change next time.

TAV: So nothing’s really been, like secret recipes, have been passed down. Sounds like you take things from the past and add your own twist to it.

STV: Yeah, because none of us into cooking.

TAV: So was that a yes or no?

STV: No.

TAV: But I said do you guys kind of use stuff from the past like as a base and then you add your own stuff to it? Or is nothing even...or do you not even cook anything from the past?

STV: Well we did take whatever from the past and we just like twist it. So that’s why you go to the party and sometimes you taste eggroll “wow how come it so good?” and next time we add something weird *inaudible noise*. Even when we fish fry, and how we make the fish sauce different. Because we don’t measure, so there’s no such thing as measure. We just use our imagination and add this thing in and taste it and it’s good and then next time “oh what did I do, how come it taste so good?” And then mm.

TAV: Are there any family heirlooms or mementos you have?

STV: What is heirloom?

TAV: Like pictures, or jewelry. Anything that has been passed down in the family?
STV: Oh, grandma. Well I am the only girl so pretty much all her stuff, she passed it to me. So hopefully someday I’m going to pass it to Ashley. But you know, the taste, *inaudible sound*. I don’t think I can wear those things because I’m pretty much modernized. I have to wear something like fashion.

TAV: So it’s jewelry though?

STV: Yeah, jewelry, like gems and stuff. I don’t wear it but she give to me so I keep it, but I don’t wear it.

TAV: Are there any stories behind them or are they just family jewelry?

STV: They just the family jewelry. Grandma love it because that’s her taste. But when she gave to me. Who knows, someday I might wear it. Maybe when I’m 90 years old or 100 years old.

TAV: Do you have any photo albums or scrapbooks or home movies? Anything that documents your childhood?

STV: No, what I have is so much and then when we left Vietnam, we did not carry because we was so afraid that they might mistake it with gold or something valuable and they might kill us. So we left everything at home. So right now I don’t know what happened to it, but we have so much stuff. Right now, I think there’s only a couple young picture when we were little.

TAV: Do you still have them?

STV: Yeah, Bac Tien has it. Bac Tien take care of it.

TAV: So now we’re going to move onto the war. The war.

STV: The what?

TAV: The war.

STV: Oh, *inaudible sounds*

TAV: Yeah so how would you say the war in Vietnam, affected your family and your community?

STV: You know, if I look back at that time, I don’t like war. I don’t like war at all. But now, well there’s pro and con now that I look at the war. Thanks for the war, the Communist took over, now I’m here. But there’s also so many people left and they lost everything, so depends on when you are and how you look at it.

TAV: How did it change your life while you were in Vietnam?

STV: I remember when I was 12 or 13, at night you hear bomb, you hear gun on top of you and you have to go deep into, like 2 or 3 feet under the ground. And then you know, you have a bag of sand on top of you so that if they ever fight or something, you know, to protect just in case the bullet going to go through. So when I was little, I don’t like it. So until the day the Communist took over, the country, we
left. And we don’t know what our future going to be if we going to make it or if we going to die in the ocean and stuff. So it affect a lot of family and a lot of family and they have children and they have to support the war. So some family, they have two or three people die from the war you know. So it’s very, very sad. To me, I don’t like the war. So now I look at the Iraq and I can feel for them. But if there’s no more war in Iraq and of course some people can flee the country and seek for the freedom and have the better life and it’s good. And some people stay behind and going to take years to rebuild it. No I don’t like war, definitely I don’t.

TAV: How did it, affect the community like you said? Were people more afraid to go outside?

STV: Yes, yes. There’s always curfew like at 8 o’clock, you can’t get out of the house anymore. The communist going to shoot you.

TAV: Who set the curfew?

STV: Well, the government. They go around, and there’s like the kid growing up 16 or 17 and they have gun. They give guns to those kids. And if you go out, they shoot. So they pretty much obey them.

TAV: So those kids were told by the government to shoot?

STV: Yeah, yeah.

TAV: Where did you live during the war?

STV: I live in Saigon.

TAV: Did anyone have different jobs during the war, like Bac Thung, or Bac Can? I know they joined the military.

STV: No, before that they were the teachers. They teach the high school and college.

TAV: And when did they join the military?

STV: Maybe late 60’s or early 70’s.

TAV: And that was part of the Air Force?

