Narrator: LOAN PHAM THAI

Interviewer: Christina Tran

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CT: My name is Christina Tran and today is May 11th 2012. I'm going to interview Loan Pham Thai, and we are currently in my bedroom in Huntington Beach, California. And, this interview is for the Vietnamese American Oral History Project of UC Irvine. I'd like to ask if you can state your name, age, and where you currently live.

LPT: My name is Loan Pham Thai. I'm 61 years old now and I live in Huntington Beach, California.

CT: Where did you live in Vietnam?


CT: So, I'm going to ask you a series of questions that deal with the wartime and the journey you took to come to America. Where did you live during the war?

LPT: I live in the city of South Vietnam. So that means Saigon. They called Saigon before 1975, they called Saigon, so I lived in there. I live in they call provinces Quan
Nhut. And My family do the business and the only thing is my husband is policeman for the prior government before. And we have the small business before leaving.

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

LPT: Actually it's not affected my family much because we lived in the city, so we just hear about the news and then sometime it happened like we hear something the battle in the country side so that’s all that affect us but it’s not really much.

CT: How were you or your family members involved in the war?

LPT: Actually we were lucky so we not involved anything with the war. We not because its far away from the city. So actually people live in city very safe it’s not dangerous at all so we not actually involved in the war at all.

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

LPT: The last day in the war, so that day was April 30th of 1975. We stay home but few day before 30th so that means 28th, 29th, and I saw a lot of things going on like people run away and you know many, many family they try to run they try to go to the bay of the they call the navy. They try to go over there and they try to escape. And they try to go into the boat and escape from there but my family still you know in the family so around the family we close the door and then we stay at home. We scared we not go out. So until the last day of April 30th of 1975, so we saw the Viet Con that mean like the communist from the North, many, many people they come in and they drive the truck, GM truck, and they drive everywhere and they take a look at whole city and the way they are like very mean and very, they have a gun in their hand, and they have you know make us scared but actually we quiet, we close the door at home, we don't want to go out, by that time.
CT: What was it like leaving your home and country? How did you feel?

LPT: Of course we feel terrible. We don’t want to leave the house. We don’t want to leave our property. We don’t want to leave our country. We feel horrible, but because they want to take my son away because by that time my stepson was 21 years old and they want to take away of him. They want him to join the army with the communist. But we don’t want them to do that. We don’t want him go in there because they will take him away for I don’t know how long. So that’s why we scared, we have to escape.

CT: Why did you leave your home?

