LC: Today is March 2nd, 2012. This is Lotusa Chan with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project and I am interviewing Mai-Phuong Nguyen. We are the University of California, Irvine in a conference room at Humanities Gateway. Would you please state and spell out your name?

MPN: My name is Dr. Mai-Phuong Nguyen and it is Mai and I differentiate that because in Chinese, it would be “May” so anyways it is Mai-Phuong Nguyen spelled M-a-i-P-h-u-o-n-g N-g-u-y-e-n.

LC: Where and when were you born?

MPN: My real birthday is February 28th, 1969 and I say that because I have an official, legal birthday here in America that is February 8th, 1969 and there is a little back story to that. I was born in a beautiful hillside or countryside called Dalat, Vietnam which is now unfortunately turned into a resort area full of golf courses. It used to be just rolling hills and Buddhist temples and French Universities and my parents met there. That’s why I was born there.

LC: What are the names of your parents?

MPN: My father’s name and I am going to use the Vietnamese version is Nguyen Van Son and my mother’s name is Nguyen Bach Mai. Every word in Vietnamese is mono-slavic meaning that it is only one syllable and every word has a meaning and I was taught very young by my very educated parents the importance. So the funny story about my dad’s name is that he had very luscious lips but when he was born, my paternal grandmother took a look at him and said, “Dang, those are big lips” so she named him Nguyen Van Song. Song is the word for lips or lipstick and Van means literature. He has lived up to his name. He is a very eloquent man at three languages: French, Vietnamese and English and he is an orator and a community leader. My mom, Bach Mai, Bach is white and Mai is the cherry blossom so our family name is Nguyen so she is a white, cherry blossom. She has lived up to that name because she is one of the most
eloquent, not eloquent. She is a very quiet lady. She is one of the most elegant and kind people I have ever known.

MPN: You know what? I am going to go kind of out of order because it will make more chronological sense so we will go on a little to the refugee experience because most people born in my generation, in the 70s or 80s had to deal with the ramifications of war so it is a little bit of a confusing story when you ask me where I grew up. So let’s go through it chronologically and then it will make more sense in the interview. So some children remember their childhood and there are some crazy people who remember when they were two or three. My one and only clear-cut, vivid memory is the day we left Vietnam and that day is emblazoned in my life and my family history. It is April 29th, 1965 and it’s the day before the Vietnam war officially ended because we were very privileged. My father worked for the Vietnamese press and he had access to information. His job at the time in April seventy five was the teletype translator for the news like AP. I am not sure if those were the actual press he translated but his job was to wait by the teletype, get the news, and translate it from French or English.

(Was paused due to technical difficulties)

MPN: The US choppers come down and I recently penned an incredibly excruciating, painful monologue describing this so I will not go into too much detail. We were at the point where Tony Paul raises his hands and stops the bus. My family files in and we are taken to the local airport of Saigon It was such a traumatizing experience because I had never seen a chopper and to describe what it was like. The propeller of a chopper is so powerful. It whipped up a dust storm. It is kind of like a dirt. It is not a normal runway like you see at John Wayne airport. The dirt got whipped up. It was kind of becoming sunset. It was getting dark. This chopper comes. I do not know what it was. I am a kid and this dust storm comes and I had no idea but all I knew was that there was like a million bee bites because the dust was piercing my skin and it was chaos. I cannot really, verbally describe the chaos. The best I can do is that it was just the most frightening thing in my entire life and I have seen a lot of violence in Los Angeles and anyways, so we get on this thing and if you have ever been on a helicopter. If you seen movies, like you know, the war movies, there are these netted things. They strap us in and everything happened really fast, right? So we get on and I remember my father. He was like, “We’re safe. We are getting out of Nam.” Right? So this chopper takes us to a large US carrier that is positioned off the shores of South Vietnam and it landed and we all disembarked on this aircraft and we, I do not know what was going on but as a kid, you kind of register what the adults are doing and I knew we were safe and what happened there was that there was a big US carrier. I think it was USS something so I do not know if this ship was the USS midway but I know that the USS midway was what we left Vietnam for. So anyways, it was like hundreds of people on this US carrier along with the soldiers and the marines and the navy people. The normal crowd and there was like hundreds of Vietnamese refugees.
MPN: They put us into bunks downstairs. I remember because it was so magnanimous and magnificent, right? So we were on these bunk beds and you can imagine these refugees tuna-canned because there has to be enough room for the usual military folks and then a couple hundred Vietnamese folks and I think between the six of us, we had two bunks so my brothers and my sisters had one. Anyways, either one or two bunks and in that evening, my father…I remember him turning to my mom and was like, “We’re safe, we’re gonna be just fine.” That was the evening of April 29th so the next days, somehow, I do not know. We were on the bunks or something. We get news that the war was over and my father was such a strong man. I have never seen him cry and he has only cried twice in his life as far as I can remember and he is seventy two right years old now but when he heard the news that the country was lost…he just broke down into tears and I did not know what happened. I just remember him shaking his head to my mom and saying the country is lost. We have lost our country and he cried for awhile and it was so confusing for a six year old but you know. He was so strong and he recollects himself and life moves on and because my father had such facility in the English language, you know. He was such a great networker. He got to know the head people in the ship and there was just all this craziness and all these Vietnamese people.