STV: No, they stop because if they don’t join the Air Force, they are smart they have degree, and if they don’t join. Because at that time, they need the men to fight, so if you don’t have a position, they going to draft you and you going to be marching down and fight with Communist and you going to die. So it’s better for them to get into some form of military that’s safe.

TAV: And that was the Air Force?

STV: The Air Force and Navy.

TAV: Who was in the Navy?
STV: Bac Thung.

TAV: And then Bac Can was in the Air Force?

STV: Bac Can was Air Force and Bac Tien was in the driving the helicopter, Air Force.

TAV: Bac Tien was also in Air force. So they went to the U.S. to train?

STV: Bac Tien did not go. He almost, but Bac Thung and Bac Can went. Bac Can three times and Bac Thung two times. They all got trained here.

TAV: What do you remember most during that time period? What sticks out the most?

STV: All I know is, pretty scare. You see people dying. You see funerals right and left. Because like every other house there is people dying from the war. Even if you go somewhere, you so scared. You don’t know what is the future going to be. It’s pretty sad for morale. It’s very, very sad. Some families are so poor they don’t have food. That’s all I remember.

TAV: Were you going to school at this time then?

STV: Yeah, throughout my life. One thing I said about your grandpa, no matter how rich or how poor, he always find a way with the money to support us. He value school. He said without school, your life going to be...you cannot do anything. So that’s why your Uncle, Bac Can, Bac Thung able to get into the high ranking. Without school, no way.

TAV: So you attended school during the war, was there ever an issue of safety? How did you deal with...you said the war was very close by. Was grandpa ever concerned with how you would get to school and home safely?

STV: Well, pretty much we walking. And then when Bac Can, Bac Thung, and Bac Tien come home from the grade, they always take us on the motorcycle. But other than that, we just walk. Your Uncle and me just walk.

TAV: Did anyone ever get hurt?

STV: No, no one. Your grandparents teach us surrounding, be aware of what’s going on. You know sometimes, the bomb that make crying.

TAV: Teargas?

STV: Yeah teargas, sometimes that happen. Sometimes like that, we in the classroom and we close all the door and you can see your eye and nose. We don’t know who’s firing, but there’s gas and stuff like that.

TAV: Was there ever people actually fighting in the city?

STV: Yeah, that was when we left.
TAV: So during the time when you were attending school, there was no actual fighting in Saigon yet?

STV: No.

TAV: But it was close enough you could hear it?

STV: Pretty close, oh yeah, you could hear them shoot. At night you can hear “Boom! Boom!” outside. And you can hear...I don’t know...pretty close though.

TAV: Were you ever captured or held by enemy forces during the war?

STV: No, but I saw the Vietcong die. You know when they say Vietcong, just like another Vietnamese. Doesn’t matter which side you on. Just like another Vietnamese, another human. But depend which side, they shoot you and they claim you Vietcong, VC. Even your neighbor can be a VC because you can be doing both and you just want credit. Cause I know there’s a neighbor, from your grandma, she see that as soon as Vietcong took over, he said “I am Vietcong.” They just want the credit.

TAV: Credit what?

STV: Credit themselves so that they can have some kind of position. Like before that, you work for the government but as soon as the Communist took over, you say you are not working for the government. And he was saying bad about the government and stuff like that. He trying to get credit.

TAV: And that was your neighbor, trying to earn himself a position. Was that common?

STV: Yeah.

TAV: So a lot of people siding with the Vietcong?

STV: Yeah, we call that kissing ass.

TAV: Were you or anyone else you know in a reeducation camp?

STV: Yes, Bac Can was in the reeducation camp.

TAV: And when was this?

STV: Just right after 1975.

TAV: So he was still in Vietnam when they placed him in the reeducation camp?

STV: Yeah, and then he did not get out until 1990, same thing with grandma.

TAV: So how long was he in the reeducation camp?

STV: From 1975 until 19...well they let him get out 1985, so maybe 10 years.

TAV: Did he ever talk, or tell you what it was like in there?
STV: He said he almost die. He was brainwashed and then even he make you eat chili, he say “sweet” you have to say “sweet”. You cannot say it’s burning your tongue or anything. Whatever they say, you have to follow him. That’s what I heard. And you don’t have food, you don’t have anything. This is from him, even if you see cockroach you have to kill it, eat it because that’s the only form of protein you have. It’s terrible.