LPT: We leave our home because after 1975, after the day April 30th 1975, after they took over the whole city and they going to control everything. They control us. They come to our house so everybody house and they try to research your money. They research your property. They research your jewelry. They research everything, good thing you have, they took away. And then they don’t let you have the freedom like the way they are they come in my house, they stay there for about 4 people stay in my house and they record everything what we do like what we eating, what we have the business, what we have in there, what my husband doing, what I’m doing, what my kids are doing, they try to control everybody and they report. They write a record and then they make everybody feel uncomfortable. We scared of them; we don’t know what they’re going to do. And then, my neighbors suddenly one night, and they took the truck come over and load them in everybody in and they took them away. They drive them to the countryside and they threw them in the forest.
Whatever they do for survive they don’t care so that’s why we scared too. But we try to be nice to them and because I many kids so I have to be nice to them. I do whatever they say to follow their rule so we can leave. So by that time, so for about, they do that for about 5 to 6 months and they have another rule is they take people away. They don’t let people stay in my house anymore. And then they going to they want to take my son, my stepson; by that time he was 21 years old. They want to take him to join in the army, communist army. By that, I know for sure, my son will go away for a long time, and maybe he might not come back anymore. So we were so afraid. So we have to try to corruption them, pay for them, for my stepson is safe for my family be safe. We have to give them money or we have to do everything whatever they want and then we be survive. And by that time everybody do that not only my family but because they the way they are very different they try to control everybody; they want all the money from people. And they take your property away. And because of my family we do the business like they say coffee beans and we grind it you know when customers come in we grind it and sell it to them. And we have a lot of coffee. We have about like 20 big bags coffee and each bag is 100 kilo. That means a ton of coffee. And they took away. They just give us a piece a paper. They say our government will pay for you. But we never see that we never see they pay for us anything. They just took away and then they took whatever we have like good things in our house they took away and they say oh we pay for you. But they only give you a piece of paper and then we never get anything. We never get money. And then we live and we be struggle with them for we try to do the small business again, very little and we squeeze in the money and then we waiting for time and
then until one day, they say they’re going to change the money. You know that? They change the money. It’s funny to say. But they change the money. So whole money you have like the prior of the government for the money is different. With them they print another and they develop and print out another the money look like they’re money. So they want us to change. So exchange the money. We have to go to the bank, they’re bank, and we have to give like 10,000 dollars, we get 200 dollars back. How about that? 10,000 dollars, you get 200 dollars only. So can we survive? But we try we know everybody be very struggle life by that time but we try to be survive. We still keep continue the business, you know slowly, small business and then later you know we sell more and more and more and more and more. So we survive by that time and then my husband go to re-education camp. But he lucky because he only go for 3 days and he come back. He’s not really suffer but he scared because they try to wash the brain of the people. They talk good about them and they talk bad about us and they say we service, the prior government, is we guilty. So that’s why we have change the way, we change it and we have to be loyalty to the communist. So we have to write all the paperwork and talk bad about the prior government. I am the one that help my husband do that because he don’t know how to write Vietnamese good because he’s Chinese. But we lucky so after that they let him come home and then he be survived. He not go too far from city so he’s okay. And then by that time we go back to do the business again, we try to do the business to survive. And they come to my house, every single day, they want to talk about communist and they want to talk about how good they are, and they want to convince us have to be equal with somebody else if you have money or if you have to give up something for them.
And they try to talk through me to take the house from me. They want to take my house and then they want to chase us, they convince us to go to the countryside, living. To live over there. And give up everything in the city, give up everything my property, my house, give up everything in the city. I was so scared because I have 8 children in my hands. I don’t know what to do. I have to try to fight with them and I have to write the letter and go to the court. Go to talk to them and you know go to report to them. We do the small business, we not do the big business, and whatever they want to pay for tax or whatever we earn, benefit from doing business, we will pay tax for them. By that they agree with us and they leave us alone. If I have more property or I have a lot of money they going to chase us away. Because we do small business and the way I talk to them I say I have 8 children and my children still young so if we go to countryside we afraid they not survive, blah blah blah. You know I talk to them and I try very hard and they stop it they don’t want to take my house away. And we continue to do the business until by that time my youngest daughter, Phuong Thai, she’s only 18 months and then we live in the city for 4 years later at 1979. My husband have a connection, hook up, to escape by boat with somebody he knows from Rač Gía, that means that place far away from city. About I think about 200 kilometers from city from Saigon to the Rač Gía. And then he try to go back and forth so many times for about a whole year to hook up and to talk to them and to make the connection. So one day, people come over and let us know, oh we’re going to move. So we have to drop off everything and then I take my kids, pack it up and only clothes and something we need to bring that’s it. We cannot bring a lot of things. So I have to go to my parents’ house and my sister, and I told them. And
I say good-bye to them and I leave. So we leave very late at night, in the midnight and we leaving. We go to Saigon we go to Rạch Giá by like the bus and then we go over there. And then by then I have to take my children first. I took 5 of them first, 5 kids and I go first and then 3 adults, 3 of the big kids, with my husband. They stay with my husband for a couple of weeks and then they go to Rạch Giá too. And then we meet over there and we go over there we have to hiding in some place like the temple. We hiding in there we don’t want to let people know that we’ll go, we’ll escape. And we try to pretend we visit somebody over there. We stay there about 1 week and 1 week later, one night the owner, the one make the boat, he come to us he say okay, we have to leave tonight. So we be prepare. And then I go to, that night, at very late about 12 o’clock at night, so we slowly, everybody slowly go to the small canoes. We have to drug the kids, we have to put the kids to sleep. We give them some medicine to take to sleep they not cry. So we go slowly, everybody very quiet, loading in the small car and then they drive about one mile and go to the bay of the seashore. And we go down to the boat, we go on the small boat. Everybody quiet and then we row the boat because if they hear the noise, the soldier, the communist soldier, they’re going to shoot us. So that’s why we very scared but everybody quiet and we try to be slowly each person go on the boat and then only like we boat it out. And then we go out for about at least 30 minutes, we boat and then go to the big boat. The big ship, we have the big boat, boat not ship, but about I think about 200 people on that boat. And we row out there and somebody take us into the big boat and everybody have to go down and hide. Hide underneath the cabin. And we very quiet and they row out. After everybody loading, and the people try to boat it out.