MPN: Although all of them had to have connections with the national government, not all of them spoke very good English so whenever there is a refugee situation, people had to quickly organize so he was a leader and so he got people organized. My father had this incredible life. Sometimes, I am not quite sure how much of it is true but all my life. I have heard these crazy stories about all the things that he did. He was only thirty something when he left the country so he lived a very rich and compacted life. He had experience in the military. He talked about the time he spent in Special Forces, working alongside the US military so he had facility with like first aid, kind of like a paramedic but not a paramedic. He could do wound care and he could give Tylenol, Aspirin but he was smart so he got to run the infirmary on the ship and was so privileged because you are underneath, inside the ship. You are not on top because there were hundreds of people on top of the ship bearing down the heat and the rain because in Southeast Asia, it rains. We had an air conditioned room and a bunk and he ran the infirmary and I was this little kid, kinda looking out of the bunk beds and you know? They had to whip out food for all these refugees. They were equipped because the US military is pretty well funded. So they would pass out food we do not usually eat. We had like eggs and bacon and sausage for breakfast. You know, to me I was like wow this is different food which is funny because when you are a kid, you have these really funny memories. Like I said, I do not have too many memories of my childhood but I remember very distinctly that these few days on the ship, they passed out tuna, canned tuna. I have never eaten American canned tuna. I was so hungry and I was so scared, thinking, “Man, this stuff is really good!” You know, it was just canned tuna. They also gave out gram crackers and it just goes to show how funny it was because it was not really a part of our stable but as a kid growing up in the US in subsequent years, whenever I eat gram crackers or canned tuna, I would get a flash back to those days on the USS Midway.
MPN: Anyways, for those first couple days, this chopper took us to another area where we had to go into one of these big things that looked like a sperm whale, a great whale. It is kinda like what airforce one looks like for the president so they were just packing the refugees in and that is what brought us to the USS midway. That was so significant because Tony Paul was the last person on. He is such a hero. He was trying to shuffle the people and he ran up the ramp as it was closing and was like, “They got to leave right. Crap is happening. It is going down right.” I remember him going in and his foot got caught in the door which was automated but he made it through. He did not lose his foot. He lost his shoe and he had such a great sense of humor. He comes up and he finds us and that was when we strapped into those netted things and we are laughing because he does not have a shoe. Actually sorry, my memory is bad. He was delayed because my younger sister at the time fell so he had to run back to get her. That is why for the most part of my life, he was like superman. He carried my baby sister, lost his shoe, could have lost his foot and you know, we were all safe so we went to the USS midway.

MPN: It was just a few days that we were on the USS midway and all of a sudden, it stops and we were like, what is going on? It stopped because there were too many people on the ship. It could not sustain it. There was all this upheaval that they had to take some people up and it was random. They said, I am guessing take X # of people off because it was too much for the ship so another ship came and it was a smaller ship and somehow it was so disorderly that only my mom and two sisters got on it. These were massive, huge naval ships. This other one comes and marches next to it so to get off. Literally, there were these like ladders on the side and they were throwing the luggage and people were climbing down so it was chaos. I remember them throwing my baby sister who was then three years old, like one sailor to the next and what if they dropped her? But they did not. Then it came my father, my brother and I and we took the trip to Guam. It was a huge navy base and a USS territory. It was probably like three hours by plane from Guam to Vietnam because I subsequently lived on Guam for four years. On a ship, it took longer than 3 days, maybe five, maybe less. We were downstairs. I had an idea that we were better off than other folks but not really and my dad was such a nice, funny guy that he made friends on the ship and then we arrived at Guam and then we get into a refugee camp on Guam. They were tent cities. That was what it was called and here in California, there was Camp Penalton. Again, they took a military base and made it into a tent city. There was a refugee camp and they set up registries and my dad took a role there because he could speak English and could negotiate between the military and the locals and the refugees and we lived there for a few weeks, I believe and it was an issue. How do we find my mom and sisters? Tony was back in Hong Kong. He had a wife and two sons. Dad phones Tony in Hong Kong and says, “My family is split up.” Of course, Tony does his journalist, investigative research, finds them on Wake Island. It was a couple weeks and he somehow managed for their reunion. I do not know if dad went and got my mom and sisters back or Tony just arranged for them to come. Tony came to Guam to visit my dad and that I do not remember but my dad as told me related stories as an adult.
MPN: We stayed on Guam for a month or two or three, I do not know. I was living in a Tent City and as a kid, it was fun. It was a clean place, there were only a couple hundred of people and it was sanitary because if you read anything about what happened in Katrina and other disasters, it is not so nice so again, I was very lucky. What people had to do was they had to wait to find sponsors in the US to leave Guam because what are you going to do? You are going to the US and how are you going to make it? In the US, you have to think politically about what happened. Now we got all these refugees hanging out in our military bases in Southeast Asia or the Pacific Islands. They set up a campaign; there was stuff in the media. Back during the Vietnam war, there was a lot of US press coverage. Vietnam is so pivotal because the US is the only war the US lost. The lessons learned politically and militarily are that you do not cover it so if you think now in 2012 or the 21st century, we were in war with Afghanistan or Iraq and how much do you hear? Very little...zero. So we were on Guam, we had to wait. There was some humanitarian campaign through the media where churches set up, sponsorship programs where American families sponsored Vietnamese families. To me, that makes me so proud to be an American, a Vietnamese American. This country is so generous in some ways. We do a lot of bad stuff in the world politically but you know. American people, American politicians are one thing but American people are so generous because all across this nation, American families sponsor Vietnamese families.

MPN: From Guam, they had to redistribute these mass amounts of people so there were refugee camps. Camp Pendleton is an example of such large. I am not sure if it is the largest but it is one of the top ones. My family, however, ended up in Pennsylvania. It was a sad railroad, depressed town and they set up a refugee camp and this was called Indian Town Gap, Pennsylvania and the funny story is that I had no idea what this refugee camp was called. When I was growing up and it was not just my family but my cousin’s family, my distant relatives ended up there which was nice because we had a community. When we were growing up, my mom’s family is from the Central part of Vietnam so they had a thick accent and called it Indian Tow Gaaap so growing up, I thought Indian Tow Gaaap was somewhere in Asia because it does not sound English. We stayed there for a couple weeks, maybe a month or so and that was where we were resettled because there was a Pennsylvanian family that brought us in, a church. Churches are these amazing dispensaries of charity so a church sponsored us as well as a bunch of other people. It was so amazing. They took us in. It was all hand me downs. They clothed us, they found a town house for us. We fixed it up and the church helped us fix it up. This was starting to be winter time. I think we stayed at people’s houses for awhile until we found good housing. So it is our first winter ever. I am from Southeast Asia. I have never seen snow and it is cold. It is kinda overwhelming but here we are taking down old paint and ripping off yucky, old wallpaper. I have never seen wallpaper in my life, my six year old life and it was fun. It was a really dark, scary place. It was cold. I had nightmares, kind of because it was damp. I do not know if you know the North East but it is damp and the first winter, I remember there was snow. I remember I was running down a hill and I could not stop so it was pretty crazy but anyways, we were housed in this place. My family was Buddhist and I remember the first day we went to church.
and they paraded us down the aisle and was like, “Welcome to the Country. This is our Vietnamese family, Song and Mai and their little four children and it is weird.

