Today is Monday, July 23, 2012. This is Thuy Vo Dang with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

TVD: First of all, would you please introduce your name, age, and place of birth?

BBH: Sure! My name’s Bùi Bích Hà. I was born and grew up in Huế city of central Vietnam.

TVD: In what year?

BBH: In 1938, 11th of January.

TVD: Can you tell me a little about your family as well as your parents and siblings?

BBH: In our family, my father worked for himself. He was an industrialist participated in many big project under the French domination, such as Hòa Xa road building called Highway One, of course it was just a distance of it, and it wasn’t from end to end. The distance that my father responsible for building was Phan Rang, Phan Thiết, Tháp Chàm. He often talked about that time, which is Ninh Thuận province nowadays. My father had many plantations scattered everywhere from the North to the Central. The last province my father had plantations in the Central was Đồng Hới, it didn’t come Huế. Education wise, my father did many cultural projects, for example, he was a head of many newspapers such as Thật Nghiệp Dân newspaper, Tràng An newspaper. My father had a printing house on a very large scale in Đặc Lập, situated right on beginning of Tràng Tiền bridge. My father had a part in the name change of French government.
He had a mandarin title with King Nguyễn, and after he died, he was bestowed a Prime minister title. Those are the things I know about my father as a young kid, because my father was really old when he had me, so things that I know about my father were from what my father told me, and my father’s friends who came to visit, and also later on thru the press, they also mentioned about him. Especially my father owned Hòn Gây, Cẩm Phả, Bắc Việt coal mines. People said that he even found Hạng Rào gold mine, and he also bought gold refinery, but it wasn’t completed when the 1945 incident happened, therefore he couldn’t do it. My father was the one who found Vĩnh Hảo spring water, and he staked out that mineral spring when he found it, for it was a natural resource, but the French government allowed my father to thay đổi khác, so he invested in it in 1930, and his capital was about 1 million Indochinese Đồng. It was great value at the time. However, when everything was completed, my father with his dispensaries and school, at that time there wasn’t any child care center like nowadays, but basic amenities for workers, and that was when the French government took into consideration that it was a natural resource, so it must be belong to the French government, so my father didn’t have the right to utilize the source. So my father was very miserable for he had called it a company; he had completed half way through, and the only thing left was to utilize and make it a selling product. So my father sued to the court in France called Cour de Cassation, it took him 10 years, and he spent lots of money, but eventually, it was just their own home country, so we couldn’t win the French laws, thus my father had to loose that project. However, they still stated that my father was the one who discovered the natural resource, and even now, the communist newspapers also recorded that my father was the one who found Vĩnh Hảo spring. My mother was the opposite. She was a country woman with no education at all. When my father, actually it wasn’t him, he was unable to have children, so two of my father’s first wives didn’t bare any children for him,
so they took turns to find younger and stronger girls to bare children for him, and that was one of their ways to earn favor. But no one bared any child, and those were very beautiful ladies I heard, and later on my father had written “Cô Mông Thu” book (Miss Mông Thu) telling of his love story with Miss Thu. However, all of those women after 2 years and bared him no children, he would send them home, and he would gave them 2 acres of land, 2 pairs of gold bracelet, that was what I heard, for them to remarry. So they just married whoever, a farmer or a barber, or a seamstress, and they all had children. So they didn’t know why my father couldn’t have children.

Not until when he was 56, which was really old, when my second oldest mother, which was my father second wife, legal wife. At that time people had the right to polygamy, she went to her hometown and met my mother, her cousin, in Bắc Ninh. The old mother saw that my mother was still young. She was only in the early twenties, very strong, for she was a country girl you know. So my older mother thought this was a fruitful one, fruitful one means prolific one, so my older mother took that cousin of hers home and told my father that she could bare children for him. When she came, then my father took his many businesses and put each woman at one location to help him manage the admin work and to separate them at the same time, that was his way to run his household. My mother, they had no idea why when she came to my father for a short period of time then she got pregnant with my older sister. Therefore the fact that my mother baring my older sister was a big change in the family. For that reason, the older mothers at that time in one hand they were happy for the success in helping my father to have children, but in the other hand, they were jealous with such woman. So my older mothers were suspicious and wondering whether the baby was truly my father’s child since there were many workmen and male secretaries on the plantation. So my older mothers were trouble themselves to go from Hà Nội to Hải Dương, the plantation where my mother stayed, to question my mother whether
the child she was baring was of father. My mother only cried and said that she knew no one else but my father. My older mothers said if she had made a mistake with someone else on the plantation, she should tell the truth, so they could help her money to go home to live and give birth, but if she lied to my father, and if he found out, he would imprison her. After two or three month of interrogated my mother and found no clues, my older mothers turned to ask my father, that whether my mother’s baby was of him. He said that leave him alone, he knew his business and that they didn’t need to question him. The day came when my mother labored to give birth to my oldest sister, it was exactly the date according to what my father had written in his notebook, the date that he went to Viên Dương plantation, date and month matched with the time that my father was there. When my sister was born, she was the splitting image of my father. So there was no need for explanation. After that my mother had some more children; however, eventually only my brother, the one next to me who is 3 years older than I am, and myself, I’m the youngest. Later on in 1945, my oldest sister married with a man who was the Tam Kỳ railway area leader. When the French troops withdrew my sister and her husband also hid themselve in a shelter pit somewhere. When the French came back to take over, my brother and sister thought that they were employees of the old government, they could come out, and that meant they could escape death, so the two went out together to the railroad. I only heard this ------ waved their hands knowing that they were their people, but may be the French were unable to distinguish Việt Minh and their people, so they shot a chain of gunshot toward the railroad, my brother-in-law died, and my sister was never heard of. We didn’t know whether she was missing or dead. The reason why our family got the news was because there was a person who found in the pocket of my brother-in-law a piece of paper written: “If I die, please let Mr. Hùng Bùi in
Huế knows.” So the family got the news that he had died, but there wasn’t any news about my sister since.

TVD: So in your family you have an oldest sister and a younger brother?

BBH: Older brother, three years older than I am.

TVD: You’ve mentioned that your family was quite wealthy?

BBH: Actually, Americans say sell yourself. This culture is very different to the Vietnamese, but since this is an interview, details of family circumstances should be told clearly. So let me tell you this, my father was one of the wealthiest men, of which people used to say: “first Bười, second Phu, third Thu, fourth Tín.” My farther was the fourth wealthiest man in the whole country. When I grew up, I only knew that in the house there were elephant tusks, pretty tall, more than one meter, and all the eating plates that we used in the house were silver, and engraved with the word “Tín” on the bottom of the bowls. Base on those things, I thought may be my family was quite powerful. “First Bười” was Mr. Bạch Thék Bười, and later in the first economic recession of Vietnam in 1930 he had lost so much, but he was still the wealthiest one. Then “second Phu” was the Chief Province Hoàng Trọng Phu, that’s why “first Bười, second Phu”. Third one I heard that was a man named Nguyên Văn Thu in the South, he was rich, and my father was Bửi Huy Tín, therefore he was listed in the oral history of Vietnam. But as you know that the riches of in this world is like vapor, so when we grew up in the 1945 event, then the event of 1954 made us bankrupted, because all my father’s utilization works located in the other side of the 17th parallel, so there wasn’t anything left in this side.

TVD: Do you remember anything in your life before 45?

BBH: Oh, life before 45 was paradise. Because in 1945 I was 7 years old, which was the year the people began to have what it later called August Revolution. Children at that time also wore
red tie going downtown, singing and stage performing, and with all that, it were the opposite of
the quiet and patterned life before 1945. My family lived in plentiful circumstances. It’s good
that you ask about that. Except I was a last child in the family, a child of a woman who had no
power in what it called the rank of my father’s wives. She was just as a shadow in the household
to help with miscellaneous chores like a servant in the house. Therefore I wasn’t brought up like
my older sisters and brothers. Except for the fact that I was a lonely child in the household and
was neglected, I was very happy. Because there were many people serving in the house, with
delicious foods, and my mother was always around me because I was her only child, so she was
just attached to me. My childhood was relatively mixed with sadness and happiness, but I still
have many happy memories.

TVD: So can you give me an example of one of your daily activities at that time?