And until at least almost nearly 5 hours and we boat out and by that time it’s 12 o’clock at night, midnight, until 5 o’clock in the morning because we don’t want to in the morning we have sun, the sun coming, they see us. So we boat hurry. And we boat out, outside to the border line. After we go out to the borderline, we stop the engine, and then we run. And oh my god, everybody they scared. And the kid, we have to put the kids to sleep. Poor them they don’t know nothing. We took them to go on the boat, and go down to the load them in the cabin. And then we boat out to, we stop engine by that time and because so many people underneath of the boat so we can’t breathe and everybody sick, seasick, throw up, and the kids crying, and oh my god, by that time I’m so sick. And my children, they can’t breathe, so that’s why I say no we can’t. we have to go up to the cabin. And then by that the boat stop for few hours later so that mean we see the sun side. So that’s why everybody go up. We go far away from the borderline already. So everybody come up and breathe the fresh air. And then because from Rạch Giá if everybody go out that way they will go to the Thailand. They tour to Thailand. And they don’t know. So that’s why when we tour to the Thailand, we only go one day, and then suddenly, we saw the big boat from far away and they come to us and suddenly oh my god they so big, their boat so big, we cannot do anything. We cannot against them because we afraid if they run into us and then our boat will break and then everybody will die. We sink in the sea and nobody know. So that’s why we make decision all the men make decision okay talk to them. And then when they come close to us we know oh my god this is a pirate. They try to rob us. And they have a small gun and they have a knife in their hand and they Thailand language. We don’t know what they talking about but they tell us to
come close to them and they jump over our boat. They start searching. They searching, they take everybody money and we escape so that’s why we bring some little jewelry or money, they took it from us. They took from everybody. So after the first boat gone, the second boat come. The second pirate, the second group come. And they try to search again. They search and search again, oh my god, each time like that, 6 times! 6 times they come and go they come and go they try to search everything. They take everything from us. Now we broke. We don’t have anything. We bring jewelry and we brought money with us but they took it away. By that time everybody get hungry and get tired. We was so suffer. And we don’t know anything to eat. We have to cook soup. Very liquid and then the people on the boat try to help each other. We cook and then we share just drink the soup. And next day, we start the engine again and we try to tour to the Malaysia. And again somebody come. The Thailand pirate, they come again. One more group, they come and then by that time at nighttime, they took every women and the kid. They tell come on come onto their boat. Oh my god, me and all my daughters, stepdaughters, daughters, we so scare. My husband and my son stay with the men group over there. Over another boat. Oh my god, they cry they cry. We so scared. We so scared they do something bad to us, but we are lucky enough because they don’t do anything to us. They just say because see you guys a woman and the kids we afraid the boat too small and if we pull you we pull your boat and the boat sink you guys die. So that’s why they want to help you. But all the girls and the women, we sit together and whole group and we so scared of them. But they only 4 men. 4 pirate, 4 men in the boat. I don’t’ think they are the pirate but they are the fishermen. But because they see the money. No body
can see them so that’s why they try to rob us. But still took everything from us and then they give us the soup to eat and then until pull boat from us to until five o’clock in the morning. From 12 o’clock at night to 5 or 6 o’clock in the morning. They pull the string they pull over next to their boat and then they release everybody. Oh my god thank god. We pray a lot. We cry and we pray. But thank god they don’t do anything. They just pull everybody into the boat. And then they return us to our boat. And then we go again. 4 nights and 5 days on the sea and then sometime we have me and my husband, we have to sit like back turn. Lean the back. I hold Phuong Di and then Gong Gong hold Dung and My Thai. And then uncle Jimmy and Bang Di and your mom and everybody, we sit together, we sit whole group together. And if raining, we got one plastic bag, we cover everybody we cover the head. And it rain a little bit and then we took it out. We don’t have anything to eat because they took it away. We make some Duc Xi meat, meat shred, they took it away. And we don’t have anything to eat. But in the boat we still have water and we still have lucky we have water. And then we have the rice. So we just cook soup. The women go to the boat and cook soup and then give it to everybody a little bit for everyday like that. But we survive by that and then until the day 5. So we tour Malaysia. And we saw Malaysia. We see seashore. And we say oh my god, we come to the land now. And everybody happy. And they try to boat very hard to run the engine very hard and we run inside. We run in but the sanho, the rocks under the sea, it’s very sharp so we got stuck in there. So we don’t know what to do. Some men know how to swim very good. They go down and then they push the boat out a little bit and then we try to go to another way and go inside the shore. Closer. Close to the beach a little bit. And by that time,
we jump down. We go out, we look, and we see police come over. Malaysia policemen. They come over and then they come over and saw us. Later on they took 3 truck, GMC truck. Come over everybody come in. they took us to the jail. Because we break in their country like illegal. Even we are refugee but we escape from our country but we broke into the Malaysia, they call illegal. So they took us to the jail. But actually not jail but they took us because we have so many people. 200 people and then they put us in the one place they call, you know on the beach the seashore like that, the fishermen, the make the a warehouse, the big warehouse. Only 2 sides have a wall with the wood wall and then on the ceiling they have the roof of the metal. They usually dry the fish in there. So they put us in there so we. But that is a big warehouse. So they load everybody in there and they take the fence. They surround us. So we cannot go out. We get in there. And then by that they let somebody , they let one man know how to speak English, talk to the policemen over there. And the captain of the policemen in that city come to talk to us and they try to take all our name and whatever. So we stay there. On the floor is sand. They don’t have floor they don’t have anything only sand. And 4 side only two side is have a cover and another two side is empty. No door, no wall, no nothing. So you know at night, you know at the seashore, on the beach, wind blow very scary. But you know everybody squeeze together, everybody family have their own place very small, so we put out the plastic bag, we bring the plastic big like that and put it down. We sleep on the sand. In the morning, they let us go out to the beach to take a shower over there. We wash the clothes on the beach. And then if we need water for drinking, at 10 o’clock we have to get in line and then they took us out for the well.