TAV: And why did they let him go?

STV: Huh?

TAV: Why did they let him go?

STV: Because after you obey, after you graduate, they let him go. That’s why they train his mind, his thoughts. Because if you fight back they going to kill you.

TAV: Then after Bac Can left, how did he feel?

STV: Even right now, he say at night, he sleep, he still have nightmares about those things.

TAV: Did anyone suffer any disabilities or injuries because of the war?

STV: From my family?

TAV: Mhm.

STV: Well Bac Thung and Bac Tien came here before 1975. Bac Can I don’t know. You can tell him right now, he very weak. He not like before.

TAV: Where were you during the last days of the war?

STV: We have so many way to, to flee the country. Bac Can have transportation in the Air Force. Bac Thung have transportation in the Navy. Your grandpa have transportation from the American because he work for the American. Bac Tien have transportation from the Air Force. And also, Bac Can and his wife bought the ship because they know that the Communist going to take over, so they bought a ship. There’s so many. So at that time, Bac Can took your Uncle and me to the port. Bac Tien got up there by himself and Bac Thung got up there by himself. Because we did not want to leave at the same time. If we were not able to make it, they going to take over the house. And then where we going to stay?. We probably going to stay on the street. So we needed to make sure we were going to escape and if not, we have a place to stay. So your great grandma and grandparents stayed behind to keep the house. So at that time, start bombing, people die on the road. People start shooting because of the curfew, no one can get out. And Bac Can was able to drop me and uncle to the port. And he turn around to pick up his wife and Chi To Anh and great grandma and grandparents. Because of the curfew, they were not able to make it. So the next day, we saw Bac Thung and Bac Tien and we knew that he said “Ok, the four of us going to jump onto the ship and just leave without, let them going to leave behind.” So we got to Guam and we keep hoping they make it, but they did not make it.
TAV: So it was you, Bac Tien, and Uncle and Bac Thung. You guys left before grandma and Bac Can got there?

STV: Yeah, we left there 1975, they did not leave until later when we sponsored them.

TAV: Who decided to make that choice to leave? Because you were supposed to meet with everyone first right?

STV: Yeah Bac Thung and Bac Tien decided “let’s just go ahead and jump to the next ship and go.” The funny part is we left everything, all my clothing and everything we left. We have picture and we have valuable and everything we left because we did not want to bring to the ship. They might think it’s money and gold and they going to shoot us and kill us. So we just went there, nothing. So by the time we get to the international line, they ask for gold and that time Bac Thung said “we don’t have anything, go ahead and throw us into the ocean.” But then the owner of the boat have mercy and let us stay.

TAV: The owner of the boat you were on?

STV: Yeah.

TAV: And who owned this boat?

STV: Some boat next to Bac Can’s family boat. We just jump to the boat next, right next to it.

TAV: It was just a boat, and how crowded was the boat?

STV: Like the fishing boat, but it’s about 200 people. So very, very crowded.

TAV: And how long were you on the boat?

STV: We were on the boat for maybe a month. We did not have anything to eat, no water, nothing. And I was so seasick, I threw up the yellow. And I just said “throw me into the ocean.” I couldn’t handle it.

TAV: How did people eat?

STV: We don’t have anything to eat, believe it or not. And then for the water, we have to scoop the ocean water up and then boil it and get the steam and then it’s like you can drink the cup. Just spoon-feed, like each person can get a spoon, so we can live. Thank God, our leader who saw the American boat. And they gave us some food and stuff like that. And they start throwing our boat a rope and somehow the rope break. And they just cut, cut the captain’s leg. Chop it off. Gone.

TAV: So you guys were on water for one whole month?

STV: Yeah.

TAV: Did you run into any pirates?
STV: No, at that time we were very blessed there were no pirates. But it was very tough. Because the boat, the wave already start breaking the boat. The water already get in, and the boat already about to sink. It’s very, very scary. And finally we make it to Philippines.

TAV: So you made it to the Philippines after one month?

STV: Pretty close to one month.

TAV: And then?