BBH: If you ask about the time in 1945, I was too young to remember much, but I remember
when I came to my father home on 75 Xã Hội street, it was a huge house. The front faced the
street, and the back opened right to the river bank, and that the house was very long. I had many
places to play in the house, especially at that time, my older mother had a very close friend, her
name was Cả Đư, so my mother let Ms Cả Đư rented, officially it was a rent but not really. Only
because she wanted her friend to come and stay there and keep her company, because my mother
played “đánh chánh”, so she needed to have someone to play cards with whenever she had time,
and this lady usually made sticky rice to made trong bác, at that time, they had to make sticky
rice, and the rice had to be sweet brown rice, then they would let the sticky rice gets moldy, and
then they put it into big jars and pots and added yeasts in it make trong. So I waited for when
the sticky rice was just cooked, then I surreptitiously went out and open the lids and stole a
handful of sweet brown sticky rice to eat. It was so sweet-smelling and had a crackling sound in
my mouth which was so fun. I kept eating on the sly like that, but until the third day when the thing started to get fermented, then I didn’t dare to eat it anymore, because I knew that it wasn’t edible anymore. For unknown reason, I also began to read books; probably that was the gene from my father. Therefore whatever book there were in the house, I read it all. The first book was the “Ms Mông Thu enters monastery” whom I was just told you. Later, whoever had books, my older siblings or the family’s interpreter or secretary, I borrowed and read. I only read books because I had no one in the house to talk to, and so I went to the…excuse me. I went in side the bathroom. At that time my father followed after French cultural, so the bathroom back then was pretty neat, the only thing was that the thing used for flushing water wasn’t on the toilet bowl as it is now, but it was above the head, and there was a string to pull it to flush. Restroom was pretty clean. Then I went in there and shut the door and read book, and when it came to where I had a character to have a conversation with, I imaging that that character was in front of me and I talk to that one. So my mother was wondering that there was a girl, a household spirit in the bathroom because she kept hearing murmuring sound. She knocked on the door and came in and there was just me and the book in there. The yard was huge, so there were fruits to eat all year round, and I played cooking with other children, and we would cook, and we were intoxicated by poison leafs in the garden, but we didn’t know anything about it. My father usually planted herbs such as tomatoes, wild tomatoes, it was very sweet, tasted like sweet tea, but it was poison, therefore after the noontime play, whoever got drunk would just sprawled on the floor unconscious. Those have been sweet memories. In the full moon nights in the garden, very big garden with many fruit trees. There were many interesting things for us to play; therefore there have been many sweet memories of my childhood.

TVD: Memories in your school days?
BBH: Going to school was fun. As you know my parents, actually, only my father, as for my mother, she was absolutely had no power in the family, but my father was rich, but he was an independent and self-made person. As he told us that when he was three years old when Bãi Sậy war occurred, **may be the elderly man named Đề Thám**, so when my father was only three years old, he went missing from his family, and later on when the French army patrolled and found a bright looking 3 year-old boy, so there was a captain adopted him, kept him right in the military base. So when he went back to his country, he took my father with him, but my father said, he was only 11-12 at the time, but he said to himself that this is Vietnam, my homeland, why do I have to follow this French man to come to whatever country it might be. He determined not to go, so the day came when the ship weighed it anchor my father quietly ran away to shore. He didn’t go. After that somehow he managed to live until he was 16-17 years old, he said that he got his elementary education because he lived with that French man. He used that certificate to work as an interpreter. At that time they needed French since Vietnam was a colony, it was difficult to communicate with the Vietnamese, therefore they needed interpreters, so he passed the test. When he passed the test, he had a boss, and he followed this man, because the man realized that my father had many natural talents. So he let my father to follow him and he trained my father. Therefore, when he was twenty, he already worked for himself independently. He started bidding for contracts, he worked for himself, and he alone being a contractor of Hồ Tây lake to catch fish in every season. So his principle was that a person must be grown up independently, and may not rely on others. When I needed a school bag to go to school, as you know, sometimes I went to school and had no school bag, so I just used the flap of my dress to fold it up to my waist to make it a pocket, so I could put my notebooks and books in it, but for pens and ruler, since it wasn’t anything to hold in both sides, so they dropped. My mother
noticed that, and she talked to my father “Sir, gave Bích money to by a school bag to go to school or else her pens dropped along the street” and I heard my father answered my mother that you tell her that if she wanted to have pretty school bag to go to school, she has to be a good student to get money to buy bag, don’t ask. Those were lessons that my father taught me. Or although we were rich, I only had two sets of clothes. The white one was to wear in the summer days, and the black for the raining season, also day time when going to school. As you know in Huế, in winter it rains for a few months. I got all wet coming back home from school, yet I had only one set of clothes how could I go to school the next morning, so I had to beg Mr. Bó, we called him Mr. Bút, I had to take money that my mother gave me 3 đồng each day for breakfast to gave him, since he was a cigarette addict, and so he would wake up in the middle of the night to heat up the flat-iron to iron my clothes for the next morning, but it took just a short distance then it would get wet again, but at least I had clothes to go to school, and it got wet again in the afternoon, so he would do the same thing over again thru out the winter. I even went to school on barefoot, no clogs nor slippers, and my mother made clothes very long, way to the ankles. When I was in my third grade, I studied at the elementary school close to home, and my teacher was Mr. Hạnh, he passed away long time ago, but I believe that his children are still live somewhere, just don’t know exactly where. He would walk behind me and said “Bích Hà, can you ask your mother if she could make you a longer dress?” I was too young, so I didn’t understand what he meant. He was teasing me. I said that my dress was so long that I had to tuck it up lest me trip and fall. He said “no, a little longer to sweep the street.” Then I realized that my mother made it long for sparing purpose, made it long so that I could still wear when I grew up. When I was in the class, and because my family was Northerner, so I had many natural talents. I read book when I was very young, so all the words I wrote correctly although
sometimes I pronounce it wrong. For example, when I say “sai” but we feel like I had the “x”, but when I say “sai” then it wouldn’t be the Northerner’s accent. Do you know what I mean?!

Even though I pronounce it wrong, I write very accurately especially the “hỏi” (’) and the “ngã” (~). My teacher was Mr. Hạnh, when he finished writing a lesson on the black board, he would ask me to come up and fix the tone marks for him. I still remember it until now. There was one year that I got typhoid fever and had to stay home for a whole month. That month he came and brought with him a note book and a reward gift, I’m not sure what it was, may be colored chalks or something like that. He said: “This is your award.” I said: “Sir, I’ve been sick and didn’t go to school for a whole month how come I get the reward?!” He said: “but if you came to school, you got an A.” That meant I was doing very well in school at that time. There was only one first place and one second place. Thus I stayed at home I got A, and I got the reward, so the teacher said: “no, if you came to the class, the reward was yours.” In the old time, there were teachers who loved students like that; it was funny. It’s probably impossible now. It’s lovely to remember those moments.

TVD: Regarding your living, did 1945 have any effect in your family life?

BBH: Generally, it was just the decline in the family financial, but my father still had some of the businesses in the Central, not in the North, but when the 45 was over, the family was still able to continue to prosper. My father was still able to continue getting profits from locations that he had exploited before. However, in his mind, he thought that he would never loose them all the way to the 17th parallel; therefore, till 54 he had totally lost them all, and the family wasn’t prepared for anything, moreover, there were a lot of land and mines, so we couldn’t do anything, and we had to give up.

TVD: How did it happen?
BBH: Completely lost. At that time, my father was at the age to retire, so his last asset was to sell the vacation home on Bạch Mã hill, where we spent the summers of our childhood playing there. I loved it. I would crowd up with other children who called my father Gram-pa since they were the children of my older mothers’ adopted children. So we came there to spend time together. The house was on the hilltop. My father worked in construction, so he flattened a hilltop and built a vacation home there. In the left side of it was a river. Around noontime, we would go to the river and pick out a big rock, lie on it with our feet dangling in the water. In morning, I often followed my mother to walk 125 steps from the hill down to the street to get to the bakery near by to buy breads for the family’s breakfast. Bạch Mã had worms called stony worms, when they crawl, they looks like a dome shape moving slowly on the street, but when we touch it, it would shrink itself just like a young little melon which just budding. It’s very smooth and pretty, and we could keep it in the pocket to play. Or in Bạch Mã the weather is very cool like Đà Lạt, so there were flowers, flower brushes were very big. So when we were young, we hid under those flower bushes when we played seek and hide. The family also planted vegetables, and we ate fresh vegetables, many nice things.

TVD: Would you please tell me a little about life in 54?