So we get a bucket, every family have two or three bucket to drink and cook. So buy that time they give us little rice and water and little salt and tea. And so we just cook soup. We eat soup again. Everybody only eat soup. They do that for about for a while. And then they supply, they give us once in a while sardines, tea, and sugar. No coffee, no nothing. The kids, they give little bottle of milk for the kids. And only rice and sardines and salt and sugar. That was the most that they give us. Like only week they give us some. One family have one kilo of rice or ten bag of instant noodle. So we survive by that. And by that time, my youngest daughter, Phuong, she only 20 months and she really, really sick. She have the diaherra with the blood. And then she really, really weak. The way she is she look like she have no energy. She cannot move. So I was so scared and I cry. I talk to the people in there and then they call, they talk to the policemen. And the captain say, “Oh just right the name. everybody name. Who has the kid was sick. Write their name down.” And then he let us go to the hospital in the city. So we lucky. He give us a truck in and then if children get sick, the parent take them go together. They took us to the city. Go to the hospital. So we go to the hospital and they give us the medicine for the kid and to take care of the kids. So how my daughter survive otherwise I think she cannot make it. But thank God. She can make it on time. She be survive. And about two days later, they let her in hospital, one and a half day. They release us, they let us go back to the camp, so when we go back to the camp, and we living for like that for about 2 months. After 2 months, one day, they get everybody together and they put us in another boat. And then they say, they use the English, they talk to the guy who knows English in the boat, in the group and that guy tell us translate to us say they
want us to go out. They chase us go out. They say we live in their country illegal for two months already so now they have to chase away. So we have to go. So that means by that time, we have to packing and go again. We go on the boat. Actually this time they nice enough. They give us the water and they give us instant noodles and rice and sugar and salt and sardines for us to go. So we have to go for but when we go into the boat, we don’t know where to go now. So we asked them, we beg them, we say we don’t know where to go now. Now you push us towards the ocean. We will die because we don’t know where to go. We don’t have the compass. We don't know where to go. We don’t have the direction to go. And then they say okay. So they help us out by you follow us. And then they have the one navy ship, small navy ship. So that navy ship go first and then we just follow them. So, by that we go follow them and then we follow them about half day. Only half day and then we see it look like raining and then the wave on the ocean very high. So we so scared. We so scared and we see all the sky very black. And then we don’t know what to do. So they call us to come close to them. So they said right now they took all the children and women go to on the navy ship. And then they tour to the Indonesia. So they told us we go to Indonesia now. So by that time we know that we go to Indonesia otherwise we don’t know because we on the sea. In the middle of the sea, we don’t see anything. We don’t see the land, we don’t see anything. So we only see water and water and water. That’s it so we so scared. Then they let us go by ourselves. They say okay, you tour to this way and then you show the captain on our boat. They show them the direction and they say you have to go this way and then all the way about one more day you will see the island of Indonesia. So we follow them, we just
go. We follow them. Our boat go and go and go toward that direction until one and a half day. So I remember that morning about 4 or 3 o’clock in the morning, I see the little line. It looked like almost a sunny side. Almost the morning. And then we see the land. Oh my God, we so happy. And everybody jump up and down. And we afraid that if they everybody jump and down, the boat will be sink. So they yell at them, “No, you guys have to sit down. Don’t do that.” Everybody tried to sit down. And then when we sit down, everybody sit down and quiet and listen to the guy and then we listen to the leader. By that time, suddenly the engine stop, the engine not working anymore. So they use the long stick. Many of them use the long stick on the boat. They just try to push in then we go toward a little bit and then we go to the land. Now we go by the beach. We go toward the beach. And then we have to sit over there and waiting for the morning. Otherwise it still dark so we can’t see anything. So we wait and wait and wait. For about few hours laters, the leader in the group, they go inside the island and they saw policemen station and they go over there and talk to them. About one hour later, we saw whole group of the policemen of Indonesia. They come and talk. I think somebody know how to speak Indonesian so that’s why they talk to them and then they say okay now they let us go to the land. So, everybody stand up and want to go to the land. And then they say, “Stop no, no. We cannot load in here.” And then one guy, one policeman, they use the small police candles. Some of them guide us go toward the island. Toward to another island. So we have to push out and go out again. We go and we try to boat and then they try to help us to push our boat and then some men go into the boat, try to fix the engine. And after they fix the engine, we lucky the engine run again, but the engine very
weak. The way the engine run like broken. But, finally, it slow, but we can go again. They took us to another island. So that island, we see many people many people already. So that mean other people escape from Vietnam, they go to Indonesia. So Indonesia policemen, take them over them. So that island we call Air Raya Island. The name of that island called Air Raya Island. So we go to Air Raya Island. They load everybody down. And then we go inside and because we have 200 people so by that time only few family live in that island. So we go on that island, we have to find some place for us to stay. So we go in there. By that time, I think about noontime, about 5 or 6 time, noontime, everybody so hungry and so tired. I hold my daughters and then because sand, I hold Phuong Di. She don’t want to go down because of the sand. So I hold her the whole time. I have to take her the whole time from outside from the beach. We walk all the way go inside, because that is an island, so that’s why up in the mountain, it goes like from seashore the land a little bit and then go to the mountain. So we go all the way inside the mountain. Near the mountain. So we load down over there. We stay over there. So we put everything down. But whole group, we go together. And then we stay there because everybody tired so we just take some branch of the dry of the trees, so we just put up a fire and we cook a little bit of soup for the kid to eat. By that time, oh my God, everybody so tired. And, we cook soup but at nighttime we just light up and one person light up and one person have to cook. We very struggle with the cooking. But finally, we done and we just drink the soup. So I give it to my kids and everybody get together. So whole group, all the men say okay let the women and the kids stay inside in the middle of the fort. And then they serve around and they protect us because they afraid something
wrong. Somebody, we don’t know because this is a new land, so we don’t know who is who. So that’s why every group we do that. And then we put everything outside and we stay inside. The kids stay inside, and all the men serve around. And they take turn like somebody sleep and somebody need to be awake. And they took turn to protect us. To make sure we safe. And then by that time, I am so exhausted. I was so exhausted. I can’t stand anymore. I fall asleep. I hold Phuong Di and I fall asleep very easy. And I woke up in the middle of the night, I see all the men, they put the fire and they sit around and they smoke or they drink tea and they talking. So like the camping people. Usually they go out to the beach, put the fire, and they sit together and talking, like that. I think around almost 1 or 2 o’clock at night, they take turn, somebody have to wake up again and the group sleep already and wake up another group. Take turn until morning. So everybody now, try to know okay I want this place so I’m going to live in here. And then we divide the land so by that, my husband and my son and a few young boys in our group, they go to mountains. They cut the wood down and we start building the house for us to live. So we cut the tree down and then we try to build a house. Not a house but a tent. And then we took all the leaves, the coconut leaves. We try to pack it up and then make the roof like all the house in Vietnam we saw in the countryside. They usually use the leaves to make the roof. So we try to do that but we not professionals so that’s why when we put the leaves together we just tie it up to cover. And by that time we don’t know that is the season raining in Indonesia. So we just put up like that to prevent sunshine and we can live in there for a while. And we use all the small branch of the tree, we tied it up and we make like the bed for my kids to sleep on there. So we try