STV: From there, we get onto the big ship, probably about 20,000 people. Called the U.S. whatever, big ship. 20,000 people in there. You talking about different layers of people. Thousands and thousands, and we going to Guam. And we stay in Guam until we have sponsor in Massachusetts. Well, we stay in Guam and then later we stay in the camp Pennsylvania camp in Pennsylvania, called Indiantown Gap and we stay there for two months and then we get sponsored in Massachusetts. And that’s where we went. That’s where I spent my sophomore there. And then my junior, we moved to Danbury, Connecticut. And then finally, Bac Thung and Bac Tien said, it’s about time for me to go to college so we can only go to school in California. Which is where I wen to Woodrow Wilson High School for my last year as senior high.

TAV: Why did you decide to move to California?

STV: Because we believe if we stay here for one year as a resident, we going to have free education. I man free college or we have to pay very little. So Bac Thung and Bac Tien was looking out for my future—education.

TAV: What was it like leaving Vietnam? How did you feel?

STV: Well at that time, I don’t know. I did not have a choice, not like I can say “yes” or “no.” Pretty much just follow the adult, which is in Vietnam, the oldest child is just like the second parent so which is Bac Thung and Bac Tien and Bac Can and they just say “go.” We just follow, like you leader. You don’t know what to do, and they just decide for you. So you pretty much just follow and you don’t know what the future’s going to be. But I’m pretty sure if we can escape. You know, to tell you the truth, I’m looking at today; I did not know almost 40 years ago I’m going to be like this. I have no clue. And we just don’t know.

TAV: Do you ever, when you came here. Did anyone ever talk about going back to Vietnam? Or did you know you were not going back to Vietnam?

STV: Not us, not for Bac Thung, Bac Tien, not us. Definitely no, I don’t think I want to come back. Even though at the very beginning, it’s very struggle with the language, the custom, and no money. But we do believe that there’s so much opportunity here and we can save and keep trying and perseverance and we going to make it. But going back, that is a no, no.

TAV: So this one is about immigration. You had absolutely zero possessions when you came here?
STV: Absolutely nothing, I did not even have a single penny in my pocket. Not even the clothing on my...
I have to say nothing, zero.

TAV: So I know you left grandma and Bac Can behind, they came here how and what year?

STV: Okay, let’s go back to.... we left great grandma and grandparents. Grandpa and grandma and Bac Can and his wife and his two kids, Chi To Anh and Chi Van. So 1979, grandpa passed away because he was so sick, he has five children and four of us in the U.S. and he doesn’t know the future of us or how we going to be. And the one he miss is Bac Can, in the reeducation camp. They torturing him and he couldn’t handle that. And I am his favorite daughter and he so worried about me. Especially for the boy he not worried, but for me he not sure, he worried. So he was pretty homesick and he die from missing all his children. And then your great grandma passed away maybe 1982. And then, I think Bac Can get out 1983 from reeducation camp. So we sponsor them and then finally they were able to came here 1990.

TAV: And that was by plane?

STV: Yeah by plane.

TAV: And who paid for that?

STV: We paid for it, they came here, Bac Can came here, it was called, H.O. stand for. Humanities or something. Because he came from the war. And grandma came here because all of her kids are here. And his wife and his five children. So they came here. And then we paid for everything you know because we sponsor for them. We paid for their airplane ticket and stuff.

TAV: So when you came here, when you were in a refugee camp?

STV: Yes, I was in the refugee camp. I was at Guam; I was at the refugee camp. I stayed there until; you know the camp in the U.S. You can either go to Pendleton or into Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania, and there’s one in Arkansas which is I forget the name. So we really wanted to go to California, but they closed because they have enough people so they did not pick any more refugees. So we have to go to the one in Pennsylvania. So we stayed there probably one and half months until we found the sponsor and our sponsor is in Shelburne from Massachusetts.

TAV: And why did you want to go to California?

STV: Because we want free education for college.

TAV: What was your experience in the refugee camp?

STV: They treat us very well, I have to consider that. All we did was just go to study, study English. So there’s a volunteer. We have breakfast, lunch, and dinner. When it was time to eat, we just get in line. I have to say, probably a wonderful vacation. But we did not really enjoy because we don’t know how our future going to be. So we focus on worrying about the future.
TAV: What were some of your first impressions and early experiences in this country?

STV: I came here, I have to say that the one impress me the most the one go to the store and you see everything. Everything clean, nice, and fresh. The checkout not like in Vietnam, so that was the first thing. Then you go to the store to buy clothing and you just say “wow”, it was amazing. And then the street, the people, just everything completely heaven here.