BBH: After 54 there was nothing left. My father sold that house. He sold it to Huế University to make it a resting place of professors of teacher’s college there, and Father Cao Văn Lương was responsible for the transaction. My father had that little money for living expenses at the end of his life. As for us, we had to work, worked and studied at the same time. One day, when I finished the high school final exam and didn’t know yet what to study, I was planning to study laws. My father said no, girl may not study laws. What in his mind was that for sure when we study laws, we would get everything backwards, and that was what he thought. For that reason,
it wasn’t good for women, it wasn’t virtuous. He didn’t say it because he didn’t want to put wrong impressions in my mind toward that career. He only said: “you study laws, later when you married and have baby, how would you come to court while pregnant.” I didn’t know that when coming to court, all lawyers wear skirts, no one would be able to see my big tummy. But when I heard my father told me that, I was troubled and didn’t know yet what to study. One day when I was riding bicycles on Lê Lợi, I saw Ms Hà Thanh, she became a singer later on, she was standing on the porch outside of Huế radio station. She waved her hand and called me: “Bích Hà, come and see.” When I came in, she said that the radio was recruiting for radio announcer, “you should take a test.” That’s why I lived there until my mature age, actually I don’t know what accent I had, for at home, I spoke the northern accent, but when I went out I spoke Huế accent with my friends, because if I spoke northern accent with my friends it was hard to mingle with them. So I went in and took a test, and when I went in to take a test, they gave me three tests, one was a commentary, one was a news, and one was a science related document. I read them all. After I finished reading, I went out and took my bicycles and went home. When I just got home and brought my bike in, I was not even yet changed my dress when my sister-in-law called me said that there was someone from the radio came and asked for me. I went out and met the person from the radio station, and that person told me that I had passed the test for the radio announcer, please come to the radio station to accept the job. So I went and accepted the job.

TVD: How old were you?

BBH: I was 19 that year, which mean I was late for school because of war, late 2 years, that’s why when I was study in teachers college, when I was just enter teachers college a few months, the next morning when the school knew that I got a job, so Dean Lê Tuyên, now he lives in the cold state, Minnesota. He called me in the office and said: “you got scholarship,” at that time
teachers college received scholarship you know, “you could not working and studying at the same time to ensure the study quality. If you work and study at the same time, I afraid that you won’t be able to complete.” I always remember what he said:--------which was part time government employee, “so if you study like that would be a lost to the government, so you have to choose either going to school or work, but you can’t do both at the same time.” I told him that my family was in the difficult situation, if I didn’t work as I went to school, I wouldn’t have enough to continue my study, so “please give me 3 months probation, if my study result good, please let me work, and if not, I would have to choose the teaching career rather than radio announcer, and I will quit the job from the radio station.” At that time, the teachers college wanted to make sure that students who got scholarship would get good study result. Therefore there was quiz every week, which was called concours. Every week my result was excellent, so just after one month, Mr. Lê Tuyên called me in and said: “you’re allowed to work, because I saw that work does not affect your study.” So I worked all three years during my college. Worked and studied at the same time. There was one morning at work, but I also wanted to maintain the good study as well as work, I had to complete what I was responsible for, so after I divided my time for both, there wasn’t much time left for myself. My mother saw me kept staying up late and woke up early in the morning. In her simple mind that if she was just turned off all the alarm clocks, so I would have a good sleep, but she forgot that I had to be at the radio station, so I slept until I woke up, it was 7:30 already. Oh my! There was no one to read news, and I was so panic, and didn’t know what to do. So I talked to my father: “Sir, I woke up late this morning and being late to work, would you please go to the radio station and ask for me to quit the job, please tell them that I can’t work anymore that I have to study” and my father said: “if you want, I will go, but you go with me.” So both of us got on pedicab to the radio station.
Mr. Ngô Canh was the Director-general of the radio. When the two of us walked in he smiled and said: “ask for a leave? Woke up late right? So never to wake up late again ok! Just come to work on time, no problem! No leaving or such, continue to work.” After that, I continued to work until I graduated from school, and was assigned to a new work location. So I chose Đà Nẵng because I didn’t want to teach in Huế, since I was afraid to meet my old teachers, afraid that they said I was their student and now a co-worker, how would I address them? I couldn’t address them as teachers, neither as co-workers, so I requested to teach in Đà Nẵng to avoid interaction for nicety sake, and I also asked to quit my job at the radio station after three years working there.

TVD: Why did you choose to teach French? Why did you decide to study that major?
BBH: Because in those years in elementary school, let me tell you about the teacher who love me so much, that same Mr. Hạnh, I only studied second and third grade, when I came to fourth grade, my father wanted me to study in private school, for at that time the situation was stable. So he thought that studied in such school his daughter would be taught well regarding faith. So I studied two years in Genda school in Huế, and when I finished elementary school, I took the exam and joined Đồng Khánh school. Studied four years in Đồng Khánh. I also chose to study French as my first language, because I already had a foundation. So when I went to college, I was very bad in science, I never especially physic and chemistry, it didn’t matter how easy it was, all I could do was to base on formulas, as for analyzed it, I could never do it. I was also very bad in math, only the definition, but if analytical proof, I couldn’t do it. Therefore, I was really bad in science. As for French, I already had the basic, so I just keep French. When came to teachers college I chose French. However, teachers college was also a coincident. As I told you that I didn’t know yet what to choose and I was hanging around with my friends on Lê Lợi street,
which was Huế school campus. So we went in and asked to see what it was, they said that it was a test to enter teacher’s college, and the scholarship for the first year was 15 hundreds, second year was 25 hundreds and third year was 35 hundreds, which was really good, so we went in to take a test, but we didn’t have any personal document because we was just hanging out. We went in and talked to a school secretary, now he lives in San Jose, still alive. He said: “it’s ok, you don’t have to submit any paper right now, only filled out the application, and if you pass the test, you’ll submit the document later.” So I went in and filled out the application to take a test, and I passed the test. So I submitted my document for study. I took French. Later students were very few unlike nowadays. So there weren’t many students in college of arts. Students who wanted to study teacher college and had scholarship like I told you, actually, it wasn’t like what they said 25 or 35 hundreds, but only 15 hundreds, and that the same for all three years. However, I graduated with very high score, 470. The top government employee at that time needed for training educational officials, and I had gone in the right direction at that time. With a scholarship like that made it very easy, because later I graduated school, I went and teach, in the literature they also needed the students from teacher’s college to register in literature to raise the numbers little higher. The year that I enter teacher’s college, there were only thirteen got in, and one male student later dropped the national administrative school, and 12 of us left, so it was hard to study. The second year in the Administrative there were only 8 people remain, and the third year only 4 remained. I had 2 girl friends in my first year, the second year they both were retained, so they had to stay behind. I went on by myself. The third year I graduated with the other 3 male students, so the total was 4 of us. When I graduated I also got my bachelor in bang Khoa.

TVD: That means you were the only female?
BBH: That’s right, that was the first teacher college class, the first teacher college class in Huế, as for my two friends, one has a few collection of poems which you see right in front of you. The Bên Bờ collection was of Nguyễn Thị Kim Thành, and another one was Phan Thị Bích Đào. There was a time that she was a president of Đồng Khánh school. 

TVD: Would you please tell me some of your experience teaching in Đà Nẵng?

BBH: I was fortunate to come to Đà Nẵng and teach because I had a cousin there. My father loved this cousin. That means my father and uncle Lan was sworn brothers, but not blood related. But since they sworn to be brothers, they were very close to each other and consider themselves siblings. So Khánh was a son of uncle Lan, so my father considered him his nephew. So he was living in Đà Nẵng, and had a store selling construction materials, but only metal items. So my father let me went there to stay with him and his wife there to teach, without their home, I wouldn’t know whether my wish was satisfied or not. He was very clever with his hands, he was also an artist. His name was Phạm Văn Khánh. I stayed there for one school year, and when I was teaching, there was an incident happened. There was a pilot named Phạm Phú Quốc, I don’t know if you know him, since you were too young. He bombed the Independence Palace. However, Phạm Phú Quốc was a brother of my cousin’s wife, and that means a brother to Phạm Thị Xuân Cư, the wife of Khánh. So when I came back from teaching at school, I saw the house was totally sealed by police. They search and overturned mattress of a single bed where I slept. They split open to see if there was any document, but there wasn’t anything. They searched all the rooms in the house and found nothing, and so they left. Phạm Phú Quốc incident was the one that I always remember because it was so scary, for there were police and patrol cars were flashing and went in the house to search, ransacked every corner of my cousin’s the store, but they could find anything because she was totally unaware of what Mr. Quốc did.
TVD: And you were only in the early twenties?

BBH: I was twenty four.

TVD: So you had experience of going to school, work, and lived independently, did you have any friend, and how was the relationship?