MPN: Something was weird and as a six year old, I even sensed it, that it was kind of weird so my dad, within six months said, “I do not see a future here, I do not want to live here. So he is so extraordinarily adventurous and he drove to Washington DC and said, “This is where I want to be, it is the US capitol, there is more opportunities here. Indian Town Gap was this tiny little town but it was depressed. What was their industry? A dying railroad. So then we moved to DC. My dad and my mom were just like any other refugees. They took whatever job they could get. I never knew what they did. I knew my dad was a delivery boy for a sandwich shop and my mom took on Seamstress work kind of, not to the extent of sweatshops. She was paid a dollar twenty five for an hour so then she worked at Kmart for awhile. So she worked in Kmart in the morning, you know, eight hours, come home, we always had a hot meal that she home cooked and she would put us to bed and I never knew this. I just found this when I delivered my son two years ago. At night, she would go work at the sweatshop from eleven to four something. That was just you know, the price our parents pay. So then, what was amazing was that my dad got recruited to work for the top four or five companies called New York Life which was probably the most stable life insurance company and he did magnanimously well. He was their shooting star. Within his first year, selling to poor refugees, he made top agent, competing against American people. He is this total go-getter so from there, we just quickly made it. We moved from one house to the next. We went from living in a one bedroom apartment, six people to a townhouse, to a single home that was gorgeous within five years? Another clear memory is that my dad drove home in this big Mercedes. He was so proud of this car, you know and one winter, he bought my mom this very beautiful, fluffy coat. So the house that I moved into, I was probably in third grade, so from first grade to third grade, was the house I grew up in. I grew up there until I was a junior in high school and it was a very nice house if you do not know anything about Fairfax, Virginia. It is one of the most premiere places to live in Northern Virginia. It is where the Ambassadors live. I have great faith in the universe because my whole life has been very blessed and we will get to my adulthood which was very trying but we went to the top public school system in this country and that has molded and shaped me like no other. It was white America. Other than my family, there was only one other Vietnamese family in my elementary school, middle school, and high school and you know, I was so lucky because I really did not experience racism as a child except for about a handful of experiences right after the war, we were at a supermarket called Giant. It is very northeast. They do not have it over here.

MPN: Someone screamed an explicit at us and said, “You chinks, why don’t you go back home.” I did not understand. What was a chink? I knew it was not nice and I knew going back home, well I am an American. What do you mean going back home? I was probably eight or nine at that time. It is so clear in my mind because I have only had a few horrible experiences as a child. As an adult, it is a different story but it brandishes you. Anyways, so I grew up, all my teachers treated me just as lovingly as all the other kids and I was such a great student like you, probably.
I was a strait A student, I was sweet, I got along with everybody and I am funny. I was this silly little girl and I felt like I fit in. However, I did not but self-consciously, I did. All my girlfriends were white and they seemed to like each other just a little bit more, just a little bit. I mean, I had great friends but they would come to each other’s houses and never came to our house partly because my parents probably did not say, “Why don’t you invite your girlfriends over?” So I felt a little out of it but never bullied, never you know. Everybody loved me, from students to teachers to everybody and then starting in fourth grade, they were rolling out what they now call the G.A.T.E. Programs. Back East, they called it GT, Gifted and Talented. I was even more lucky. I was plucked from the normal kids. I mean they had testing. They test kids like crazy nowadays but back then they did not have as much testing so I had all these aptitudes and I was plucked from a very good public school system to an even better public school system. I grew up with the smartest, the best of the best and you know, it was great. So I had this great experience. Meanwhile, my parents were working like crazy, they worked all the time. We always had a hot meal, we always ate as a family. At least mom did because dad was always busy out and about selling insurance to every Vietnamese person he could find and then when we were teenagers, my parents, my dad worked even harder because once you get to the top, you have to stay at the top and your game has to be great so he ran out of Vietnamese people in Northern Virginia so then he started going to Massachusetts and he is so brilliant. Back in the day, before Google and all that stuff, you just had like white pages and yellow pages so every town, somehow he would get work because diaspora Vietnamese are everywhere but they were pockets right. He was smart, he talks to people so he would go to like…Boston, there were not so much, some other cities that were not so…he would go there, get their white pages, look up Nguyen, look up Tran, look up Le. These are the key surnames, put it in a computer. I did that. I became the data entry and would put in their address, do mass mailings. Hi I am Son Nguyen, I sell insurance, I was top dog in my company which is two hundred and fifty years old…blah…blah…and this is how he made his money so when he ran out of Vietnamese people in Massachusetts, he went to Florida so that covers the East Coast. When he ran out in Florida, he went to Texas and after Texas, he moved to California. That is 1987 so growing up, I had a great…a great education. We did not do any sports. We did not know anything about that so it was tough growing up in that way but I never felt like I was missing anything and I felt that my life was adequate. However, we wore hand me downs. The only things that I felt that I was missing were that I never had designer jeans until much later. My friend’s clothes always looked a little nicer and now I go back and look at my pictures and I was always a misfit in terms of my clothes. My clothes did not always look so great but I did not care. It is not who I am. That is a good thing because if I cared, I probably would have suffered psychologically so I am this…oddball. I mean my shirt, the colors, you know. I have an older sister and she was very fashionable so when she had nice clothes and got new ones, I got her old ones but then she got really big, it was not very healthy so I could not fit her clothes so my cousin, whatever.

