Narrator: CHRISTOPHER PHAN
Interviewer: Andrew Lu
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AL: My name is Andrew Lu and I will be conducting an interview with Chris Phan. Chris Phan, please state your name, date of birth, and place of birth please.

CP: Yes, my name is Chris Phan, I was born on January 14, 1974 in Vinh Long Vietnam

AL: Continuing on, what were your parents’ names and please describe them.

CP: Their names, my father’s name is Thuc Phan, T-H-U-C and my mom’s name is Thrinh, T-H-R-I-N-H and as far as describing them they both were good parents except that they were not together for the first ten years of my life because my father had to escape right after the Vietnam War.

AL: So, tell me about your experience of your family growing up, like how you were raised by your mother and how your experience was after you arrived in America, reuniting you with your father.

CP: It was pretty good. You know growing up in Vietnam my mom was the sole bread-winner along with my Grandma. So she would basically, you know, at first she would sell bread on the streets to help pay for our meals because after the Viet Cong took over Saigon and took all of our possessions in the city. And so we were relegated to go live in the country-side. And so you know she did everything she could to provide for me and so she started off by selling bread and
then after that she started selling medicine on the black market in order to have money to provide
for me. As I said I didn’t see my dad until another ten years of my life and so it was difficult at
first when I first reunited with him cuz I was used to having my Grandmother and my mom to
take care of me and to be honest, there wasn’t as much discipline cuz both of them were very
loving and very laid back and so I probably didn’t have much structure in my life as I did until I
met my father. And then that discipline clicked in, which I think is probably for the best because
I think I became a much better person for it as I grew up with the discipline.

AL: Tell me more about your hometown.

CP: The hometown I grew up in Vinh Long is, it was very rural, there was really not a whole lot
of people at first when we were there. Our home was basically on a pot of land that belonged to
our family hundreds of years back basically. But it wasn’t confiscated because it wasn’t near the
city. It was way in the back woods so I guess the VC had no desire for it. So we were left with
that land so we built a tin house on the property and the house was divided into basically three
sections. The first section, the front part of the house was the living room with the altar and
everything. The middle part was our sleeping area, our beds. And the last part was our kitchen.
And we were surrounded all around at least on one side by the water. We had dug a few, pretty
deep ponds by the house and we would raise fish there and I still remember one of the exciting
things that we did was that we would raise the fish and when it was time to harvest, we would
unplug one side of the pond so it floated to the other side and so we’d jump in there, you know
hand feet and all; and we would grab the fish from the pond. And it was so much fun because it
all of course was in the mud and everything with the fish all jumping around at the bottom of the
pond there. So the biggest thing that my mom would always try to do was keep me from going in.
Because when I went in, I went in. So it was one heck of an attempt of her to get me clean
afterwards. So I was always getting yelled at because I would always be standing there pointing at the fish waiting for the big guys, our neighbors to catch them because we couldn’t get in. But once in a while, I would accidentally fall in or you know I would just jump in and say it was an accident and just jump in and try to catch the fish myself. So lots of fun.

AL: Did you all have to live in one bedroom?

CP: We all had separate beds and we had the curtains around the bed because mosquitoes were quite the issue over there at the time so all of us had either the thin curtains that we drew together when we went to sleep or we had the thick curtains. It all depends on how much privacy you wanted because you would use whichever curtains but curtains were a must because without we would have been like bait at night, you know…

AL: With the mosquitoes, especially in an area around water.

CP: Oh yeah those puppies were mean too! They were big.

AL: I can imagine. So tell me about your childhood memories. I guess starting with the cricket one?

CP: Yeah, I guess the most memorable one, was as far as my hobbies would be the cricket collector for the whole village because I was the youngest kid in the village. And so we would have the tradition of the cricket fighting. And so, whenever the cricket would lose, they would give me the cricket for free. I would have a whole house full of crickets and I would have these tin boxes where I would cut the cardboard and divide the boxes up in sections so the crickets wouldn’t see each other so they wouldn’t fight. So I would have a tin box, you know a tin cookie box with six or seven dividers inside the box where I left my crickets and that was my pride and
joy. I think at once I had over two hundred crickets and I finally let them all go because my mom was getting tired of trying to buy enough cucumber to actually feed them. They went through, with so many crickets, at least one, two cucumbers per day. After a while she was like “you are wasting money,” So I finally let them go, but I actually kept them; it was a hobby of mine I think for a whole good year or so, so that was great.