TAV: So let’s talk about places you traveled to. So you said you lived in Massachusetts first, how was Massachusetts? What was life like in Massachusetts?

STV: We go sponsored in a small down, Shelburne, Massachusetts. And I have to say, no foreign, no Mexican, no black. Only white. And we are the only foreigners in that whole town. So, they treat us very nice, but sometimes they can look at us and they never see any foreign or any Asian, I have to say that. People are friendly; I probably do better now because now I know the custom and I can be talk and have fun. But at that time, shy you know. Just like, so shy, you more like to yourself. You don’t open, you don’t talk that much.

TAV: Can you describe the family that sponsored you?

STV: The one sponsor me, I still remember their name. Janette and Paul Sweem, they the same age your uncle, Bac Thung at that time. Paul was 26 and I think Janette also 26, so probably same age as Bac Thung. And they did not have kid, Janette was the teacher and he, I forgot. So they just sponsor me, sponsor us, because we were looking for the Catholic and they were Catholic. That’s pretty much about them; they didn’t have any children so they sponsor us, so we live with them for maybe a week or a month. I don’t recall exactly, later they found us the apartment, we move out. Bac Thung and Bac Tien went to pick up apple. And Bac Thung and Bac Tien work right away. And then Uncle and I went back to high school, I thought maybe I can work. But no, since you are under 18, you cannot work. You have to finish high school.

TAV: How did you communicate with them?

STV: How do we communicate? Actually we just wrote the letter, we did not know what’s going on. We did not communicate with Bac Can at all. Just with your grandparents.

TAV: How did you communicate with your sponsors? Did you talk to them in English?

STV: Oh yeah, remember Bac Thung came to the U.S. a couple times so he have to know English. Remember that?

TAV: So Bac Thung did most of the talking?

STV: Well actually, I have from 6th grade to 10th, so 4 year of English. Just like you learn Spanish and you don’t speak, but I pretty much, I can hear the voice and I can speak. I can communicate but it’s not fluent.
TAV: So after that, you moved to Connecticut and how was life there? Were you staying with another family there?

STV: Oh, the reason we move to Connecticut because Bac Thung have so many friends. They in California, they in New York, so we travel. But we take a step at a time, so we have to Connecticut because it’s next to Massachusetts. And then from Connecticut we start to move to Ohio and to other states. And California more like back home—the weather, the people, the culture. So that’s why we choose California.

TAV: So these friends of Bac Thung were Vietnamese?

STV: Yeah, they all Vietnamese, they all in the same Navy with him.

TAV: And you stayed with them for periods of time when you moved around?

STV: No, we just, before we moved, like someone we know so we at least can find an apartment. So if something happen, we can support each other.

TAV: And who was working…Bac Thung and Bac Tien?

STV: Yeah, only Bac Thung and Bac Tien.

TAV: And what were they doing for work?

STV: The first job they have, the sponsor for him have him pick up the apple but they don’t like it. Later, they find another job for him like clean up the cucumber and they said they so scared because they grow so many cucumber and marinate it. And you can see the worm and it’s huge and it’s so dirty and stuff like that and scare. That’s why every time we say eat the cucumber, they say “nope”. After that job, they don’t want to eat anything like that. And later they move to Connecticut, they find the job, they become the machinist. And after that, they move up and become like the maintenance and stuff like that. Fix the machine and stuff.

TAV: And how did you hear about California or the free education in California?

STV: Oh, everyone talking about it.

TAV: In the refugee camp?

STV: No, usually you have a friend and you learn from it. Because when you in the camp, they give you the book about what state have what and stuff, but people you know just passing the word from mouth to mouth. So that’s why we decide to move to California. That was the home to the majority of Asians.

TAV: And why did you pick Southern California in specific and not Northern California like San Jose or something?

STV: Because Bac Thung have couple very close friends, they live in Long Beach. That’s why we picked it there, we stay. At least we have some friend.
TAV: So did you know about Little Saigon at that time or no?

STV: No, at that time, Little Saigon one or two store. And now it’s booming. People start like one person, start to have the store or the market there. And then another person and it start booming. People start gathering in that area.

TAV: So when did you find your first job in the U.S?