to take all the carton box we put it together for them to sleep better otherwise the wood make them very pain in the back. So we live in there and in the morning we usually we go to the mountain. We get some dry branch on the tree. So we come down, we try to use it to make a fire to cook. But what we have? We don't have anything. The first month we don't have anything. We only have some little rice. And then was lucky because by that time, my husband, he hiding some money in his pocket because he had the small address book. He hide the money inside the address money, so that's why he don't lost that money. We have a couple hundred dollars. We use that money. We go try to talk to the people in the resident in Indonesia. They change the money for us and then we buy the rice or we buy something we need. We buy the rice, salt, and sugar, oil, whatever we need for cooking. We only have enough money to buy the rice and then that's why we only cook soup. We eat soup all the time. We cook very liquid soup. Like Vietnamese we call cháo and then we drink. That's it for a whole month. And then after that, so we hear from the government of Indonesia, they somehow they have a connection with they called United National Wide. They come to help us. They come to help people like refugees. So they come to island. By that time, now, a lot of people come over, a lot of boats from Vietnam. A lot of boats they come to that island too. So many, many people on the island. At least 5,000 people on the island. So by that time, the United States government, let people go over there to, they put up the instant house. They try to take all the history from us. The family names, they try to make the paper work. So by that time we know we are going to have some future. Now they're going to list down like who work for the United government before and who was the
policeman, the army or policemen in the prior to the government before 1975. So those people can be refugees and then can be sponsor from the people in the United States. So we go and put the name and register our name, our family. And we go from there. So they took all the pictures from us. They interview us, our family and then they say they going to send this paperwork to the United States to find somebody sponsor us. So we been waiting in that island for 9 months. So at first, every morning, we go to the beach, we wash and we take a shower and then at first we come about 1 month. We dig the well to get the water to drink. So when we get the water, we know how to get the water for drink. We have to cook it. We have to cook it and then we have to boiling the water and we can drink otherwise everybody get sick with that water. So I think because this is an island, nobody live in there before, so the water is like poison water. After the kids take a shower, they have a lot of like, they’re skin get rash, red skin. So my youngest daughter, Susie (Phuong), she get all the red dots in her hand, and then she itchy and then she cry all the time. Poor her. So I have to try to get some medicine for her. So we lucky somebody show us and then we go to another island because in Indonesia, many, many island close together. So we go from this island to another island. We see the Indonesian over there. So in Indonesia they have the business to do. So we buy the medicine and we buy the food. And we try to send the letter to my friend in United States to help us. And some of them send us. My husband have a good friend. He came to the United States before us. He send the money to us. By that time, I think some boat or ship, like German ship and Singapore ship, they come to help us. They come to try support us to give us some food and some fabric and some soup or medicine for us
to use. And then they try to help us by they took the letter. They say okay you have a letter so you want to send it to the United States. I am going to do this for you. So I write a letter to my friend and then they took those letters, they go to the city in Jakarta and they send it to the United States. So that’s how we can get the money from my friend. And then we use that money, we exchange to the Indonesia money. We buy the food, we buy something we need and we live in there for 9 months. We live in that island for 9 months. In the meanwhile, I try to teach my young kids know how to write and I teach them how to read. I try to do whatever I can for them. And we been waiting and waiting, but by that time, because a lot of people, a lot of Vietnamese people, they come to that island and they build a church and they build a temple for people who Catholic go to the church and who Buddhism they go to temple and they pray. They pray for us and we pray for peace and we pray for everybody. We try to survive on that island with a lot of activities. Everybody get together and they make activities like at nighttime, they go to the beach, they sing a song and they make a lot of thing fun and they make the community move on. They motivate to move on with the life. In the mountain like that, one day I went at noon time, I try to go pick up some dry branch from the tree to bring home to cook and then I climb up the mountain a little bit and I saw the snake. Oh my god! I’m so scared because the snake too big and very dark. It very dark and very black. But it make me run! Oh my god, I saw the snake and I run. I never forgot that. I so scared. And then I come home, I sit on the bed and I cannot move. Oh my god, I so scared now. But finally, my son cut the wood from the mountain all the way inside the mountain and bring home and we cut that so I could cook. By that time the season is
raining season in Indonesia, but we didn’t know, so that’s why when we make the house, we only put the leaves only cover the sun, not cover the rain. And then one night when everybody sleeping, my young kids they sleeping and then suddenly raining, pour, I mean like pour, so everybody wet. So we wake up and hurry up find out one piece of the plastic so my husband sit on one side, I said on one side and we cover them. We push all the young kids inside, we cover like that. We sit like that until morning. So until morning, it’s rain almost stop. Everybody get wet, but my kids still sleeping because they sleep so well and then by that day it rain so hard and flood everywhere so we have to sit on the wood, we cannot do anything for almost whole day because it rain so much. So I never forget that one. It’s so funny. So we live in there day by day for a while and we just continue to try to get to make the paperwork and by that time because of a lot of many, many refugee, many people go live inside that area in the island, so I think United Nation, they come in with the big ship, like the navy ship. They come in and ask everybody they are going to try to make a house along the beach and then they can come to work with us. They can come to help us. So by that time everybody get in line. We sign up the paper. We make the registration. They interview us by family, by family. They categorize who is a priority one, who is priority two, who is priority three. We were priority three. They stamp the paper. they take a picture of every single one of us and they put it on a poster. And they say they will send it to the United States. They send to Bakersfield. And one of the church in Bakersfield, called Bakersfield Campbell church. Somebody sponsor my family. That is a Mr. and Mrs. Rummergburs. So they try to sponsor to come over here. Come over to the United States. So by that time
they make the paperwork and everything. We so live on that island for about 10 months. So the day they let us know, they say pack it up and we pack it up and we ready. The people in Indonesia, they have a group to help us and then they take us to they call Pulao Galang. That means another island from them. And over there they have policemen and everybody make the paperwork but we waiting over there. So we waiting over there for about one week. We have to go to Jakata and we stay in there for about another week to check up for your health. And then after that they bring us from Jakata we go to Singapore. We go to Singapore, we stay at Singapore camp for about 4 days. And from Singapore, we make the paperwork and everything we go to the United States. So we come to the United States, and we arrive to Bakersfield on January 31, 1980.