BBH: When talking about work, I should say that I started working when I was 12 years old. When I study third grade I taught the second grade, and I studied fourth grade, I taught third grade. But as you already know that I was very bad in math, thus there were times that I encountered math problems that I couldn’t solve, elementary math. So whenever I couldn’t solve the problem, I would tell them that to take out their paper practice dictation or write essay, so that the next day I could go and ask for help and I would bring back the answer to teach them. But the students’ parents saw that I was a good student and also well known, so they trusted me. However, just came to study and find out. I was just tutored them. I taught what I knew, I love them. That’s why when I was 12, I already was able to buy my mother a gold ring, you see! Because besides teaching which I only did in the summer, and during the year I kept lying. As you know at the market people would not let me directly get the work from them, but there were people saw me and love me, they received the job and shared it with me, and every sweater came with a hat, and every sweater went with a pair of socks, pretty cute! Huế is very cold. People would gave me three rolls of yarn, and I only used 2 and a half rolls to finish one set, and I had half roll left. So if I finished 6 sets, I would have one set of my own, and I would give and ask people to sell it for me, not just the labor only, the other five sets were just the labor. I and kept doing that, besides crochet, my eyes were looking at the book as my hands knitting, and I wasn’t looking at the knitting needles anymore, I was used to it. I also embroiled. The loose-fitting blouses, it had 4 small flaps, and so at that time in Huế, there was a trend to embroiled little
flowers on it, such as lotus, rose or mum on the flaps. They even embroiled on bras too. I undertook and did them all, so I did those to earn extra money, but I didn’t spend any, so I bought clothes for me and didn’t have to wear only one set like I used to in elementary school. I also had money to buy a gold ring for my mother. So I was independent very early. As for the relationship with friends I didn’t have as many as I do now. Now at home we have internet, so the social network is great. But at that time, friends I only knew as school friends, and friends in the neighborhood, and some other friends were family friends. That was all. I didn’t have wide connections as I do now. But if you asked about boyfriend or romantic relationship or dreams, since I grew up in a very special family as I already told you. I shouldn’t have a family like my mother did, so I didn’t think about getting married. In my mind as I went to school, amongst the friends I socialized and be friendly with them, even very friendly to them, but when they had expressed their love, I stopped, because they were kind and friendly and all of the sudden, I was like totally shut down and not talking to them anymore, and I would tell them that I couldn’t get along, but knew that there was something that had gone beyond friendship, and I couldn’t respond to that, so I had to stop. The year I graduated I was 23, said that “you’ve finished your school and graduated” I remember clearly each word that my mother, who was an unlearned woman told me, but she said to me: “it doesn’t matter how great a woman could be, without a man, she is just a deficient woman.” I didn’t understand where my mother got that “deficient” word. She memorized the Kiều story, Lục Vân Tiên, Cung Oán Ngâm Khúc, she memorized them all, Chinh Phụ Ngâm, but when she wrote, the words were corked. My father only taught her to know the numbers or addition, and subtraction to help him taking care of the bookkeeping of the plantations. Being a decifcent woman as I was, my mother was not at peace. She was afraid that when my parents passed away, and I was alone and no one to depend on. So later on
when both families knew each others’, my oldest sister-in-law’s family, and my family, the two discussed with each others’. Then I married with a younger brother, a close friend with my sister-in-law’s family, so we became a couple. I also had children. Married until when he needed his freedom; he wanted his freedom back, so I gave back to him his freedom and that was it.

TVD: So you married when you were 23?

BBH: 24

TVD: According you what you said, that relationship was arranged, and you were not dating?

BBH: That’s true, no dating, but there was no time.

TVD: How was the wedding?

BBH: The wedding was just normal with all the rituals. His family was in Sài Gòn, and his father had died away long time ago, and his mother was still in the North, in the 17th parallel. So his aunt-in-law took care of the wedding in Huế, and later received the bride in Sài Gòn. That’s why I asked to move from Đà Nẵng to Sài Gòn.

TVD: So was there an engagement ceremony?

BBH: Yes, there was.

TVD: Engagement ceremony together or separate?

BBH: Separated, because when my sister-in-law matched us up, so she had to bring him and his aunt from Sài Gòn to see a prospective bride, and after that, things seemed to go well, and since it was a long distance, once agreed then they asked to have an engagement, as for the wedding date, it would be determined later. So we engaged. Later my father was seriously ill and we worried that he wouldn’t make it, so we asked to have a wedding with in six months to get it over with, briefly it was like that.
TVD: What was your wedding dress like?

BBH: I just dress according to ancient custom, and that was áo dài khẩn dòng (Vietnamese traditional costume.) I wore áo dài, but I didn’t wear a turban as it is now. At that time it was a queen veil, later on they followed mode (fashion trend) So the queen veil was very special. One must have to be in royal family to wear that veil. As for the common people they didn’t have property to make it. They only put a flower on the head, and a sheer veil on it, but they didn’t wear a veil.

TVD: Was your wedding dress red or white?

BBH: My wedding dress was pink with a sheer pink layered dress mix with gold color.

TVD: Do you still have pictures of that day?

BBH: May be I do, but I don’t know where it is amongst the stuff, since I moved too many times in America.

TVD: Back then, after the wedding then you moved to live in Sài Gòn?

BBH: That’s right, but just for a short time, my husband moved to Long Xuyên to work in customs, and I also moved with him to Long Xuyên, so I taught there for 2 years. I taught in Nguyễn Đình Chiểu 2 years, taught in Nguyễn Ngọc Hân 2 years, then moved back to Sài Gòn.

TVD: Do you remember the years during 60s?

BBH: Very good question. Actually the time I lived in Sài Gòn was as long as the time I lived in Huế, more than 20 years. But I don’t remember much about the time in Sài Gòn. My childhood memories seem to be more etched in my mind. The time I was being a wife and a mother I didn’t have many happy memories, therefore I didn’t have those memories imprinted on my heart except in Sài Gòn at night it rained very little, there wasn’t heavy rain. It kept raining outside at the veranda, there were homes that situated deep in blind alley, and those ladies who were selling
chè thùng (pudding) at night when they called out, the sound “chè thùng nước dừa” (pudding with coconut milk) their voice were so clear echoing thru the narrow alleys made me always remember. It just gave me a sweet and warm feeling in the rainy nights. Or the sound of the young kids called out for mì gõ, (noodles) they used two wooden sticks to tap together. When I called them to order a bowl of mì or hủ tiếu, he would used his hand to hold a tray and yet still ride a bicycles because he parked far away since there were too many houses, may be in the diameter of a few meters. So he went out, I ordered mì, then he would make mì, put it on a tray and brought it over, but sometimes it was raining, he laid a plastic bag on the top and brought it to the house. Those memories have been so sweet to me, those rainy nights in the middle class neighborhood in Sài Gòn.

TVD: What about the living? How was the neighborhood in Sài Gòn?

BBH: Neighbors were more civilized than the neighbors in Huế, because in Huế, people were more reserved, only when we really closed to them thru a certain opportunity and got to know each other. As for the neighbors in Sài Gòn, they seemed to be more open. When we met we would say hi, and so they were pretty spontaneous. I felt pretty good, social relationship was good. Wherever I lived I always had very nice neighbors. Especially, when I went to teach in Long Xuyên, that was when I learn about gua sha. One day I had a cold, a very bad one, so I had a very high fever, I didn’t eat or drink. I remember a maid, Ms Nắm, she was a sweet lady, oral face, hair tied back. She told me that “teacher” although we were not much different in age, but because I was a teacher so she called me teacher. “Let me do gua sha for you, after gua sha you’ll feel better right away.” I asked: “what’s gua sha?” “just let me do it for you,” and I saw her took out a little medicated oil bottle, a spoon, and she pointed me to a curtain. As you know in Vietnam at that time we slept inside a net, a mosquito net. She lifted up the net and she started
gua sha for me. Can you believe it?! As soon as she finished doing gua sha for me, I rose up and ate two bowls of rice soup. For a few days I had been bedridden without eating anything. Fully alert, so I really believe in gua sha. Just a little sign of a cold then I would do gua sha.

At that time, in Long Xuyên people were very busy trading on the river in their sampans, they traded dried goods, bunches of coconuts, sugar canes, sweet potatoes. Especially in the rivulets, weapons were carelessly abandoned, can foods were also left behind, those were the vestiges related to the Americans, I thought so. I went and reported at the school, and those who were still remain there to teach looked at each other in a dumbfounded manner, knowing that a new chapter of life is opened up, and probably there wasn’t much to hope for. So we had to contact right away with the officials who came from the North, they were the commanding cadres, and the branch that they took control of besides public security branch was the educational branch. They were afraid that we would propagate theories that would oppose the communist theory. However, with those who worked in the educational career from the North, they were cultured people, and so they were nice in their communication. Except one cadre, the school secretary, he was a vicious one. As for the school president, they held the title of president, but there wasn’t a need for vice-director. The title President and Deputy Principle and such were something that they really felt proud of in those day.

TVD: Teachers like you after the age of 45 were still continue?