MPN: So those were the only things that I was lacking. I did not know about sports, I did not know about theater, until I hit high school and then I met other people I knew but my parents,
being refugee parents were afraid of American culture. They did not want us to become poisoned by the bad Western. They wanted polite kids which we were. They did not want their kids to curse so they kinda intentionally did not want us to assimilate too much. We would speak Vietnamese at home. We always ate Vietnamese food at home and there were no after school activities. The only thing my two sisters and I did after school was dreaded piano lessons so for five years on Wednesday, all three of us would go to Bac’s house and she is like this famous piano teacher in the Vietnamese community. She has her credentials from France and she is brilliant but she taught in the old fashioned dictatorial manner. If you did not do it well, you got penciled on your knuckles. She was such a passionate musician that I am so grateful to her because she taught us the beauty of classical music but we were classically trained, like brutal...kinda...we call her. She’s about four feet, six something. She is so diminutive when it comes to music and we had recitals and we competed in the Boc Festival, every year! personally, Bok music is one of my favorite now but trying to learn like the four voices and getting it right ooh...the mood was hard and it was the tiger mom sort of experience but they were so committed because this was the one thing they wanted us to do because my father knew the importance of a classical education given his experience and he was born very poor so, what was it like growing up? It was going to school, getting my straight A’s, Wednesdays, three hours of piano, getting beat up psychologically but taking it because you know, it is sixteen dollars an hour. It was a lot of money. Asian people use guilt, right? So you had to do well, then you go to your recitals and there is a hierarchy and so and so is better than so and so. It was a lot of pressure. That was the only thing that I felt pressured about. Everything else was easy. I am a good student. So then when I hit tenth grade, you have to figure out what you want to do with your life, right so I had a cousin who was from Florida, great family. She was a distant cousin. MPN: She went to Johns Hopkins. So Johns Hopkins is in Baltimore, Maryland which was a couple hours from Virginia. She did not have family so we became her family and she would come home on the weekends sometimes. She was about ten years older than me and no, like six years and she was like well, if you want to be a doctor because I had to choose between. These were the three things. My parents never pressured me to become a doctor like most Asian parents. I chose because I was so smart. I wanted to be a writer, a teacher or a doctor and my father in his wisdom said, “Be a doctor because you will always be teaching your patients and you can always write but you cannot go to school and take English or something and decide later that you want to become a doctor because it is so much harder to go backwards.” So I decided at tenth grade that I was going to be a doctor. So my cousin from Florida was at Hopkins which was an Ivy League school. It was one of the top programs in the country and she skipped 12th grade because she was so smart. She was like, “Why don’t you skip twelve grade and just go to college like I did because you know what you want to do? Why waste all that time, you know all that peer pressure of prom and your family?” It made sense because I knew I could not go to prom. My dad’s rule was you cannot go to school dances but I loved to dance. My dad was a social light in the Vietnamese community. He would have big parties at home and he was like,
“You can dance at home.” Our basement, we had a three story home, two story home, split level home.” We had parties for like sixty, a hundred people playing you know. Funky Vietnamese, French music and dancing ballroom dancing so I learned how to ballroom dance in my teen years so he said, “You don’t need to go to school dances.” They were afraid we would become Americanized right. I knew I could not go to the prom. I knew I would be traumatized because it was sad so I was like okay, I will graduate because I had enough credits. I took advanced class so that was my global plan so I left high school, I had all my credentials and I went to George Mason University was a local university but it was not a great university and I thought it was great so you know. So during twelve grade, I was a freshman at George Mason. I took like premed stuff like Biology, Calculus, Physics. It was okay because I liked it. I convinced myself that I liked it but I am like, “How am I gonna get into med school from George Mason?” My classmates in high school went to Princeton, went to UVA which was like so much better than Mason and you know. So you got the IV leagues to the upper crust state schools and I was like dad, I do not think I can get into med school but I probably could have gotten into med school. I was just insecure, right. So he goes, “Well, honey I am going to look into California. Why don’t you come with me? I don’t want to move the family. I mean he did not go through all this but was like, “If you really want to get into med school, UC schools are really good.” How did he know this? How does a refugee father know this but he is smart and I just as an adult, I guess I appreciate parents more. So it was he and I and that moment when we drove across country. I remember it was a long trip and my cousin…I remember I grew up with three cousins in our house they were boe people. They left their older parents. They just get out of their ship and send their children to make sure their children get to a safe, free country and deal with reunification later. So they tried a couple times and made it to Virginia and they were teenagers so they lived with us. It was three of them. The oldest sister, Chi means older sister. We always refer each other in a hierarchy and her two younger brothers. We were a big family so in this house in Suburban, Virginia, there were seven kids in the house and my two parents who supported all of us because that is what people in the villages do. So we grew up with them and they went to college. My youngest cousin got into MIT. My other cousin went to a couple schools, good schools but it look him like seven years to finish college and she became like my big sister more than my real big sister. She was twelve years older than me but we were born in the same year. The year of the rooster and she is just this really generous, wonderful woman and she went to work at kmart with my dad and she ended up…I am sorry, with my mom and she got recruited with New York life and worked with my dad. She was a good seller but not the top seller because she was not wired like dad because you have to be a really, really go getter to be a top seller. So it was my cousin, myself and dad driving across country and it took several days. I do not know how my dad knew this but I knew he wanted to be in the Little Saigon area but we arrived in Southern California late one night and I remember driving into Irvine and you know the street signs here are so nice right. They are perfect, lit and said, “Welcome to your new home sweetie.” and Irvine at the time was one of the planned communities in the country. I grew up in like Rowland Hills with big back yards, trees and these were like track homes with teeny little
yards and I was like wow this is different but it was exciting right? It looked happening and I had sight on UCI. I have never heard of UCI. I had to make sure it was good enough for me right so I went to George Mason library and looked it up. Back then, they had the dewy decimal system and I opened this book. It opened in 1960 something and it was only like twenty years old right? That is not a very old school. Is it good enough to get into med school so I had my sights on Irvine and we moved into this place called Oakwoods in Newport. I had no idea how expensive it was to live in Newport until recently and recently is like the last fifteen years as an adult and this was my father and he mapped everything out brilliantly and it was expensive. It was executive housing. It was like living in the embassy suite so it is a completely furnished apartment and it has a swimming pool and all that. So it was just me, my big sib/ cousin and my dad. So he worked like a dog because you know. He is a pioneer. He comes out here, goes to a general office and says, “Hi, I am Son Van Nguyen and I am top dog back in Chevy Chase, Maryland because that is where their general office is and I am here because my clients are Vietnamese and this is the largest Vietnamese population outside of Vietnam. So he worked really hard and he dragged my cousin around and together, they were a formidable team and I am too busy. I did not start UC Irvine right away. I enrolled in Orange Coast College because it is very expensive to be an out of state student so my plan was I was going to go to OC for a year, get my state residency and I had no doubt I was going to get into Irvine because I was a good student, right? I am pretty confident. I have a supportive family and that was their exact words. You are born to be a leader. At OCC, it was important, it was a humbling experience. I am smarter than the average OCC student and I am very Americanized relatively to them because many of them later. The first wave was the post seventy-fivers, the second wave were the eighties and reaching to the late eighties because the camps were closed in ninety two. I saw these people come to school in flip flops and you know and funky clothes, kind of like the clothes I had when we were refugees and it was very humbling and it made me realize how lucky I have been. Their English was broken, they had funny accents, not so much to me but obvious to an American person because they had a thick accent. Picking up a second language as a teenager is way harder than if you were a child. I was very grateful. I was very lucky to have these experiences and then I got involved in the Vietnamese Student Association by accident because I was trying to figure out who am I right? So I walk in. I am this total Americanized person because if you were Americanized like me, you would be going into UCs right? I had to go to OCC to get my state residency.

