Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: KIÊN TÂM NGUYỄN
Interviewer: Thúy Vũ Đặng
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Location: Fountain Valley, California
Sub-Collection: Thuy Vo Dang Oral Histories
Length of Interview: 01:37:25

FIELD NOTES

I met Ms. Kien Tam Nguyen through her son, Tam Nguyen, who is an active community leader in Orange County. She has worked in the beauty business since her time in Vietnam and she and her husband co-founded one of the first successful beauty colleges in the area, Tam Beauty School. Later, they turned Tam Beauty School into Advance Beauty College, the largest Vietnamese American beauty college in the US, now run by her two children, Tam and Linh.

I came to her home in Fountain Valley, California for the interview on a beautiful spring morning. The first thing that struck me was her entire living area has been set up as a Buddhist meditation room that can comfortably accommodate upwards of 20 people. She later informed me that she often holds meditation groups in her home.

She was alone in the house, as her husband was in Vietnam at the time of our interview. When I arrived she had just returned from a stroll at Mile Square Park with some of her friends. I admired her house and then we settled down in the living area—me at a chair and desk while she is sprawled on a chaise longue. She offered me fresh jackfruit and water and we munched as we chatted about her life.

Co[aunty] Kien Tam was very animated in her storytelling. I enjoyed hearing anecdotes of her children. And each time she spoke of them, her face brightened and she became more expressive. There were several moments during the interview that were challenging to get through, for both of us. When she told me about her brother who passed away, not because of the war per se but what she characterizes as the corruption of ordinary people. He was in the military, but his role was to audit the financials and he was murdered while napping in a hammock. This story was especially difficult for her to relay, given that she has tried to forget and move on. She remembered him fondly as the person who introduced her to mediation, which has stayed with her all these years.

Aside from the difficulties that arose in retelling this story, we laughed as we conversed about many topics, from her experience doing social work in Vietnam—mainly caring for and cheering up wounded soldiers during the war—to establishing a beauty business in Los Angeles with her husband while raising her two children. I queried her about the arrangements and negotiations she had to make for childcare while she worked long days with her husband to establish their own beauty salon and then beauty school. The interview taught me a great deal about what it was like for a mother of young children to
build something for herself and her family on new ground. I could see how this would inspire others to share their own experiences and struggles. This interview has helped me imagine ways to connect with those who may be hesitant to share their stories or have yet to see the value in this practice of “talk story.”