AL: Were there any other hobbies you had? Anything?

CP: I was always the mischievous one in the village. I remember I being a five, six year old kid but always trying to lead the pack with kids who were in their teens. I don’t know if they listened to me but I always tried to ask, not ask but demand that they follow what I was trying to do. Didn’t work out a lot of the times but this basically this being a mischievous kid, not to the point where I would be considered juvenile or delinquent or anything but just to say I wasn’t as mild mannered as I should have been.

AL: Did you pull pranks on the teachers…

CP: I did not pull pranks on the teachers but later in my life when I came to the United States, it was the fourth grade, I still remember I had a crush on this one young lady in class and instead of showing how much I cared, how much I loved her, I would follow her around recess and basically I would pick dandelions, and rocks and pebbles, and I would put it in her hoodie. And she would walk around the whole recess time oblivious to what I was doing. And when we was about ready to flip the hoodie over her head, because it was getting colder due to the weather, her head would just be full of flowers and stuff I put in her hoodie. I would do stuff like that. Another time I basically, another girl was sitting down and I would pull the chair from under her and she went straight down to the ground, hit her head in the back of the wall there and I would
be in detention for the next week. So I don’t know, I don’t know, I think somewhere along the way, discipline kicked in and I stopped being such a hell bent kid. But I definitely had my fun.

AL: Was it more when you started seeing your father again? Or…

CP: I think I had seen my father starting in the second grade. So I had been with him even to the fourth grade. I think I may just have been a phase I was going through. I think fifth grade was my most mischievous year.

AL: Around what age did you come to the United States?

CP: I came about when I was nine or ten years old. I remember it was December of 1981. I was born in late seventy-three. So I guess maybe eight or nine would be more accurate. But I still remember my first time stepping in the United States was in the dead of winter. And we had our first snowstorm. And 1981 was a bad snowstorm too. I mean snow drifts were about five or six feet high and it was just phenomenal you know? I’ve never seen snow my entire life. That was awesome.

AL: A snowstorm being awesome? I can only imagine! I haven’t seen snow very much in my life either.

CP: You are not missing much.

AL: So describe some of the traditions that you follow, some of the holidays, any cultural aspects of your life that you might’ve carried from Vietnam to America or only kept in Vietnam or…

CP: We usually always observe Tet you know the lunar New Year every year. We would celebrate Buddha’s Birthday, and we would do what is usually known as damyou which is basically kind of where you worship and you have food and everything to remember your
ancestors and the best part about that is when you get done with the worshiping, you have all of
the food to eat. So that was always good, and we kept that tradition all of the way from Vietnam.
But some of the traditions that we picked up as new would be Thanksgiving, Valentine’s Day, St.
Patty’s Day, stuff that’s only over here that has become very secular for our family. So we took
on board that but over in Vietnam was more of the traditional eastern type of holidays.

AL: Is there anything you miss from Vietnam that you wish could happen in America?

CP: Ah yes, I would say before coming to Southern California, I really miss the Durian fruit.
And I don’t know if you are familiar Andrew, but Durian is either really aromatic to some and
very pungent to others. It’s a matter of if you have the receptors to sense what you are now
smelling or tasting. But I am a huge fan of that and I can eat five six perhaps in one sitting if you
would let me.

AL: Are they like this big?

CP: They are big.

AL: It’s the spiky fruit right?

CP: Yes, yes it is. It’s the smelly one.

AL: A lot of people tell me how bad smelling it is.

CP: Have you ever had Durian fruit before?

AL: I’ve actually never tried it, though I would love to.

CP: Man, I was with the Navy Seals over in Fallujah, Iraq; and you would think that they would
be tough to anything but that fruit took them down. My mom had carefully packed the care box
for me and it wasn’t actually the durian fruit itself, it was basically a flavor durian, like cake or whatever it was, I broke that up and I gave it to them and like ‘Dah!’ they ran right out the door.