STV: When I find my first job, actually when I got here because I don’t speak the language very well. Actually I do a lot of volunteer because other people came after me and they look up to me. Because I have education and I speak the language and stuff like that. So I do the TA and I also do babysitting for Bac Thung’s friends because they have their kids and they have to work. Usually, I don’t know, they pay money but I say “no”, I do it as a favor for them. And when we move to California, I TA when I went to Cal State Long Beach. But I also TA, teaching math and English as a second language, at Woodrow Wilson High School. And I also have the work study at Cal State Long Beach. So I helping grade paper for the Chemistry Department. And then after I graduate in 1983 with a Computer Science and Math at Cal State Long Beach. And then it very hard to find a job at that time, like right now because of inflation and stuff like that. Recession. So then I did not have citizenship, so I went to work for the small company, they do soap and lotion, in Compton. Compton, that’s a very scary place, I’m telling you. And I was doing, testing out, like pH for the soap and stuff like that. And then later I found job at the Chancellor’s office in downtown Long Beach. And then I also work for the small company, it’s the computer science and doing data entry. And finally I have my citizenship, so my first job at McDonnell Douglas since 1984 until now.

TAV: And now it’s called Boeing though?

STV: Yeah, so Boeing took over so, I been with them for 28 years.

TAV: What do you do there?

STV: First I was the programmer, converting a lot of programs from IBM to….I forgot. There’s another program. Pretty much, converting one program to another. I do programming basics Fortran and Colbal. And then Nomad? For a while. And then later, they into Windows and supporting Windows and Java and C++. And now I am doing user support, which is my son Thomas think is an easy job, but he doesn’t know what’s behind the screen. Every time he say “mom I can do your job, just sitting there and answer phone and look at the internet. Oh, he underestimates it.”

TAV: What did you graduate from Cal State Long Beach with? What major?

STV: Well actually my dream to become a doctor or nurse but I was not able to continue it because I have a problem with English. At that time I find it much easier for me, I don’t need to learn, is dong math. And you just need to understand physics and chemistry and math. And you just do it; you don’t need to be fluent in English. So I want to teach math, which is I was so good at it. And one day, I was doing TA at Woodrow Wilson and there’s black girl, maybe 16 or 17. She looked so big and higher than me and she put the fist on my face and “you teacher, you want this on your face?” And I say “uh oh, I
better not mess around.” She want to punch me and I say “oh my lord.” And that’s why I switch from becoming a math teacher to becoming a computer science. So I rather have a BS in Computer Science than in mathematics in 1983.

TAV: Have you ever encountered racism here?

STV: Well after that incident, I better watch out. I do believe there is some because, I don’t know, I’ll just, maybe it’s just my perception, but maybe there’s still exists at work.

TAV: Can you give me an example?

STV: You know, like, usually Asian, Chinese people stay in Chinese group and Vietnamese stay in Vietnamese group. I can see the Asian kid that study so hard, they get good grades but they excel so slow compared to the white because white people they tall and speak their language and they can B.S. (bullshit) and they can move up the ladder. And that’s a true statement.


STV: I have to say that I get along very well and I can mix into any group. I’m pretty much open, so to me I am pretty much more like American. I have to say, even the culture. I am open; I am not typical Vietnamese Asian.

TAV: So what you consider yourself American or Vietnamese American?

STV: Probably Vietnamese American.

TAV: Do you have any funny or memorable experiences of culture shock? Did you do anything cultural wise that it was funny or memorable? Maybe first time trying a hamburger?

STV: You know you eat hamburger and French fries; you eat with ketchup or mustard. But I know some people who eat hamburger with fish sauce and shrimp sauce. But no, I don’t have anything like that. I’m adapt to the custom with the food pretty good. I don’t have any problem with it.

TAV: Do you vote in the U.S. elections?

STV: Believe it or not, I don’t. I should do it. Because sometime I think one vote doesn’t make such a big difference, but I should reconsider that because it does matter. My voice is matter. If everyone think like me, then no one going to go. So I need to think about that.

TAV: Do you keep in touch with family or relatives in Vietnam?

STV: Well, all of my immediate family is here except for the cousins and I don’t like to say that, but usually they demand a lot. They expect a lot. Even if you are just cousin, you know, like their mom and their dad side and my mom and my father’s sister and brothers. They demand. Pretty typical, if you come home and you don’t have money for them, they look down on you. They expect foreign people who come home to give, so I do love them a lot. And I do help but then, there’s a limit to it.
TAV: So you still have cousins you talk to today in Vietnam?