BBH: Back then they called “lưu dụng” (retain and forgive), at first I thought it was “Lưu dụng” (retain someone at his post) which means they would keep us to employ, but they said “lưu dụng” which meant to keep to forgive. Dung means forgiving. So they called us “lưu dụng” teachers. However they wanted to call us, since I taught French, I wasn’t closely watched, but for those who taught literature and history, those were the two main subjects of ideological study under the
communist regime, they were closely held. They had people to come and attend their class. As for French, first of all, I didn’t know if they really understand French clearly, secondly, they thought French culture would not be a drawback to them, for that reason I wasn’t bothered much.

Teachers in school were divided in groups according to our professional skills. English team, Vietnamese literature team, history team. They also selected out those to handle different positions such as leader of entertainment group, team leader of the group which took care the living basics issues in the school. Since my co-workers no longer had transportations such as cars or motorbikes and they lived far away, I was responsible for cooking. Cook for teachers those stayed, and each one chipped in a small amount of money like 2 or 3 đồng. I had to responsible for the living team. I had to go to market to buy food, cook lunch for teachers to eat. In the afternoon I would go to school, usually I taught in the morning and not in the afternoon because in middle school we only taught in the morning, so in the afternoon we would do the school jobs which they called economic improvement such as raising pigs, planting trees, and for those who taught in the afternoon, they would come to the school in the morning and do the office works like in the library or so, and group meetings continuously or such.

TVD: Besides the changes in your teaching career, were there any changes in your family life? I meant life after 75?

BBH: Family life by and by went downward, but not immediately. We still lived as usual until we ran out of money, and so off course! It had to be downward. Sometime my family had to cook rice soup, and we didn’t have any other food, so we had to make rice soup with mung beans, and we would eat it with sugar. There were two kinds of sugar; the one they provided for civil employees was called white sugar or cuba sugar which we took and sell in the market to earn extra money to buy food, and brown sugar no one would buy it since it was sour to add in coffee,
so we kept it to cook with meat or eat with rice soup. There had been times like that, and later on
I had to go to the swap meet to trade to earn some extra money for living.

TVD: So in your family, were any of siblings affected by war or died because of the war?

TVD: Talking about dead because of war, there wasn’t anyone. I had a brother, who joined the
army, but he was in the army engineering branch, and he was a construction engineer, not a
combat engineer. So he supported the fronts, but he protected walls from a far, and public
buildings. For instant, whey they needed a place for a unit to move in, he would be the one who
took care of camp or such, so he was relatively, and so he had enough time to evacuate. That
was in 75, as for the others, they were affected by war economically. My family suffered a great
lost, because of war, the issue was the change from the North, but we suffered no losses due to
weapon violent.

TVD: After 75, many people were leaving the country, did you and your family have any plan
and how did you get to go?

BBH: Of course I didn’t have any experience about leaving right at that time until there were
some incidents occurred that made me think about it. For example in 75, I had only one brother
as I already told you, so when he decided to bring his family and go, I really wanted to go with
him, but because of many reason that I couldn’t make it, so I had to stay behind. Since then the
thought of being reunited with the family no longer existed in me, and I thought that we were in
the two corners of the earth and didn’t know when we would be able to see each other again. So I
considered that was a turning point of my life. Especially I got stuck since my parents were at
their age of 85, very old and couldn’t do anything. When my children went to school, when they
began to join what was called Hồ’s organized youth groups, they had to wear red tie to go to
school. My children were no exception because they were teenagers, 13, 12, their activities was
mandatory. One day I found a letter from the leader of vanguard teenager group where my daughter was having activities. He wrote a letter declaring his love for my daughter. My daughter showed it to me. I had to go to the district, Phú Nhuận district. I went to precinct first before I went to the district. I told them that a conduct of a leader of such teenager’s group should be a good example of dignity, be a good example in his work. She was only having activities 1-2 months, and he already wrote such a letter to my daughter. At that time she was only 12. She was very beautiful. That wasn’t right, so I requested that they would have a solution to correct this problem; otherwise, my family wouldn't dare to send my daughter to go to their activities anymore. I didn't know how they handled it amongst themselves, but he came to my home to apologize. He said that he couldn’t keep his passion in checked and shallow thinking, and what he did wasn’t right. I gave him a chance to change, and he promised that he would change and wouldn't do that again. Hopefully this problem also mentioned at precinct and district meetings to avoid future problems. However I lost my trust. I started to doubt. Because for my daughter it was the first time, so she was afraid and she gave that to me, but later on because the pressure of love, and because of having activities together they would trust each other, and she wouldn’t be afraid anymore. She might have co-operated with him and expressing their beautiful love for each other. I thought about sending her away. At that time escaping in Saigon was a very hot issue. You know everywhere people would whisper and discussed about it. It was so discreet yet people talked and discuss about it a lot. That was 1977, only two years after the country fall. Not until 79 when I had an opportunity to send her away, but she died in that trip. It was unsuccessful. So I lost her in that trip. Later on I was afraid, and there was a problem that my mother was too old. However, her friend love me so much that they were willing to let me and the whole family go with them, but I was afraid to accept the offer because
my mother was too old. I was afraid that it would be too difficult for her, and she wouldn’t be able to make it and had to return in the middle of the way which would interrupt their plan, so I refused the offer. So we had to stay behind and wait, but we didn't know what to wait for. We just try to live. Later on my brother sponsored me in the beginning of 1980, and until 1982 the application was accepted and processed. Until 1985 I got the approval paper for leaving the country, and waited for a flight schedule, and was on the list, waited for the American delegation to interview. So the beginning 1986 I came over here.

TVD: so when you were sponsored, a whole family was sponsored?

BBH: Yes a whole family.

TVD: You your husband and your children?