I’m like okay navy seals, great.

AL: Some tough guys right?

CP: Right. That could be something we tell the other side. Like hey! Don’t worry about the bomb, just bring the durians and they will be out the door.

AL: Were there any other things that you missed from Vietnam?

CP: Let me think. I think just the simplicity of life. You know I think it was just a laid back lifestyle. My mom and my Grandmother, although we lost everything, we didn’t need much. So we had basic living: no running water, no electricity, basically, whatever we needed we would basically take care of ourselves. And so, just the slowness of life, just how simple everything was. Now everything is dictating by schedules and meetings and stuff like that. So thats what I miss.

AL: We were talking about electricity before, how has electricity shaped your life? As compared to before when you didn’t have any televisions back then. What’s different?

CP: It was great! Because I didn’t have to check my email, didn’t have to worry about the computer. I mean there’s so much that we worry about now Andrew is basically fluff. If you think about it I mean if you never see your email, if you never check your emails, does it really make much of a difference? Probably not, no. It’s always the primary thing on our minds. ‘We have to check our email. We have to sign on facebook you know?’ And I think just the modernness, which is a nice touch, keep more social with your friends; but in reality, it probably
gives you more stress than anything else you know? So that’s what I miss the most, is the
simpleness of it all.

AL: Did you used to help your mom around the house?

CP: I did! I actually was, there wasn’t really much to do to be honest with you. My Grandmother
was always very good about that and because we lived so far out in the countryside, and that
there wasn’t a lot of maintaining to do. We had a vineyard where we raise peppers, was it what
we raised? Yeah, Basically, I don’t know if you know how the peppers, they grow, but they grow
like vines. So basically, I still remember my Grandmother had built this like scaffold where all of
the pepper vines actually grow on but that was the only real construction we had around the
house. As I remember, our house was already built. I don’t know who built it, I don’t remember
who built it. But when we were displaced from Saigon to Vinh Long, I remember the house was
already there. So we just moved in and we just lived. So everything was already there for us
basically, Aside from just the minor stuff of helping her feed the rabbit, or feed the chickens or
whatever, I didn’t have to do much manual labor. I had to do much more manual labor after I
came to the United States than before in Vietnam.

AL: There seems to be a theme here…What were the main industries of your home town?

Farming, manufacturing?

CP: I would say farming. I don’t know if it was actually an industry because I think whenever we
farmed we would use it for our own families. I think during that time the government was still
very disheveled and I don’t think the tax system or whatever they had was very robust at least as
far as in the back woods. So basically it was what we produced we kept. I don’t remember them
collecting any taxes or anything like that. At least to my recollection. Of course I could be wrong,
I was too young and perhaps my mom and Grandma and mom never bothered to tell me about it, you know?

AL: Did you have any neighbors?

CP: We did but, I mean wonderful neighbors. We had our profession that we did. I remember one of my neighbors, she would be a great cook and she was well known in the whole village to make the, not the pho, that you are probably familiar with but the hu tieu. Hu tieu is probably another version of the soupy noodle types but the noodle texture is a little more elastic. And she made some of the finest hu tieu in the whole place. And so she would always reserve me a bowl and I was a big fan of the hu tieu with the pig tails. So she would just cut those pig tails up and she would throw them in there and give me just a boiling bowl there, and I would just happy as a clam when I went to her house.

AL: That sounds really good.

CP: Yup. Have you ever had pig tails before?

AL: I haven’t but I’ve eaten a lot of things like pig’s foot.

CP: Boy, that pig’s tail, I’ll tell you, it’s like the tenderness of it, just the texture, hits the spot.

AL: Is there anywhere I can get pig’s tail here?

CP: I don’t know about here but I know I believe over in Indiana, some of the more African American Grocery stores sell that. They sell anything under the sun including pig’s tail. And that’s where we would get our fix of pig’s tail over in Indiana.

AL: Alright, if I ever go to Indiana, I’ll be sure to try the pig’s tail.
CP: I’ll tell my mom to send you some.

AL: Thank you I appreciate that.

CP: You’re welcome.