MPN: They thought I was so funny because I was Americanized and I tried so hard to speak the language. I have a funny American accent but they were very loving. I was so enamored because when we get together, the guitarist is playing music and I wanted to fit in right? So I get into the choir barely reading Vietnamese and I sing songs that I do not understand and most VSAs put on an annual, big fat concert for the Tet or the Lunar New Year and it was fun and then I gave some kind of commencement speech in English and I rocked the whole audience and they were like, “Oh my gosh Mai-Phuong, you are so good with English.” You know, talking about the Vietnamese refugee experience. By that time, there were many refugees in Southeast Asia. I got
involved in the refugee movement and I became the secretary of the OCC VSA and I liked this and I met some really nice friends who kinda pulled me further and then I got involved in the Union of VSA which is a really strong group. It is the umbrella group of all the VSAs kinda like UCLA, UCI and I think UCSD is too far and all the local junior colleges. So they put on a huge Thet. In Little Saigon, you have like a huge swap meet where you have booths and the lion dance and you have a huge stage and I was getting immersed in the Vietnamese community so I loved it so then of course, I applied to Irvine, got in so now I got in as a sophomore/junior because I had already done two years of college GEs and I did okay, you know. I remember my first day in a Bio class, as I walked into the auditorium of five hundred kids, it was like black hair, you know as I am sitting in the back. That was an eye opener. Dang, there are a lot of asian people at UC Irvine and they are multi-culturally API, right? Asian Pacific Islander. It was fun. It was so wonderful but you know, premed is really intense and they are kinda competitive. They are kinda yucky so I did not like that so then I took up a Spanish minor because I started studying Spanish back in Virginia because I had this fantastic teacher called…cannot remember her real name but she called herself “La Bruja” which means the witch but she was so funny and she made us love the language because it was so rich and so I was pretty fluent by the time I came to Irvine and I knew I just wanted to get better so I took like lit classes. I never read Don Quixote in Español but I really want to one day. It is an amazing story and I liked Chicano Lit and Chicano Cinema so that was my solace or salvation because I do my Bio classes but I really loved my Language classes and although I spent all my time in Humanities Hall, that was where I would study and during my time here, they built the Cross Cultural Center in Irvine. It was this small place and it was like all the ethnic kids and all the Kababayan, the Pilipino group, the Chinese/American group and it just felt like home for a change and sometimes, within my first year here.

MPN: I went to my first Project Ngoc and I only bring this up because Project Ngoc really sealed the deal. It really framed my world view and it was a very formidable, small. It started off small, student group trying to advocate for the refugees back in the refugee camps and this time, we are talking about refugee camps in Indonesia, Hong Kong, Thailand and so what Project Ngoc did was we fundraised all throughout the year and in the summer, because students have their break, we would put out a volunteer program and we would pick anywhere from two to four volunteers, depending on how much we fundraised that year and I got very intimately involved with that and I got into Irvine in ’89 so by ’90, I became the chair person and there was a little of a coo because I was the third chairperson because it was a brand new organization. The first one was a guy named Van Tran but he has become the first Vietnamese American assembly man in the California assembly and last year, he ran against Loretta Sanchez running for the US congress. Van was very formidable. He was the first person that I ever saw that spoke English better than me and I went to the first meeting somewhere in Irvine and he was so eloquent and so polished that I fell in love with Project Ngoc. This was an organization that I would learn so much and I can contribute because of my language skills and sure enough, when Van. So he did the first year. He built it and then the second year, I was just a very active member. A guy named Duc. I do not want to disrespect anyone but he had his own political agenda. It was only for him
just because he was in political science. I do not know what he was looking for. Public office? He was not a good project Ngoc chairperson because it was obvious that it was about him and he was hard to work with so then there was a coo to depose Duc and you know, in the meantime, we had an advisor named Tom Wilson who started and he was an American person who felt very passionate about the refugees because he was such a humanistic person so Tom and he was a grad student. I think an Engineer who started it and there were like three undergraduates who were very active. A gentlemen named Lam Vu, a woman named Vuong can who is one of my best girlfriends who was also premed, two years ahead of me and two other friends but they were like, “Mai-Phoung, you have to become chair. You are the obvious next person” and I am like “Why don’t you guys do it?” “Well we are upper classmen and we are gonna graduate in a year and you are going to need to do it.” I was really pressured and I would have done it in a heartbeat because I felt so passionately about the mission. However, my Vietnamese was pretty poor and I am like we have to work in a Vietnamese. We had to put out Vietnamese press releases when we have events, how we raised our thousands. The programs we ran in Southeast Asia cost like a couple thousands, five thousand and the later years were seven, eight thousand. That was a lot of money and how we raised it was we had a table, every weekend and we are talking every weekend down in Asian Gardens Mall and it was just in testimony to the commitment and the passion of the student members and I can do the American part but I cannot do the Vietnamese part and I was so self-conscience about it and they were like No problem. We will have a co-chair. A Vietnamese co-chair and that person was Huong Vu who is an engineering major. No disrespect to Huong Vu. He is my dearest friend but he is pretty nerdy, pretty stereotypic, nerdy. You know, pens in the pocket, funny, dorky and I think, he is not insulted. He knows who he is. He is married and has kids now and knows who he is. Hung and I were a great team. I was bossy and pushy and Americanized. He was so Vietnamese. His Vietnamese was excellent. We put out newsletters and back in the day, I do not know if you remember, but we did not have have a computer like we do now. It was cut and paste, take a picture, print it out, you know. Lay it out on paper, put it together, send it to a printer and that was such an ordeal because we put out one every month, every quarter and it was you know, exhausting amount of time. So here I am doing premed, Spanish lit minor and Project Ngoc was my full time job and I worked two jobs to have some spend money. My parents were so generous. They payed for out tuition but I had to pay for my living expenses.