BBH: When I wanted to be sponsored, I had to have paperwork which included an application requesting for permission to leave the country, and that application had to be signed by a school President in order for the application to be valid. I took that application to the school President, at that time it was Ms Mai. She was a northerner. I said: “Ms Mai, I have something to address to you, that my mother has the only son, and my brother now already moved to America, and now he sponsors our family to come, and because of the humanitarian reason, I have to try to have my mother and us and my brother to be united, so against my will I asked for permission to leave the country. So please understand and sign this application for me so I could submit it to the Embassy” She replied: “I don’t want to let you go, because you teach affectively, and the students love you, so I didn’t think that I would let you go, but because you’ve said that you have an old mother, therefore I thought in this case there is a human love, so I would sign it for you, but submitting the application is one thing, the story is that whether you can go. So you have to promise me that as long as you’re not leaving yet, you will continue to teach in this school for
me, and if you get your paper to go, I will be happy to let you go so mother and son, brother and sister could be reunited.” I got my paper and went to submit to the Embassy immediately. When the paper came, I was still teaching as usual for 2 days then Ms Mai called me in the office and said: “Bích Hà, I really want you to stay and teach, because I’ve requested you, but there is a friend of yours” now he’s still living in San Jose, he just came to united with his family whose name is not convenient for me to mention because of nicety reason, and since he’s still living I don’t want to say it, that “a friend of yours” she told me his name, “said that you’re not poor, and so why you already had the approval to go overseas yet still continue teaching” He didn’t know that Ms Mai had requested. He thought that I had requested to continue to teach, and that “you have to watch out, if tomorrow when you come to school and something happens, like propaganda leaflets, explosive devices, you would be responsible for it, because you protect and cover up for a person who already permitted to go overseas to continue holding chalk teaching at the board. Who knows that Ms Hà might be a CIA agent? She worked as công tác hải đạo” Thus Ms Mai was afraid, she called me in and said: “as of tomorrow you can stay home, don’t come to school anymore.” Letting me stay at home I was so happy although I missed my students very much. The following days when it came to the time that I would to go to work, I stayed at home, my eyes wet with tears missing the place where I had been attached with my students, place that I had so much hope for the future generation and I had to quit. That was a career that I had been pursued for many years. I was very regretful, but I had to let it go. In that situation I had to leave. When I came to America, the first thing my brother encouraged me was to register in college. At that time I had an old mother and 3 children. My oldest one already went to college, so not much to worry, but the two younger ones are six years apart from their oldest sister. They were in high school, so I had to work to make a living rather than coming
here to depend on anybody. Therefore I lived in Riverside for a short time. However, the memories in Riverside were like this. I’ve learned that the younger children learn much quicker than I am. They adapted to new things much faster than I did. In the afternoons, well, in the morning my brother went to work, so he dropped my children in front of the school. I didn't have to go. I woke up early and prepared and had breakfast with my mother, took care of the house, went to market, cook lunch. Around 2 p.m. I would go to the immediate school to take my children home, two of them; they both were in intermediate school, only one class apart. so when I came to the school, I walk into the school yard, and I saw children even though they were young, Americans are big, but in the intermediate school, they were in pairs hugging each other, or they would sit on a hallway. The boy would put his back against the wall and his legs straight ahead, and the girl would sit on in the opposite position. I was so worried. Oh my, my children were just came, and studied in this environment, what am I going to do now. My knees were shaking I almost collapse, and when I met my children they walked by my side, and they were walking with a straight face and it didn’t seem to bother them at all. When we came home, after we finished eating dinner, I sat next to them and asked: “children, when I came to your school and saw that students in school they have too much freedom regarding romantic relationship, children in here seem to be so free”. My children said “Mom, why do you worry about others’ people problem, just ignore them.” So I was telling myself oh my goodness, my children are more mature than me. They said that why I have to pay attention to other people’s problems, which means they was not trouble about that problem so why did I. I lived in an apartment, and my brother has his own home, but at that time his house was being fixed that's why he move to another apartment to live temporary. So when I walked my children home through the apartment walkway, in the summer people’s windows were open, and we walk by and just looked around
without any purpose, but they would pull my shirt and told me that mom you shouldn’t look into peoples’ windows. I have learned a lot of good things from my children, since they mature faster than me. After a short period of time, I had friends in Santa Ana, and so I moved to Santa Ana to find work as well as taking care of my children. As for my job, it was very hard I couldn’t imagine. I just came as you know, I didn’t have a car, I didn’t have a driver’s license either, so I had to carpool with the lady who introduced me to the company. I lived only about 200 m from her home on the same street. In the morning I took my lunch box. I said lunch box to make this sounds good, but it was just a plastic bag. I did not know yet what the lunch box was. I waited in front of her home. That job started at 6 o’clock, so we had to leave at 5:30. It took us about 20 minutes to get there and 10 minutes to find parking and such. So I had to be at her home by 5:30, and in the morning whenever I came and saw the light from her bathroom on, I was very happy, that means she was ready to go. Sure enough she came out five minutes later and opened the metal gate. That was in Santa Ana, and the well-to-do people would put up a fence. When she pulled the gate opened I knew that I would go to work with her. Whenever I came there and saw the bathroom was dark I would say oh my goodness she over slept. It seems that I waited forever when it was only a few minutes, and it wasn’t too bad after she came out, but I stood there holding my lunch bag waiting. At that time there were many Mexican in Santa Ana. Early in the morning, especially in the winter, waiting alone in the rain I was very scared going to work. That was about work. About schooling as I already told you, I lived nearby Santa Ana College, and I had to go to school there for a while. About one year later when my job was stable, I learned and got my driver license, my first car was a used car which I bought from my nephew. It was 1 mile between school and home. I lived in a corner of Fairview and First streets. So I just took Fairview, went straight and turn right. I parked at the parking lot and went to the class
for which I had taken an assessment test and got a result. I told my children that there were three parts as you already knew, vocabulary, listening, and grammar. For the grammar I got 100% because of as Vietnamese we study thoroughly especially when I converted French grammar to the English grammar. It seemed that there was no way that I would miss it. In vocabulary I got 95%, but when it came to listening, I asked my children: “do you know how many percent and I got?” they hesitated and said “was that 50%?” You know it was only 36%! I could not and listen. However, I got into a class 100 or advanced, something like that. I drove to school, parked the car and went to the class. As for the grammar questions in school, it was very easy. I already knew them all. However, there were people that whenever they got one question correct according to the teacher’s answer they would jump up and down noisily cheering. I told them why would they do that? When the class was over, I went out and did not know where I had parked my car, because when I came I just saw the entrance and came in and parked. I went to the class, but I didn’t know where it was, so when I came out, I didn’t know what direction I had parked, and there were bushes and trees, and it got later and later at night. The class was over at 9:30 and until 10:00 I was still not able to find my car. Each time I passed a bush my heart was pounding. I was scared, sometime I found myself at a strange place, I did not know what to do. Not until later when I asked people, and they asked me where did I park earlier, which entrance?! Bristol or 17th street? I didn't know where, didn't know what street, and did not know where I had parked. Not until 10:30 when the parking lot was almost empty, then I saw my car parked at a corner. I went home so scared, and I didn't return the next day. I quitted going to school.

TVD: At that time did you work in a factory?

BBH: that's correct. I was an assembler, and that was the easiest. When I went and work as an assembler, I was the only Vietnamese there, two Mexican lady, one Korean lady, and another
lady I forgot where she was from, but some area in South America. When a building had a power cut, you would know their culture according to how they reacted. There were two Caucasian ladies, and one would run down to the management office immediately, asking them to fix the air conditioner, for “it is too hot up here to work”. As for a Mexican lady, she had a fan which see hid somewhere, a small electric fan under by her feet. I could see it right away the way people react to such situation. The Vietnamese would just quietly work. When I worked, I was not used to talking during work. While one lady at one end would called out loud to the other at the other end: “do you know anything on sales anywhere today?” At that time Macy's was not here yet. “Federated sales underwear very cheap” a certain amount of money, and “Miss Macos has 3000 pairs of shoes” it was so noisy, one end would call out to the other. I was just sat quietly, didn't talk out loud like that. Another thing was that when I went to work, I had to be busy working. There was a female supervisor, she came to me and asked: “are you happy? It seems to me that you are very unhappy”. And I answered to her, I told her that I was taught to love my work place and love the job that I do. She opened her eyes widely and looked at me. I thought maybe she asked who I was rather than having an appearance of an assembler. I told her that I wanted to pay attention to my job. The next day, she still didn't feel restful, she came back to me and told me that “I knew you are not happy, and tomorrow I will move a Vietnamese girl up here for you, so you have someone to talk to” I thanked her for being considerate. The next day, she moved a Vietnamese lady over and sat next to me. That lady showed me how to pack my lunch, how to buy plastic container, how to keep the food, and where to keep it, so when lunchtime I would know where to go and heat up my food and eat. See walk me through all the things that I had to do, but she talked from the beginning to the end of working hours. Kim, whenever you listen to this interview, remember that I only appreciate you and not saying bad
things about you. However I was working as she talked because there wasn't a chance to talk. The supervisor was very sensitive she saw that I was still not talking. A few days later she came back and told me that “I think you are still not happy in this environment, so let me send you a two of the floor, there are a lot of Vietnamese there probably you will feel more comfortable.” she did what she had said. She sent me to the floor, and truly, there were all Vietnamese. So we had a mini Vietnamese community there, we ate lunch together, talked to each other; we learned and helped each other. I lived one year happily. However, I only worked there eight months, after that I saw in Quality Control had an opening, I applied and moved there to work. I worked there for seven years, it called it quality assurance. Then later Supplementation had an opening, I applied and moved to Supplementation, and I worked there for two years. Finally, I saw Regulatory Affair has an opening, I apply for it, within the same company, but I had the qualifications for job interview, if I get it I would come there and work. The experience I have for a job interview was from the last job. As you know in here when they have an opening for a job, they have to announce it, and that's fair, equal employment opportunities. I saw that they already had candidate identify, which means the person who posted the job already had someone in mind, but he has to post a job for everybody to have an equal opportunity. So I thought to myself this was something that I could do why not giving myself an opportunity. So I applied. In order for an application to be sent, it had to have a signature of a supervisor. So I told my supervisor that he would give me an opportunity to change my job, that I had been working for him for a few years and I liked it very much, but “as you know in America we have to move up,” and he told me: “did you see that Mr. Dick noted that candidate identify?” “Yes, I saw it, and I am not hoping for this time, but I just want to let the company knows that I too, qualify for this job, and if the company needs it in the future I would be the one apply for this job, that’s what I
want the company to know. Please just go ahead and sign it. He told me that he would ask Mr. Rick, “I already told you, please don’t ask Mr. Rick anymore! Please just sign it for me, as for whether it will be accepted, it is problem.” But he didn’t want to let me go. He said: “I already told you, and I already talked to Mr. Rick, he already had candidate, he wouldn’t take anybody else.” And I told him: “please don’t get involved, I am not asking for any favor, but I just want to let the company knows that I am qualified for the job, if I don’t make it this time, there will be another chance. Please do me a favor and sign it” so he didn’t say anything anymore, he signed my application. I went and submitted. So when I submitted, they had to review, and I had to go for an interview. They called everybody who submitted the application to come for an interview, except the candidate identify, and I was too, went for an interview. When I came to an interview, there were five managers of the company, and the production manager was the most difficult one, people said that he was very picky. His name was Mr. Maxwell. When I came for the second interview, he asked me: “do you know what the company is expecting from you at this job?” and I said: “I would just use only two words: accuracy and speed.” He said: “thank you very much.” He let me out right away, and he noticed in the application that he hired me. Moreover, in production department, they had the advantage because they made money of products. Therefore, Mr. Rick he posted that job, but it was just the official work. As for the other three were also willing to hire me because they liked me. They did not have any candidate identify, they saw that everyone were interviewed equally, and so they just pick the one that they liked. When I came and reported to him he said: “please don’t misunderstand me, I did not know that you like this job, therefore I did not think that I would invite you, but now I’m very happy to have you in my department, so I just want to let you know that and welcome you to my department.” At that time I already had a plan to go to Vietnam to visit my older brother. He
was my uncle’s son. He had colon cancer, so I had to go to visit him and to say final goodbye to him. Therefore I told him that I already had a plan to go to Vietnam, even before I submitted the application for this job. So “please let me go for three weeks, and I will start my new job when I come back.” He said: “if you go to Vietnam, you will not get the salary rate from my department, but you still have to get the rate from your old department until you reported back to me.” I told him that it wasn’t a problem, and that was fair. I just got salary from wherever I work for, and I was willing as long as I get to go to see my brother because he might pass away soon. So when I came back, I was just working at the old place until I reported to him for the new job. He called me to the office and said that: “this year you’ve got a big promotion which is really good already so you won’t have any annual review added to you.” But I said: “Sir, I think that’s two different things because this one is not a promotion. This is the position which the company had a need, and I applied for, but it is not a promotion. It is OK that you understand it as a promotion, but actually it is not, therefore, I still have my annual review because there’s no reason why I can’t have it.” He told me that it was the company’s policy. If that was the policy of the company then it’s OK and I had nothing to complaint about. I was very happy because I got a new job why complaint. A few days later he called me to the office and again, he told me that at the other department told him that they would still review for me this year because it was true according to what I said, that according to the procedure: “you still get it, and the second thing is that you have to accept the new job with me now because I don’t let you in right now, I won’t be able to get you in three weeks later since budget will be ended this month. You have a paid vacation.” It’s unbelievable you see?! that’s American. So I got that job until I retired. I worked there for five years at my last job. I was very happy working with R&D engineers, working with Vietnamese friends you know. They were the outstanding members chosen by R & D to work
on the first articles to get the approval from the hospitals; therefore, it was very fun working with them with enthusiastic