CP: I recollect so, the only big events I can remember are each year in our family we would have the catching of the fish in the pond. So basically, we would find all the neighbors over (mostly the older gentlemen) not older, but the more manly people, people who will jump into the pond and grab fish, and we had two ponds right by our house, and we would fill one up and drain the other side thereby all of the neighbors would jump in and grab all of the fish from the drained pond. And so I would always try to go in there and join them but that was never allowed so I would try to sneak in and get myself dirty. If you ever try to catch fish with your bare hand Andrew, it’s the best feeling possible.

AL: I’ve seen it in movies all the time but I’ve never actually tried to do it. I never found a pond small enough.

CP: Yeah this was a pretty sm-, this small pond I would say is no more than say maybe fifty feet wide and maybe about thirty feet deep. Yeah but that’s large enough to raise most fish.

AL: How big were the fish?

CP: Some were pretty huge. We would raise bass, and catfish, and yes, some of them were pretty big. And you can imagine, with an entire year going by with no predator in the pond, it can get pretty hefty.
AL: Did you release the fish afterwards or did you take them home and cook them up?

CP: Oh no, that was our food supply. Basically, we raised them to be eaten. And for those we didn’t eat, we just refilled the water and off they go in to survive for another year.

AL: That’s awesome. Let’s see. What kind of jobs have you had?

CP: Well I didn’t hold a job until I came to the United States. My first job was as a library page when I was fourteen. My parents were never keen on me working at a restaurant or anything like that. They wanted me in an academic setting so I took a job at the library when I was fourteen. So I worked in the library from fourteen until I started college and I would always in the summertime I would always mow lawns. I was basically the neighborhood lawn boy. And I would probably carry around five to six lawns on a weekend. I still remember that that’s how I made my living throughout high school. Was mowing lawns and working at the library. And then for college, I wanted to go to medical school so I worked at a hospital for all four years. I started off in the food services department because that was the least requirement of all of the departments at the hospital. So I was in food service first, then I transferred to the neonatology unit where we took care of preborn or premature born babies. After that, I was over at the lab where I was a hematologist and a phlebotomist, so I got proficient in sticking babies and every type of adult veins for blood. And it takes practice Andrew. They can teach you all they want about how to do it but once you are in the area and you have to do it, it’s all about that exposure and practice. I still remember having to stick this one baby who was no more than three months old try to get blood from her, and she was just bone dry and I had to go after the vein in her head and so that was very tricky. But stuff like that, so I worked for the hospital for four years during college and then after that I went to law school and then so my first year of law school I didn’t
work. And then my second and third year I was a teaching assistant for a legal writing and legal research and also I was the resident assistant for one of the nearby apartments. So basically I was able to get free room and board by being the RA for that complex. And then after law school I joined the Navy and worked as a Navy Defense Counsel prosecutor and a statute advocate for the Navy Seals for over eight years. I’m still on the reserve side now and then I also have my own law firm recently and I work for the government a whole lot and most of my life has been in federal service either as a military man or as a civilian. And currently I am running for Garden Grove City Council. So that’s basically a nutshell of all of my jobs.

AL: Is there anything that inspired you to run for city council?

CP: I’ve always wanted to Andrew. I think it’s a great honor to have the opportunity. I think that I’ve always had this desire from a very young young age. So I have always worked my path towards this opportunity. And I really do believe that, as my personal belief, that any public servant or anybody running for office should have some exposure to the military. Cuz I think that that is the epitome of service there. You are basically putting your life on the line for another person.

AL: Have you ever had to put your life on the line for someone else?

CP: Yes, actually I did. I was in Fallujah with our Navy Seals. There were a few occasions when we had to fight our way out of a pretty dangerous situation. I won’t go into the details of it but I’ve been very blessed with the having served on the front lines and being able to come back in one piece. It’s a blessing. You don’t really think about it, you take it for granted until you’ve been there and you come back and like ‘oh that was awesome.’
AL: I want to learn about your war experiences a little bit more. How did the war in Vietnam affect your family and your community?