STV: Oh yeah.

TAV: And you support them financially or no?

STV: Oh no, only when I come to visit, I give. Or if they say “I desperately need help.” Otherwise I don’t volunteer to help. But if they need help and they ask, I help.

TAV: So have you gone back to Vietnam?

STV: I came back one time, you remember, in 1998. When you was very little.

TAV: What was that experience like? How would you describe the experience of coming back?

STV: Well, when I was in my country I only lived in Saigon. So when we came back and we live in Saigon, I still remember the place touch down to the airport. And it was different. It was hot, humid, dusty, and so crowded and humid and all kinds of things. But it was very touching, you know. You come home and you really feel like, somehow you get so close because of the custom and the language. And you deeply understand. And over here, when you go on vacation, you still worry about what happen to you at work the next day. But when you go over there, you totally and completely relax with the people.

TAV: Would you want to go back?

STV: I only want to go back to visit but not to stay.

TAV: Are there any traditions or customs that you try to preserve?

STV: Obviously yes, there’s no matter what, where you go, there’s always good and bad customs. Of course, like when you see the people you still greet them, you respect the elderly. And you watch out what you say. Not like here, you have too much freedom and you think anything.

TAV: In your opinion, what will become of Vietnamese people in America?

STV: Like what?

TAV: What you consider your Vietnamese culture growing up, and they kind of brought it over here, how do you think it’s going to change over time?

STV: I can, just watching you and Ryan and Ashley growing up. I don’t think you going to retain much of my culture, which is okay with me. Because I believe where you live, you have to adapt to that society. But some people say “no, culture you still have to retain.” Maybe for your generation you can retain but when you have children, how much are they going to retain? That’s why it doesn’t matter much to me. If it’s good, you follow, if it’s not bad, you try to learn from it. To me it doesn’t matter that much. Some people you have to wear certain clothing at the wedding or eat certain food. To me, that doesn’t bother me.
TAV: How has Vietnamese community changed? Or how would you say the community has changed?

STV: I am not very close, I don’t participate into much activity because maybe I don’t care that much. And even for church and New Years and stuff like that, I don’t go out there and celebrate with them. Maybe I’m just think it’s not necessary. That’s why you can see you guys don’t know much about your culture. And I don’t know, for me you living here and you pretty much growing up here. You are American so where you live and whatever the activity there, you just participate. Why should you have to go far away and participate? I’m pretty much busy with family, work, and volunteer. To me, it matter to me if I can help other people. It doesn’t matter whether Vietnamese or African or Mexican or what. As long as I do something good for the society, that’s all I care.

TAV: So what do you think of Little Saigon? Or why do you visit Little Saigon?

STV: Well, if I want some food. If I want some Vietnamese food, I go down there.

TAV: What’s your opinion of Little Saigon? Or is it just a place to eat?

STV: It doesn’t bother me; I can eat any kind of food. So eat down there for the change, you go out there for the change. Just like if you eat Chinese or Thai or Mexican or American, so some cultural change. If it’s not there then it doesn’t bother me, I have other stuff to eat.

TAV: Do you ever go there to gain a sense of nostalgia? Do you ever go there to kind of reminisce about your childhood?

STV: No, not really. I don’t care much.

TAV: So what are the most important things that the future generations of Vietnamese Americans should remember about their past? Or is there nothing that you really need to remember?

STV: Say one more time?

TAV: Is there anything that you think that the future generations of Vietnamese Americans need to know about their past?

STV: Like even right now, even if they say “ok my grandparents have some Chinese or some French or something.” I really don’t care. I really don’t care that much. Just like you guys right now, I look at you and as long as you growing up here and as long as you a good person and you do something back for society that’s all I care. Doesn’t matter if you have to speak the language to help the Vietnamese people, you can help any people out there that need you to help. So that’s all that matters to me. And it’s nice for you to speak like Chinese or another language so you can help better.

TAV: So last question is, is there anything else you want to add or is that it? Closing remarks if you want to say anything.
STV: Well thank you for the interview and I hope right now you know something about me. And for whoever listens to this conversation, hopefully it enlighten that person and that they learn something about our family, our culture. And thank you for the interview and listening to me.

TAV: Ok, I definitely enjoyed it. So that will conclude our interview for today, I guess that’s pretty much it. That is the end of the recording.