TVD: You said R&D. I just want to give it a definition of Research and Design?

BBH: Oh, Research and Development.

TVD: what year did you say that you retired?

BBH: In 2005.

TVD: And what did you do after you retired?

BBH: I did community work. Before I retired, I had already worked for Phụ Nữ and Gia Đình magazines, and I continued to work for the magazines and work in broadcasting. I work full time for the radio station.

TVD: How did you start working for the radio in here?

BBH: Working for the radio in here I should say like this. I have a very close friend, Mr. Lê Định Điều, and that is Ysa’s father maybe you know well. So I worked for Người Việt, I wrote articles for Người Việt. Mr. Điều knew that I had capability to work in the media field, so when he got the VNCR radio, he wanted me to come and work for him there. At that time I worked full time for an American company, so there was no way that I could work for him. Therefore I promised him that whenever I have time I would come and work for the radio, work for him, because I also liked to work in the broadcasting. Unfortunately, not even two years yet when Mr. Điều passed away, so I could not fulfill my promise for him. A few years after he died I had an opportunity, because I worked in second shift so I could help. So at noon time, I would come to the radio station to read the noontime news, then I would go straight to work. I worked in the afternoon. However, later I when I got the new job I changed to work in the first shift and no longer working for the second shift. So I couldn’t continue. Hoàng Trọng Tự was a director of
the radio at that time, the radio station located on AK Asia Street, so that were the two times I broke my promises. The last time was when I already retired and had full control of my time. The opportunity at that time came when Mr. Lê Đình Điểu’s son, Nhật Lan, he didn’t want to work in broadcasting anymore, and he wanted to sell his share in VNCR, so I bought the share in VNCR from Nhật Lan and his wife, and from Phạm Phú Minh, of those who had their shares in VNCR and wanted to sell. I came and worked full time for VNCR when I got my shares there. That was how I started to work for VNCR. The first thing I did was to go to the storehouse, looking for a portrait of Mr. Điểu, for he more or less had contributed in the establishing up the radio, so I wanted to remember the founder, the friend whom I couldn’t keep my promise to when he was still alive, so now I could do it, I didn’t have to break my promise with him. I had Mr. Đình Điểu picture hanging on the wall wherever I worked. From the old location on Moran street to the new station which is now located in Văn Lang assembly hall, I have Mr. Điểu’s picture there.

TVD: In your work within the community what has been the most memorable moment for you?
BBH: The year that I was still working for the radio, I don’t know what caused me to work for Little Saigon Radio, let’s me see…who was the one that introduced me to Little Saigon radio. It was some one, may be it was Ms Vĩnh Trướng. Said that the radio needed a program producer, so she introduced me. I went in and met Mr. Nguyễn Hữu Công. He asked me what program I can do for the radio, and I told him that I wanted to do the programs for women. All issues related to women I was willing to do it all, career, family relationship, friendship, whatever. The radio gave me three probation programs, and if those three programs get good feedbacks from the listeners, people support those programs, they would continue and sign a contract, and would pay me from the first program, and if after three programs and the listeners’ feedbacks did not meet the radio’s
expectation, they would end the programs. I tried all three programs and people responded, so the radio let me work with them. I worked for the radio 17 years, almost from the day it was just started. When I came to work full time for VNCR, I worked in management, and that I was VNCR’s CEO, and the management of Little Saigon radio thought that there was no reason why I would continue to work for them in that program, because my position had changed. It wasn’t like that. I thought that wherever I work, I should keep the loyal relationship with the listeners. Therefore, I continued to do that program for another 2 years until there was an unexpected incident happened, I reluctantly had to say goodbye to Little Saigon Radio’s listeners and no longer work there, but the program I did at the radio was about 17 years from the time I started to the day I left. From the beginning when I did the women’s programs, I had topics that I discussed with the listeners, such as being a single mother, should a woman remarry or using her own ability and strength to raise children, or women should not neglect cultivating knowledge, and daily communication skills. I would like women to have power, confidence, because women are capable to do many great things. Just because they respectfully lived according to traditions and customs in which men are respected and women are despised, and that means in male chauvinism, it’s hard for them to be learned and be progressive, having in mind that whatever they do, they would not be able to supersede men, and they would feel humiliated, so they would not know the extend of their capability, and so they live too humble, endure too much, give up too much. A strong mother who can protect herself, she too, can be a benefit for her children; moreover, she can be a help to lift the burden of her soul mate, and her community is also be stronger. Therefore, I would like women to be positive individuals with the natural strength they already have and just need to cultivate. I did the program in that format for about 10 years. I invited guests, and I had a host with me. The host who worked with me for the longest time was
Trần Mỹ Duyên. He was a PhD in psychology. After that I changed the program to a different format, which was to discuss new topics, which means whenever there is a new topic, we would discuss. If we only have the opinions of the host, and with the listeners opinions, and their opinions were very new, but they were many and not selective, so I needed to sort them out and summarized it a lot too. Because when the listeners hear too much, they can’t focus, and so I had to format with the radio station Director’s suggestion. At that time, there were many letters to the radio from the listeners, and I wanted to answer those letters, so why not have a program to do that. So I changed the format into a reply-to-listeners program called ‘heart to heart with Thái Hà.’ Before it was the women and family program, and later it was ‘heart-to-heart with Thái Hà.’ I received a lot of sentiments, and many of which were tricky and full of surprise, problems of ladies in all ages and circumstances. I did it until I resigned from Little Saigon Radio. The program had to be temporary stopped, since VNCR did not have enough time for such program. Later, I had a program in the evening, and I used the entire time to meet the listeners’ need by answering their letters. I did the evening program for almost 3 years, and after that, because there was a change in VNCR office staffs, and I felt sorry that I was not be able to keep the program, and eventually I had to leave VNCR’s programs. Therefore, it comes to a turning point now, and I don’t know how far would it take me, but at least right now, I stop having my voice heard on the radio. What I’m saying is that that voice is filled with good will and sincerity. My utmost desire is that all women would be able to live a life worthy of woman essential qualities, dignity and responsibility. I would like women be able to use and develop their skills. When they have their confidence and with their skills as well as their internal strength, they will become capable women in the society and family, rather than look down on others simply because of having little ability. It’s not so. Puffing up is because they don’t have
enough confidence; don’t know how much they have known, do you agree with me on that?
When we know that our knowledge is limited, we always need someone to help us to improve it
daily, and such woman would never closed her mind, and would never look down on anyone.
You see?! Therefore, I would like women to have opportunities to improve themselves. I
courage them to read, read anything with in their sight, listen, question and study. Now the
internet gives us many ways and opportunities, and the purpose of my radio programs is the
same.