CP: I think for our family it was drastic, because our family was actually quite well to do over in Vietnam and so everything we had was basically taken overnight, so, not only were our families displaced because most of them came to Vietnam after the war. My Uncle was imprisoned for over seven years because he was a part of the politics, the military of South Vietnam. And then as far as our whole family, all of our property and all of our assets that we had before the fall of Saigon were confiscated. So we went from having a basically a very good life to having nothing. I still certainly did not feel much of it because I was still too young. I feel sorry for my Grand, my Grandma and my mom who knew how life was before things got really bad.

AL: How did you feel while you were in the war?

CP: Well the war itself didn’t really affect me because I was only one when it ended. And growing up I was so sheltered from the harassment that a lot of people had. I still remember them coming to interrogate my mom and my grandmother a few times at the conclusion of the war. I think I may have been three or four at the time but I was still too young so they left me alone and what I do remember is that they questioned my mom for hours but I don’t think there was any abuse or anything like that to my recollection. They just wanted to know how or what she knew about my Father and where he was but in truth she did not know anything because he had left and had no communication with him or the family until five or six years later at the time they were questioning her. She didn’t know anything.

AL: Is there any particular reason why your father left?
CP: Well he was I think the attorney or the council for the Vice President in South Vietnam so he was a pretty big political guy too. I don’t know how involved he was as far as the chain of command but from what he tells me and in fact my Uncle who was his basically, they were partners in what they were doing. He was in prison for seven years. It had to be something big for the VC to jail him for so long.

AL: You were very young during the war stage right? So you didn’t really know much about it

CP: Not really, I mean I lived in that society and the aftermath of the war. But I wasn’t affected by it, I would say.

AL: Did you leave before or after the war ended?

CP: After, I left 1981.

AL: So, what was life like after the war?

CP: It was, like I said, I was too young to appreciate life before. All I can tell, is that it was a very calm and quiet life. We didn’t have much. We lived n a tin house, and it was hotter than the dickens in that house over the summertime and it was kind of cold at night. But for a child I had all the bare necessities I was not hungry. When it the special holidays came I would always have presents that my mom bought and everything. So I had all the comforts of what a little kid should have. Perhaps I guess ignorance is bliss so I had nothing to compare it to. But I had a great childhood. I’ve never had too much of anything. Never had too much clothing, never had too much food or anything. I just had enough to get by.

AL: Did you feel that helped shape who you are today?
CP: I think so. I actually would say yes absolutely. As far as just the fact that I lived like a Spartan. I don’t need much. It’s basically everything I do is very slim, trim, and very efficient. I think that upbringing really helped because even now when I do have the means to live it up and be extravagant, you can cut me dry and just give me five dollars a week and I can get by.

AL: that’s impressive.

CP: and that’s how I lived myself all through college and law school because basically I helped my mom with my sibling. I have two younger siblings so basically all the money I made I gave to her to help with the family. So I never really needed money much. And even now, it’s like when I was working for the navy I was making a lot more than what I would actually ever need. I was like wow. And of course I would spend it. And I’m like man, I wonder how I got by with so little before. But yeah, life has been a lot of fun. I have to say I have been very very blessed.

AL: Were you ever punished as a kid?

CP: Yes actually I was punished more when I was with my father than when I was with my mother before. I don’t know if you’re familiar, but sometimes there’s a jackfruit which is not as bad as a durian. A durian has the spiky stuff. But the jackfruit is also spiked, but it is not as sharp. And I still would remember, as punishment I would actually have to kneel on the jackfruit.

AL: Kneel on the jackfruit?

CP: Yeah on the jackfruit shell. Its cover.

AL: Was it like, your stomach or your knees, or..?

CP: No, my knees. Yeah.
AL: Sounds painful.

CP: Yeah I mean it didn’t draw blood or anything but it definitely left marks.

AL: Wow. That was after you came to America right?

CP: That was before. And then after I came to America I got spankings.

AL: Spankings. Reminds me of my childhood.

CP: Yeah.

AL: What was it like leaving? How did you feel after leaving?