CT: How was it living in the U.S.? What were your first experiences here?

LPT: The first day we come here, I feel like great! Oh my god, I feel so happy because I see everything is different and the sponsor they rent the house for us in Bakersfield. They rent the house for us and they have everything like furniture, bed, and everything. They ready everything for us. So I just came into the house and then I see everything like this house is my house. So I feel good by that time I feel so happy, so good. Even though we are very tired, but I am so happy. And they very nice and they make the food for us. They think we always eat rice. Beside that we don't eat anything. So that's why they cook rice, but they cook not like soup, but not like rice. It's very wet. The rice very wet. And they have one bottle of soy sauce and they put on the table. So we eat that and then we go to bed because we come to Bakersfield and they bring us home at 9 o' clock at night already. So everybody tired
and they go to sleep and tomorrow they come to see us. So I feel so good. I feel like this is worth it. We make it through and I feel so happy.

CT: What were your experiences like here? Like your first job? Where did you work?

LPT: So we live in the Bakersfield. We came to the United States about one week. One week later, the church find the job for my stepson. So he go to work for the Honda motorcycle shop to clean up the Honda, to clean up the motorcycle and inside. So that was the first job he had in one week. And then the second week, my husband go to work for some place like they play golf. And he go catch the ball and bring back for them. And they clean up something so that first job he had. And then three weeks later, after register for my kids to go to school, I looking for a job, and they introduce me to one lady because they know that I know how to sew. So they introduce me to the lady, her name is Shelly. She make the toys that hanging in the room for the decoration children's room. They call that Childish Hangs Up. So they make kind of like the balloon or the clown or the elephant, circus, everything. She cut it at home and we just take home and we sew it and they pay the labor. So this is the job I worked on. And I worked on that job for a while, and then because my husband work not too long, they let him go, so he have to go look for another job. So he worked at a Rice Bowl. Restaurant. He have to ride bicycle to work and by that time, January is very cold in Bakersfield. We didn’t know that. And he don’t even have the glove, he don’t even have the hat. And he ride in the whole day to go to work. And then at nighttime, 7 o’clock he come home, he ride home, at least 3, 4 miles to work. So he ride 5 miles come and go. And then when he come home, he sick. Actually, when we first came to the United States, I didn't know how to use the
heat so that’s why the house very, very cold. Everybody wear a lot of clothes. So one day, my sponsor come to pick up and do social security department to make social security things and then they come and then they say “Oh my god, what are you guys doing?” We say we cold. They say, “Oh my god, poor you guys.” They laughing at us because everybody wear like we live in the North Pole or something. And then they come and they teach me how to turn on the heat. So by that time I know how to turn on the heat. And then I don’t even know how to use the washer machine and she teach me how to do that. So that was a funny experience I had. And then by that, my family start make money. The first money my husband earned was $34 a week and he bring home. Oh my god, we so happy. And then we start work and my kids go to school. And by that time I sew good, I have good hand sewing. They give me a lot to do. So my stepdaughter, Bang Thai and Le Thai and Angie Thai, help me too. They help me to cut for my sewing, So our life is start getting better and we survive in Bakersfield. We live in Bakersfield and I try to go to the adult school at night for English. But for about a while because I am working so I just study not too long and then my husband have somebody help him another job from in the oil field. So he go to work in the oil field. So we get better and better. We learned how to drive so we buy the car. They help us to buy the car. So I drive my kids to go to school in the morning and then I come back home to sew and 11 o’clock I go to pick up my youngest daughter. So I have full hands too because I have to take care of the kids and I have to sewing, and then I have to cook and then I have to help them to homework and actually a lot of things going on. I work very hard. And one day, we live in Bakersfield for 6 months, and one day suddenly I heard a phone call and we
find out that is my husband’s cousin live in Massachusetts. So they live in Massachusetts and they say Massachusetts very cold but they say a lot of electric company over there. So everybody can go to work with electric company or the computer shop. But we haven’t to make decision yet. Because that time, my husband still working and I still sewing, and my kids go to school, so we are good. We work good for a while. So one year later, my husband’s cousin come from Boston. He come to Bakersfield. They try their life over there. They stay in Bakersfield for 6 months and they don’t like it because they said they cannot find a good job. So they move back to Boston. By that time, my three step children that is Jimmy, Bang Thai, and Angie, they move together with them, go to Boston, because they want to try out in Boston because in Massachusetts they have a lot of opportunities to go to school or be an electric technician. They learn a lot of things. So they move up there first. They go over there first with their uncle and auntie. So after they move there, they solid, they go to school and they go to work. They like it. They like over there, and they keep talking and they call us and tell us everything about over there; easy to find a job. So we make decision, we want to move up there. So we live in Bakersfield for about 2 years and one day we make decision. So me and my husband rent a U-Haul truck. So we load everything in there and we have one big Chevrolet car so my stepson come back from Massachusetts to ride us, me and 4 young sisters, and the other young sisters they sit on the U-Haul truck with their dad and we start from there. We start go to Massachusetts. We drove from Bakersfield to Massachusetts I think 5 days, 4 nights. And we arrive to Massachusetts and we rent an apartment. We stay in there I looking for job. About two months later, I get a job. In the first job