MPN: So I tutored crazy stuff like Biochem which is hard and I did Project Ngoc every free moment I could get because I loved it and just to give you a flavor of what Project Ngoc means to me. Why I was so passionate was because it made such a huge difference. This was when horrible things were happening to people. Women were getting rapped, Thai pirates were aversively attacking them and when we sent volunteers in the summer time, they would bring back information and they would tell these incredible stories of how two people in a camp made such a huge difference. With the money, we raised in Asian Gardens mall, we ran like art programs for the kids and so we would send markers and paper and pens and that was cherished by the refugees. Well we did not send them, we sent money with our volunteers and the
volunteers lived outside the camps. We built this bridge between people that had hopelessness because when become a refugee, you have to prove that you are a refugee because when people are leaving, like two million people, final asylum or western countries like the US, Australia, Norway, Sweden, Canada. You have to prove that you are a refugee and not an economic migrant. I can’t tell you how important that is because you have to show paperwork or you will have to document. I was put into an education camp after the war ended. They were terrible if you ever read anything about it. Somehow you had to prove that. I do not know how you can prove that as a boe person but you do so the people who runs these refugee camps. It is an international organization by the UN. It is called the UNHCR and they are not just involved in Vietnam, every exodus. So the UNHCR has to send people, you know staff people and set them aside. As the years went on, it was harder to prove that you were a refugee. Fast forward, by eighty nine, it was fourteen years of refugees, the world was getting tiring. Vietnam was not a happy place in 1989. That is why people were still leaving but it got so bad that the UNHCR said, “We have to end this.” somehow. It has been going for fourteen years. The only way people would leave the camps is if we close it down. There was rumor that it was going to stop so that gave Project Ngoc more mandate. We saw our purpose even greater. By 1990, we got really active so this was the year I became chair or it was the year after? They were like we gotta get serious so you know what they did? We did crazy stuff like we put out a full page ad in the New York times like ratting on the UNHCR and was like how can you let this happen? These people deserve refugee status. They are modified refugees so what if they do not have the paperwork? People will get on a ship and risk life and limb and lose their children just because…just because I want a better life in America, right? It was because things were really bad. So anyways, we did stuff like that and I am like this is so important. Even if I do not get into med school, this is bigger than me. I have to do this because no one else is doing this right? These were my best friends from college and they are the friends that you keep for life and the friends I would like to think would die for you if you needed. In ninety one, the UNHCR said we are closing down the camp. That gave Project Ngoc even more mandate. We saw our purpose even greater. So by nineteen-ninety, we got really active so this was the year I became chair. I think I was the chair the year nineteen-ninety. They were like, we gotta get serious so we did crazy stuff like we put out a full ad in the New York times like ratting on the UNHCR like how can you let this happen? These people deserve refugee status. So what if they do not have the paperwork. Project Ngoc sent people, a delegation. We went there. We are not a non-governmental organization. We were just students from a university in California but we wanted presence and we are in solidarity to these non-governmental organizations. We have five year experience working in these camps. We matter, they matter and we gave testimony. Pretty cool, huh? So why I tell you that is that is why I am the person I am today because one person makes a difference. A small group of idealistic students make a huge difference. You have to have something like this in a college experience. The people at Berkeley during the civil rights movement, all the major civil rights movements. Students made a big difference and that was my civil rights movement experience and I mattered. I did a good job because for three years, we won most humanitarian student
organization by ASUCI. That is something that I am very proud of, you know. So there we are, ninety-one. Camps are closed so between ninety-one and ninety-two, Project Ngoc’s word was how do we get these people safely back to Vietnam? What they did was that they were very strict and said we are going to do the last round of screening. Those who make it go to the first world countries and those who don’t, we must send you back to Vietnam. How scary is that? The act of getting on a boat and leaving Vietnam by Vietnamese standards is an act of treason. It is grounds for imprisonment and many of these people have already been imprisoned because not everybody gets to a refugee camp successfully the first time. I have heard stories of people who have tried seven, ten times. Do they really want to go back to prison? I would imagine not. So what our work was making sure that the world was watching, that the world has not forgotten about these people and that Vietnam stayed accountable. By ninety-two, ninety-three, the issues kind of died down. My sister who is three years behind me became a chair and I think the year after her. I think in ninety-five, Project Ngoc was no longer an organization. All the people involved and you can say there was six, seven years generation of us. It has shaped us. It was such a big deal. In terms of growing up, that was mine.

MPN: Then I graduated Irvine. Then my next most humbling experience was that I had to apply to med school. I thought I was hot tamale right? I did not get accepted to most of the schools I applied to. I did not apply to many because I was a good student. I did a lot of work and my resume as a college junior was pretty darn good. We were most humanitarian organization for three years in a pretty good place and I speak three languages. I thought I was pretty hot tamales so when I got all my denials from the UCs, I was kind of shaken. I did not have a 4.0. I had a 3.8 or something like that. Kind of like you right? Taking more courses and having a negative impact.

LC: How do you manage to do all that you do?