CP: I really missed my grandma because she couldn’t come with us. My father sponsored my mom and me but my grandmother had to stay behind so I really missed her. But I was really looking forward to the United States you know? I hadn’t seen my dad for a while. I mean, ever since I was a child basically so I was very excited about that. Also very apprehensive because I knew that I didn’t know English at the time. So basically it was going to be from scratch. But I think because I was fairly young, about 8 years old then, so it wasn’t like I was really scared or anything. I think at that age you’re still absorbing things like a sponge. So I was very blessed to be able to beat the language barrier at the age where you can’t lose your accent. And so, I think everything has worked out great.

AL: Your English is really good

CP: I wouldn’t say that, but I do get by. It’s kind of funny actually we try to case over in Guam. And I had dealt with this lady who was an alleged victim and she’s from Tennessee. And I had talked to her to prepare for the case for many months. And when she came over to Guam and
saw me in person, she was like you don’t quite look like the way I thought you would look like. And I was like what did you think I would look like? And she said well you sound very white. I was like, well I’m sorry I didn’t mean to disappoint you. But yeah, I’ve had that before when folks talk to me over the phone they just don’t put the two and two together.

AL: I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.

CP: I don’t know, I just enjoy it. I guess my accents not too bad then.

AL: So what did you think of US policy during and after the war?

CP: Let’s see.

AL: Well, you were very young back then.

CP: Yeah. Having grown up a little bit more now and seeing a little bit more, I think that being a military man and a naval reservist I have to disclaim at this point that everything I say right now is my personal view. Does not reflect the views of the United States or the United States Navy in any way but I really feel that the United States should have fought to the end. Or at least fought to a stalemate or at least a victory. I think had the war been fought by military men instead of by politicians or by the whim of the people in the United States, the outcome would have been very very different. And I regret that we did not play to win. I don’t know what the heck we were doing. We were sacrificing fifty eight thousand plus men and then basically high tail and run. And I know there was a lot of different things going on and climate that we don’t know about but when you look at it from a macro perspective, you would think “why would you invest all of these resources and lives and then just cut bait?” I mean it just defies logic. I think there’s one thing that I can take away and would advise any future wars the United States get into and
involved with, is fight and learn it through the military guys. Don’t let the politicians dictate the outcome because we will lose every single time.

AL: Aren’t you going to become a politician as well? Running for city council?

CP: Well I certainly am and I hope that of course with city council and everything, it’s more trying to fix the potholes and making sure that the local levels are taken care of. So my perspective that I gave you is just at the federal level and the bigger level. And if I must say that I won’t be blessed enough to get it there but that’s far and way down the road that I don’t think I am even going to think about but these are just some of the observations that I have made through all of my teachings and my studies and what I have learned through the military. That if we fight a war dictated on politics then we will probably lose every single time.

AL: I don’t want to say anything about the war right now. So why specifically did you come to the United States? Besides getting sponsored to come over? Is there any other reason?

CP: Actually my father left, after the war here, and escaped. Actually he was saved by the US ships and so luckily he came to the United States and so basically I was sponsored to the United States. He could have been picked up by an Australian or a German ship or whatever other ship and I would have been to that other nation but not having the perspective of the nation, I’m going to give you a very bias view I am pretty sure. But I can honestly say that I am very happy and honored that we were picked up by America. Because I often tell my friends and those I meet that very few places in the world will allow some kid from a third world nation to learn English, to get the education I’ve received, and to become a naval officer or an officer in their military. And basically promote and rise through the ranks as we all do here in the United States. I can’t
test for how I would have been if I grew up in Canada or Australia or anything else but just my optic observation I think that I am very blessed to have been raised in the United States.

AL: But why specifically did you leave? Was it for the opportunity?

CP: I didn’t have a choice. Because my dad sponsored my mom and me and I was under fourteen, under the legal age so she went and I went with her.

AL: Did your mom have a choice?

CP: Well she wanted to reunite with my father so I’m sure she wanted to come. And I certainly am very glad that she came because I am sure the communist, they have a system of basically keeping you down. If you were on the other side, you were not going to progress. I don’t know if that has changed since the war but during that time, if you were on the black list and if you were a part of the old regime, you will survive however you can but you would get not help from the government so I’m sure if I had been under that system, life would have been very very different for me. Probably for the worst, unless I joined the party. And I am sure because I was raised in the south and part of the southern culture I don’t think I would have ever been let into the party to begin with. Not to say I would want to be a part of the party but just having the invitation, I don’t think it would have been offered. So I probably would have struggled and would have had a menial existence. All through my life. But for the opportunity in the United States.