for electric is I work for T & T company. In T & T company they make the chip, they make chips and electric components. So I learn from there. I go and I work. By that time they pay only $4 a hour. I work second shift from 3 o’clock to 12. And my husband work for another company. He run the machine, C & C, and he work morning, first shift. I work second shift. We take turns to do that because in the morning I have to drive the kids and take care of the kids go to school. And two-thirty, I pick them up, I bring them home, and by that time, three-thirty, four o’clock, my husband come home and take care of them. So we try to take turn to do that for 9 years like that. He work in the morning, I work in the afternoon. If he change the job, he work in the afternoon, I have to work in the morning. So we take turn to do that for 9 years to take care of the kids. I’m lucky because my kids they are so smart and they work very hard in the school. They learn very quickly. And they listen so that’s why when I come home, they do the homework and then I don’t have any problem with them with the homework or with the study. They try very hard. We live in Massachusetts for 6 years and I like the snow but one time we get a snowstorm. I never forget this. I go to work. I work for the company called Compugraphic. And then by that times it was the first shift. And then at three-thirty I come out and I don’t see my car because all the snow cover. I don’t know where’s my car. So I go looking for my car for half hour and people help me shovel the snow out and pull my car out. So when I get the car out, I drive home but snow very, very strong, so I drive very slowly. And once in a while I have to stop and come out to wipe out the windshield because the windshield getting stuck because too much snow and then very cold so that’s why. So I drive home, I get off of work three-thirty,
four o’clock. I came home at nine o’clock at night because oh my god, take too long. I drive slow and snow stuck. I have to drive very slow and then by that time my husband and my son go looking for me but they can’t find me and they so scared. They come home and they wait. I keep driving and I finally came home. Oh my god! I was so scared, I cried because snow so bad, I afraid I cannot come home and it dark at night so I get hungry and cold and so tired. I came home and I say oh my god I afraid I cannot make it. Later on I know, so when it snowing, I want to go home early. That’s a good experience in the snowstorm. But we live in there, we try to work hard too. I work very hard. I have to take care of the kids and drive them home, take them to school, drive the young kids go to school and then I have to drive the old kids to another school, and then come back, and then I cook, and then I clean the house. I do everything. I cook, I make the meal ready for them. And then at three o’clock, I go to work. By that time, my husband go to work so the could take care of them. And their older sister, try to make the food for them. And then they try to help out. I live in there for 6 years. Because I get sick of the snow, because everything it gets snow, I get sick. So, one time, my second stepdaughter, she travel to California; in Santa Ana. So she likes it there. So after that, she come home, she tell us about how nice the weather in Huntington Beach. How nice weather in California and she marry. Finally she marry and she move with her husband to Huntington Beach for a while. She live in California for 1 or 2 years. She tried to convince us to move down. So by that time, I have a problem with my health. I get allergy all the time and I get migraine headache all the time when wintertime. So I can’t stand it. So one day we make decision, I have to move again. I have to move to California again. So my
second stepdaughter, she rent a house for us and move again. So by that time my older stepdaughter she marry so my son-in-law and my son try to help us try to drive the truck and drive the car. We go again. So we move one more time from Massachusetts, we move back to California in Huntington Beach. We rent an apartment and we stay in California. Because in Boston, less Vietnamese, so when we go to work, so I try to communicate with the American people, so I talk to them a lot. So I try a lot. So I know a little bit of English and then I move down to California about 3 months later I got the job. The first job in they call Smart Flex in Tustin. So I get hired in Smart Flex in Tustin and I work for assembly line for soldering and then one year later, I try to do the business but by that time I looking for a business to do like I want to make a restaurant but because we don’t have enough money to open a big restaurant or like Vietnamese restaurant, I didn’t do that. My step kids say they going to go to work. They like working better than do the business. One time I make the decision, I look for the shop so I got the pizza shop. I buy the pizza shop in Huntington Beach, near the beach. So, I quit my job, I quit assembly job. I go to do the business. First year, I do very year. The business looks good, but about one year later, the company next to my shop, they shut down. So my business go down and down and down. And I cannot afford it. I have to close the store and I lost a lot of money. So I go back to work. But luckily by that time 1990 it’s not good. In the middle of 1991, I come back to work. I go back to that company Smart Flex System. So they still accept me, so I come to work with them. I work until Smart Flex become to Saturn Electronics. By then I work for 14 years in that company. I stay in that company for 14 years. So I work very hard. Sometimes I work the hard shift like
work the weekend shift like I have to work 3 days weekend and another week is 4
days weekend. And I got a lot of experience on expectation, hand soldering. And one
time my company had a job opening in training operator so I did that job, so I
become trainer operator of inspector and soldering. And I work there for 14 years.
The economy everywhere too hard so that's why that company getting slow down
too. So until they want to sell the company. So they let a lot of people off. So in my
department only still have four people working assembly to work for them. Two
engineers and one supervisor and the office people. That's all. So my boss, David
Moor; I used to work with him and he like me a lot because I very dedicated to work
and more detail job, I do a good job so they like me a lot. So he got laid off first, and
then he found a job in Fountain Valley; WAMCO Incorporation. So one day, he give
me a call, he say in WAMCO, they need one person know how to inspect. And then by
that time I feel so tired with electronic already so I want to do another thing better. I
want to try out another job. So by that time he call me and he ask me if you
interesting, you come over there to take a look at that. I listen to him and I go over
WAMCO and the owner let me go in and take a look at that. But this is totally
different. It's not like electronic anymore. No solder, no electric at all. This is like
they do the night vision goggle, and they do something like they call the filter with
the glass only. So I tried it out, one day. I feel like I like it. And then they say if you
interested you can work for us. So I say yes. So I give the two week note to my boss,
William, and I move from Tustin to Fountain Valley. And I work for this job until
now; 11 years. So I am here now in Huntington Beach, California.
CT: Well that seems like you went through a lot coming here to America. Did you ever have any encounters with racism when you were here? Did you get any discrimination from anyone and what was it like?