MPN: I do not know. Grace of God, passion. I think passion and commitment, prioritizing. I was never good at prioritizing. I followed my heart and it lead me to Project Ngoc. I mean we are talking labor of love, like 3am making newsletters. Every weekend, I never went out. I went to Asian Garden’s mall and raised money. I sat in a booth and told people our sad stories and our victorious stories so when I did not get in I was like Holy Cow! How is this possible? I was, you will not believe this. So I only applied to the UCs, USC and Penn State. I got two interviews. USC and Penn State so I was like at least I am not in the dog house but wow, I am not top dog anymore right? So that was humbling. Going to Penn State would be like going back into white America. It is not what I want to do and once you go to med school, it impacts who you meet and impacts your residency. I wanted to stay in California or the West. I am genetically programmed to like the tropics. I am physically miserable when I am cold. So of course, Mai Phuong had to take life by the hands and change her destiny so when I was waitlisted and I had not heard. You know, the top students get their acceptance letters early and I got mine later and then I did not hear back from USC so I had to do something. I am not just going to sit here and let life happen so I contacted the dean of student affairs and said may I have a minute or may I have an
appointment with you? I need to tell you. I need to talk to you. I think he was tickled. Like how many people interview the dean of student affairs? I need to tell you why it is so important to me to stay in California. So he kinda gave me an appointment. I do not know what he was thinking but like my father, I am not just going to sit around and let things happen to me. At least I am going to make an effort, right? You cannot blame yourself for trying so I remember him walking in and he was grinning like this is crazy. Why is a student coming in and interviewing me? One of the things he impressed upon me was he just let me talk for a good fifteen, twenty minutes. He asked me key questions to start the dialogue and was this magnificent listener. Now as an eighteen year veteran, internal physician, he made an impact on me, the importance of mindful listening. So he was grinning during the interview, right? There was an admissions coordinator and her name was Arlene. I cannot remember her last name but I wanted them to know me. They get thousands of applications and it is so competitive in med school but it was really intense because I was such an amazing kid, right? Like how can I not get an interview? So I did not hear back. So school ended, I graduated, it was a magnificent day. I do not think I graduated with honors but who cares? I did stuff here nobody else did. I really did not care so I learned, kind of early on what was important in life right? I didn’t hear so I was like oh my God, if I do not get into med school, what am I going to do? While in third year, I went to Mexico, a two month summer program. It changed my life. The first time I left the US and I saw a totally different country. A completely different culture, I mean there are so many Latinos here but it gave me a cultural flavor of what it means, of what Mexico is all about. You know, we are so ignorant. We meet Mexican people, you eat tacos, beans, rice and you think Mexicans are all the same. They are not! They have different states, ethnic pride, every state has something unique about it and it opened my eyes to the world. In addition to classes, we would have eight hours of classes, we would have an excursion and we lived with a Mexican family it was wonderful. It was immersion, right? When I came back, I worked for EAP, The Education Abroad Program. That was my job. My other job was a tutor. I was employed by the university as a tutor and then I was employed with the EAP Program. My job was to go to lecture halls and say you need to study abroad, it really opens up your eyes. It was something I was also very passionate about. I had fun. You had these files of all the study abroad programs. EAP is expensive. It is through the UC. It is a year abroad, like junior year abroad. It is expensive, even a summer abroad. I knew I was not going to be idle after graduation so I looked into a program called Los Amigos de los Americas which is a very well known program in Texas and what they do is they do community health and humanitarian programs. Taking you back to Irvine on what I did because to get into med school, you have to do research so I was a bench rat for biochemistry and I grimace because what I had to do was DNA sequencing and I spent a year trying to sequence which is to isolate gene from e-coli that makes a certain protein and if we can find it, we can do genetic engineering of food. I cannot remember. We are talking weekends, nights going and trying to isolate this gene. A year, I could not find the gene, I felt like such a loser. This was the only thing that I felt that I failed. I have never failed anything but I failed to isolate this gene. If you have ever been to the chemistry part of the department, the labs are yucky, they stink. It smelled like sulfur, rotten
eggs and petri dishes like yeast, lucky. I quit after a year. So anyways, after I graduated, I did not get into med school so I went to Ecuador. They trucked us in and we stayed with different families everyday to spread the burden. When they fed us, it was basically just rice and beans and corn. Beans grow symbiotically and there was no industry. It was remote right? Amazing experience. My mom was frightened to death. I met a man who was a med student at UC San Diego. He housed me so I could save money in San Diego and he became my boyfriend. So his name was Chris Clark and he is now married with children in Massachusetts. Chris and I were actively in a relationship and I remember the day I left from LAX. My mom just cried. She was like, “My daughter is going I do not know where” and Chris is just like “Oh my gosh.” I had this great experience, I come home and my family comes with a banner that says “Congratulations, you got into USC” and it was unbelievable. So I go into USC and it was pretty intense experience. I was the class of 95. I went in in 91. I went into med school, it mostly students with parents of doctors and it was so hard. Med school was the first time I felt that I was going to fail a test. I was like, “Oh my goodness.” and it was exhausting, mentally, physically. USC was very dramatic, so much disparity. Sometimes, I see that I do not have it so easy because I am a female but Latinos have it really hard. Here I am having gone to Mexico, you know. I am really relating. Then I go to USC and the white kids are doing so much better because if you are a kid of a doctor, you grew up with it and it is nothing new to you and I have never been a jealous person, that is not who I am but it was just like this is hard you know? First and second year, it was all bookwork and Irvine really prepares you for that and that I hit third year. USC is one of the schools that shows the intense, real world reality. USC is so hard that the residence. After you graduate med school, you have your internship of post-graduate training and then you do residency. It is a huge program. It was the third world. Every country is represented, diseases of poverty, lack of education. It was so hard. Unless you feel for this patient, it was such a job. Although I respect my American friends, I do not think they hurt so much when they saw this poverty as I did but it shakes you up and I had a really tough time and I had a year to get used to it. I applied for a place called San Fernando Valley, a UCLA program because it was still a county hospital. I had such a hard time in ICU because I was always so intense all the time because I never felt that I was good enough. I was very humble through my medical school education. Part of the trauma at USC was that you never felt that people had your back because it was so big. As a third year, I felt like I just had to know stuff and it was so unrealistic. HIV was a big thing. You do not get grades but you get evaluations. I was so scared. When you see gun shot wounds in sixteen and seventeen year old bodies, you wonder, what kind of poverty or violence produces this? You are given so much responsibility. They are so overworked. Physically and emotionally, classmates were so nice. We took care of each other and I am pretty smart and I am so intense and they respected me but I felt like an imposter. Everything thinks that you are doing a good job but you feel like a fool because you feel like you do not know enough, so I mentally broke down and I just could not do it anymore. I had to take a break because other than quitting the bench research, which I hated. I had my first, severe battle of depression which I had my whole life since then but it is now managed. I am good. I had to get through the fire to get here
and it was so hard and I graduated and I knew I had to find a kinder, gentler practice setting and there are not any. I worked as a substitute doctor for Kaiser, worked for Healthcare partners. I was just a fill-in and it was horrible. Urgent care work is hard because it is intense right? I had this imposter syndrome. What if I missed all these other things? Doctors who do not worry have it so much easier but because I am too smart and I am internally, medicine trained, a cough could be more than a cough. It could be other things so I had to make sure it was just a cough so it was hard and I was slow and it was bad.