TVD: Was that because you’ve raised three girls made you pay special attention to women
issues?

BBH: Perhaps you would let me come back to my childhood. When I’ve learned that my mother
was living in a noble family. In principle, pardon me for saying this, when a woman sleeps with
a man, has children for him, they must be considered his wife. Only feudal system would reject
her rights as a wife. Sometimes they would be called concubine, another time additional wife,
other times lover, flame, sometimes kept-woman, or kept-wife. Therefore, women’s dignity has
been my utmost concern, and that is how to make women feel worthy of their role which nature
gave them, and the society also needs them, and when they are not treated well, they should raise
their voice. That’s why we have to have enough strength, capability, and common sense to have
our voice heard. For that reason I would like to share. As for my children, they are a part of my
wish. In the other hand as you’ve mentioned, when I worked at the company, my female bosses
who are American, when they saw that my all my children graduated from university, they asked
me: “I know that you’re a single mother, how did your children manage to graduate?” and I told
her that “first of all I believe in fate, I believe that’s the way it supposed to be, and another thing
is that I believe in the effort of each one, when you have motivation, I tell you that when I first
came here, my children and I went to the Stater Brother store near by our home. We didn’t have a car, we were walking holding plastic bags, and there were Mexican men loading very heavy boxes from the truck, and so I blurted out and said to my children, look at that, there are only two ways to survive in America, one way is using muscles as what you see right now, and another way is using the brain. As women, we don’t have muscles like men, so we have to use our brain. I only told them that, and my children figured out that if we want to live and survive in American society, we would have to use our brain. May be they studied because of that, but in my perspective, graduated from a university is only a mean to survive, as for being successful in life, it depends on many other factors.” I told her that.

TVD: I would like to conclude, but I would like to ask you one last question. Looking in to the future, and you have children and grandchildren, and they will have more children, if they want to have moral inheritance, what would that be?

BBH: I’m very sad to share you. I admire you and those like you, your friends, and those who pursue other projects with a purpose to connect a bridge between the passing generation and generations to come in which national identity is main principle. Those are the Vietnamese language centers, the teachers, and the people who do the same line of work as what you’re doing. As for me in the family as you know the problem is that first of all is the living. The circumstances is that we can not live together under the same roof; therefore we don’t have the interaction of blood relations between the older generation and the generation to come in our daily life, so it’s hard for us to overcome because of what technology offers. Now children have their own games, ipads, games, laptops, everything. Human factor decreases day by day. Now the children of the first generation, which is my generation, immigrated here, the success is what we see them having a social standing, a profession with a college degree, but what it actually
mean!? They’re no longer Vietnamese, and have to flow with current of life in America, buy houses, cars, invest for the future, teach their children according how they think and how they live. Honestly, those children, if they ever thought about Vietnam, the most they can do is to make a trip to Vietnam to look back to their homeland, to see the place where they were born, may be just to take a look to have an idea, something that would never be theirs anymore just as a chapter of book that has ended. As for the generation of young people now, they are not American as I just told you, they are the 1.5 generation, they are not successful in one side, and neither do they success in the other side, even worst that they would have to take a short cut, things that they try to do, illegal things to achieve, and involve in crimes and jails, no future direction. In any case we will still lose our coming generation, and if with out a generation serving as a link, how could we connect together, and the importance of this generation bridge is that not because we are grandfathers, fathers, mothers who must be obeyed. No! This generation has challenged (changed?) already, they don’t know whether the things that they believe in or pursuing would be acceptable or not, and if so, we need to exchange, and if the older generation do not want to exchange, we would lose their power, we would lose our hierarchical position that younger ones would have to obey the older. That phrase would never happen, because for the young people, if they can’t have hold of the beauty of the previous generation, then there is nothing to hold them back, nothing to lead them back to their root, and that’s reality, and that is what I concern the most. Now that the older ones just demonstrate by insulting each other, fighting, vying, squabbling, not doing anything new nor anything good. As for those good examples that we look upon for success like we have Ms Dương Nguyệt Ánh, very famous, she does many creative projects, and Americans admire her, and there are many other people, that I can’t remember them all at the moment. They are the examples in professional and technical
area. Or Ms Dương Nguyên Ánh said that as for the love for the homeland, she has contributed to the United States, the country that gives us opportunities to contribute our skills, but can she really live like a Vietnamese? Not really! You see! If by nature, they don’t have anything in the bottom of their hearts for rooting and be rooted into the ground, there is no way. Now my granddaughter, I want to speak Vietnamese to her, I took her to the Vietnamese class and brought her home, but when she comes home, her parents don’t speak Vietnamese to her, what the point of her studying for anyway? They don’t speak it in school, and parents don’t speak at home. I asked her “con có đói bụng không?” (are you hungry?) she said “con không đói” (no, I’m not hungry). I think I give up on that generation. Therefore I admire families, those who have opportunities to live close to their grand-parents, and both sides are making the effort to teach their grand-children children’s song like ‘kìa con bụm vàng’ (same tune with where's is Thumbkin). Greeting the elderly men and women, just some, not too much, and later on those factors will be fading away by other stronger factors. When grand-parents have passed away, there will be no one to remind them, and when they come to school, there is no Vietnamese in school, when they are with their friends, their friends don’t speak Vietnamese, who can they talk to in Vietnamese?! As long as the language exists, the people exist. That is one of my interest and concern. However, to make up for that, I want to share with you something that made me fell very happy. The other day, I went to Washington State, and I have a friend who is a poet, her name is Trần Mộng Tú, and there were a group of young people who organized a gathering to honor Ms. Tú and her poetic works which she has contributed to readers. When I heard that I asked who those young people are. Ms Tú said that is the Director of Washington State music school, and she said that may be this person has a heart for literature. Good. I didn’t expect much, but just want to go and see how it would come out. Can you imagine? I’ve never seen
such organized gathering. I’ve been living in Orange County for more than 20 years, and attended many events regarding politics, current affairs, literature, and science in our community, and I have to say that the recent event in Seattle of Ms Tâm, the director of a music school there, was the perfect one. Ms Liên Tâm. In terms of organization, they organized according to American way. It was on time, the program was in good order, the stage was never empty even for 30 seconds, and greeting guests decently, polite and elegant. The program started on time, and ended on time, and you would see that those young people they all wore áo dài (Vietnamese traditional dress) they spoke very good Vietnamese, and they had a great responsibility in they way the managed the program, they took a great responsibility, and they had great respect for their guests. I’m sure, as the Vietnamese, they had to learn a lot, and well disciplined in order to be able to do that. Moreover, they memorized many of Ms. Tú poems. They knew by heart. There was a lady, who seemed to be young, may be about your age. Ana’s her name. She has a 6 year-old daughter. She and her daughter, she read one of Ms. Tú poems entitled: ‘Mẹ mồ lòng cho con’ (A mother’s heart) in Vietnamese, but the little six-year-old girl read in English, and when she read she was not only read, but also looked at her mother and expressed her feeling showing that she could understand what she was reciting. That mean they have an interaction between mother and daughter. I saw that that girl expressed the feelings in the poem. She was showing the feeling that she has from her mother in the poem. She was only six years old, a child of mixed marriage, because Ana’s husband is an American. Therefore, I thought that why do I not have the right to hope. The coming generation can still be able to carry on. Sacrifice just like what you said, as long as they have motivation, which is the love of the older generation, the works of the previous generation pass on to them. How valuable the moral heritage could be. How would they respond to it, because they worry that there would be no one to pass on
to. That is my last aspiration, and I was very happy on my last trip to Washington State, and I just want to share it with you.

TVD: Thank you very much! Thank you for all that you have shared with me.

BBH: It’s too personal. Isn’t it?

TVD: Don’t worry.

BBH: You have asked me if I’m going to Vietnam again.

TVD: Oh, have you been back to Vietnam yet?

BBH: If I go to Vietnam, I would stay there for good, and not for any other reasons, but maybe at this age I don’t have much hope.

TVD: You are still quite young and healthy.

BBH: Unless there is a change in the country, but I don’t know until when. Sooner or later changes will come, by one way or the other, I believe that. That is the destiny of the history, it can’t be different, but I don’t know how long. Maybe there’s no hope for my generation. I only wish that we would be able to build a little Vietnam overseas complete with dignity, culture and moral value. I would be peacefully close my eyes. We need a community, a little Vietnam overseas. My dream would come true when that happens. Otherwise, we would just be the exiled people living in a place where we do not know what our position is, and we could not see the result of our works. That’s the painful part.

TVD: thank you so much!