LPT: Yes I did. When we just arrive to America to Bakersfield, when the time we live in Bakersfield, sometime I go to shopping and I buy the food, people look at me like they don’t want to talk to me and the way they are like when I come to choose the vegetable or to choose the apple, the fruit. So they beside me, they look at me and they walk away. They don’t want to stay with me. I feel like oh that is the discrimination. I feel bad, but I tell myself this is not your country because you just come to this country and people don’t know about you so that’s why they do that, but don’t feel bad and then I just comfort myself and say don’t feel bad. I just try to get over with it. That’s it.

CT: I notice that your English is pretty well compared to some of the other Asian Americans who’ve immigrated here. How did you learn to speak such proper English?

LPT: When I live in Bakersfield, because the first time we come and then I cannot talk to my sponsor. They ask a questions, some questions, I can’t understand and some words I cannot understand so we use by hand. So I don’t feel good about that. I don’t fee comfortable about that. So I try to learn. I read the book from my kids. My kids bring the book home so I read with them. I learn a little bit from them and then one time I will go to the Chinatown in Los Angeles from Bakersfield, we drive over there about 2 and a half hours. I go over there and I ask people for help and I ask the people living in here for long time for help. And they show me how to get tape. They
teach me how to get the tape and the books. It’s have the English and Vietnamese translator. So I bought that book, and I buy the tapes. I bring home and when I do the sewing at home, I pop in the tape in the cassette. I listen to it and I listen to the conversation they talking and I just follow like they say something “How are you?” “Good morning” “Where you go?” So I just follow them to talk and then I learn a lot from there. I learn to speak with everybody. I’m not shy because when I speak to them, I tell the American people, I say, “I’m not good English. If I say something wrong, please correct me.” So by that the people like me, and they teach me a lot. They tell me if I say something wrong, they correct me. So that’s why I learn a lot from them. And then besides from that I listen to TV, I watch TV and I try to listen to what they say and I have a book in my hand and the paper and pencil. If what words I don’t know, I write it down and I go ask people. Or I turn up the dictionary. So I learned by that.

CT: Since you came here from Vietnam, have you actually been back to Vietnam?
Have you visited?
LPT: Yes, the first time I went back because I heard my mom sick so I been back in 1991. That was the first time. And the first time it was very hard. They check everything at the checkpoint. They take a look at your paperwork and your passport and then they ask all kinds of questions. They make me scared too because they check everything. They check my purse. They check my luggage. And I say I don’t have anything because I come back to visit my mom that’s it. And then they let me go. But they make me scared. I feel like oh my God, what happened? But anyways, when I come back home, oh my God, my mom cried a lot. And my family, everybody
happy to see me and everybody cry. They talk about us and I told them the journey that I've been through. And I stay with my family about two weeks. And I fly back to America so it's fun to go home to see your family. It's happy.

CT: Okay, I think that's all the questions that I have for you. Thank you for your time, and I definitely enjoyed the interview. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

LPT: I forgot one more thing to say. When I lived in Massachusetts, many, many ladies like me, same age like me, they Chinese and even they Vietnamese, they cannot speak any English, so I help them translate like they go to see the doctor or they go to the dentist, and they take the kids to register for school, I have to follow them. They call me all the time because they work the second shift so the first shift I have free time, but you know what I have to come home at 1 o'clock at night, at the midnight and I go to sleep and then I wake up at 7 o'clock, I have to take care of my kids and bring them to school. And then I just went back to try to sleep a little bit more, and then at 9 o'clock they call me to help them. So I have to help them. So it's fun but tough too because sometime the weather so cold. Hard to wake up and hard to drive them to someplace, but I feel good because I can help them. And kind of like I'm happy because I can make through everything until now. And now my all my children are successful and they are married. They have children. I have grandkids. So I'm so happy now. And America is very nice country to accept all the refugees like us and they give us the opportunities to move up your life, to learn, and to do everything, what you need to do, what you want to do. By that my kids grow up in America and they very successful because they develop their talents, they go to
work, and they go to school. They succeed in the school. They finish in their college and they go to work. So now, my family very happy family. So thank you.

CT: Thank you.