MPN: I am sorry, my first job out of training was with the county. I did this really bad job at the health clinic and the swing shift between twelve and eight because they wanted to capture the working core. It was a very lonely job because I was the only doctor in the evening. I did that for a year and I could not do it anymore. I wanted to quit. All this training, I just wanted to quit. It was physically so unhealthy. It was so demoralized. So here I am! I was top student, big dog, did all these stuff, was full of myself, only got into two med schools and I wanted to quit and my cousin said come to Guam. She had a very humbling time. She did her residency. She did not know what she wanted to do at the time. She could not get into a residency graduating from Hopkins so she was humbled. I had nothing going on. I was single, I was depressed, I felt like I had to do something different. Maybe walk away, become a health writer or a journalist or do public health and I was not ready to give it up. So I said why not? I came to America via Guam. This is where God is sending me, right? When I say, God, I am Buddhist so it is more the ancestors and greater power. My parents were not keen about it. So I went to Guam. Guam is paradise. It is in the tropics, it is a culture similar to Mexican culture which I felt very keen to. They were very loving, communal. Have you eaten yet? Go to a fiesta. My first couple days there, come to my fiesta! My cousin is having a fiesta! I did not know them and it does not matter. I found myself and my job was going okay and I got hired into HMO. In Guam, it is an actual healthcare that has a clinic, doctors but it was kind of odd because people who go to Guam have problems. Well, not problems but issues. They are a little quirky; they could not get along with the folks. The locals loved me but it was the Caucasians thought I was a little full of myself but on Guam, I fell in love with medicine. I did house calls and the way I was wired, I got involved in the community, organization, community building. I met all these amazing women and a woman’s group of like congresswoman, nurse. My contract with Pacific Care was only two years. I was not ready to come back so I opened my own clinic for a short time. So this was 2001, I went to Guam to 2004, three years and I was in my mid-thirties and I realize, my parents are not getting any younger and I was the only doctor in the family and I knew that I could not live with myself if something happened to them. Here I am at a tropical place trying to find myself in paradise eighty-thousand miles away so I decided, I needed to come back home to California. I decided with a lot of support that I would walk away from clinical medicine so I came back home, had to move back with my parents. I only applied to two schools: Harvard and UCLA. It was a big, big application. You know, you had to fill out like ten essays, you had to prove yourself. I was meditating, religiously, everyday. I got to be a finalist for the fellowship but did not get it. It was a one year program. I owe a hundred and fifty thousand dollars from
USC that I am still playing twenty years later and we still have like fifty thousand left to go so do the math, Meanwhile, I was writing for the Vietnamese local paper, not Vietnamese but English and I got involved with VAALA which your professor is involved in passionately. VAALA is the Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association. I went to see a lot of the screenings and this is how I met my husband and he showed his student film from UC Berkeley. His movie was about Cuba. In 1999, he went to Cuba. It was a very important time. Duc happened to be in Cuba. He happened to get all this footage. Duc is your epitome of a starving artist. He lived in a commune in downtown LA. Duc, he rocked my world right? So I became his friend and he told me about a film that he wanted to do. It was an incredible story. It was about a woman who escaped in nineteen eighty-eight and it was a really powerful story. He was a starving artist. He had no money. I had time so I moved to LA and moved in with him. Anyways, long story short. I helped him raise twenty-five thousand dollars doing my community activism and we went to the Philippines and Japan and we made this really great movie. So that was 2005, doing my MPH, I got a job offer in Napa and that is how I ended up in Napa. A woman was giving away her practice so it takes that much time and he finally put it together and got a grant. In 2009, we went to the Emmys for this film. It is my pride and joy and it really was our first baby. I dragged Duc to Napa. I had this practice and it was horrible and hard. Most people do not go into solo practice nowadays because it is hard. Napa is different because there are no HMOs there. You can actually make a living not seeing too many patients. I saw fifteen to twenty and it suited me. I found myself in positions of leadership because they needed a token, ethnic person so I got involved in the California Medical Association. The CMA has something called the ethnic, medical section and I took leadership positions which was statewide and started a statewide mentorship program for kids of color. I got pregnant in 2009. We had these great launch parties. It was a lot of work pairing. It was hard finding the student and pairing them with a mentor and then I got really pregnant and I got some complications so I had to bow out. Six years in Napa, we had a great life, we bought this amazing house but when I got pregnant, I realized my child is going to have problems in Napa so I had to leave again. I had to close my practice, leave my house and this was just last year, a year ago, this month in February. It was really scary. I was pretty bummed, had I failed yet again. I never failed right? It was just in my mind. So I had to get a job so I took a job with an HMO here and we moved in 2011, February and I started in April. They thought I was worth waiting for. It is in a poor area, patients are hard, they do not comply. I am pretty used to that right? It was horrible. I hated it. You get a set salary but it is hard. Health care in America now is very different. Doctors, it is transparency. At Kaiser, they send papers out to patients and you get graded by them and that affects your salary. I did well in Napa so I got my confidence back but this was a yucky system. When I was coming home to my one and a year half old son, he would cry because I was a stranger to him so I thought that this was not working so I quit my job. I have never quit a job, very demoralized. So anyways, I am in the process of building my new company: Karuna Health Care Consultants. It is a consulting company. I am trying to glean all my worldly experiences and putting it into practice. I spent the last six months researching innovation in health care, meaning it is going to be tele-health
meaning I do health consults on Skype, Facetime on Ipad. I can be super-mom and super-doc. I do not want to lose my clinical skills so I am going to do home visits for home-bound old people which is what I did in Napa and Guam. To me, I am very excited. It is not going to be easy. I am very involved in the community, I am involved in the arts, my husband is a filmmaker and he is making a sequel so I am very Vietnamese and I love Little Saigon and we now live in Little Saigon. I am so happy my son gets to live in his ethnic community. I am an engaged citizen, I think elections are important. I am very politically active. Democracy is cool. It does not always do what it is supposed to do. Please vote! We have to go. We are going to take a picture.

LC: Thank you very much Dr. Nguyen.

MPN: You are welcome.