AL: Did you bring any possessions with you? To America?

CP: Not really. I think my father left with no possessions. He worked for Steak and Shake and Burger Chef, I think that’s now been replaced to Hardees and Carl’s Jr. But basically he worked at the fast food joints, got his degree. He was a lawyer back in Vietnam and so he became a
computer programmer here in the United States. So he basically worked multiple jobs and was able to gather enough money to sponsor us. And when my mom and I came, we just came basically with a suitcase and some clothing but that was it.

AL: Do you know how your father escaped?

CP: He escaped by boat. I think based on what he told me he escaped with the police when they left. I was too young at that time so my mom agreed that she would stay behind just so that I perhaps wouldn’t die at sea. I was barely one at the time. So that’s why we stayed behind.

AL: Do you remember the journey at all? What the journey was like?

CP: I was very very blessed. I was actually…we flew over here. We were sponsored by my father so we flew on an airline over here. My uncle actually had already came to the United States and then over to Hong Kong to start his business. And so we flew from Vietnam to Thailand where we were processed. And then we were awaiting in the camps there for a few weeks but because my Uncle was already established in Hong Kong, he sent for us. And so we were quickly located from Thailand to Hong Kong. Basically it was like a whirlwind, in a matter of three weeks I went from Vietnam to Thailand to Hong Kong to the United States. So I was a very blessed child. I still remember laying spread eagle on the flight over on the way from Vietnam just being a spoiled kid. So I certainly have no place or no standing to say anything about a hardship as far as the trip from Vietnam to the United States.

AL: Was it hard starting? Besides the language? You told me you learned at an early age and you didn’t get to the point where you had an accent but was there any other hardship you faced in your resettlement in the United States? Or did you suffer any racism of any kind?
CP: Definitely. Because I was in Indiana, and so I often joked that I doubled the Asian population and from my school from zero to one. Because there was nobody of my same color or skin tone over in Indian at that time. Now it’s getting more diverse but at that time it was all Caucasian. And it was quite an adjustment. I couldn’t speak the language, I looked different from them, so I got harassed pretty often. For at least he first two or three years of my life. But you just deal with it you know, and what doesn’t kill you will make you stronger. So definitely, racism, prejudice, just snide bickering, stuff that kids do.

AL: Was there anything specific that they called you?

CP: Let’s see, they would call me pig’s nose; that’s the only one I can remember. But basically just, you had the kids who would try to protect you and you had the kids who tried to break you. I mean I would always let them play against each other. I knew I had my protection and so if I ever had to call on help then I would. But for the most part, it isn’t much. I have to say that there were some very mean kids but on the whole, on the majority, they were all quite nice to me because they knew that I didn’t have...because I was new to the school, new to the country, so I definitely had the odds stacked against me. So for the most part a lot of them were very very nice to me.

AL: What about now? Is there any racism you suffer now?

CP: Not so much anymore. Because of course you see in southern California, we are now the majority, so it’s not an issue anymore but I think even as I was growing up, that became less because I think once you become more educated, then you basically fight back with intellect. And so, on occasions when they would be…kids would be making rude comments behind my back or something; in the movie theater making Long Duk Dong jokes, or trying to speak
Chinese to me. I would turn to them and say “You know what? You are not speaking whatever you are trying to speak, if you are Chinese or Japanese, whatever it is, it’s actually wrong. You want me to teach you how to say it properly?” They were so taken back that I am basically challenging them on their ignorance you know. Just to shove it in their faces, not rudely or anything, but just basically trying to challenge them at an intellectual level. And I think once you do that they just peter off and go off on their merry way.

AL: What was that word you said? That insult you said?

CP: The Pig’s nose or whatever?

AL: No, no, no, more recently when you were talking about…

CP: Oh like they would refer to Long Duk Dong the guy from sixteen candles. Have you ever seen that movie? You need to check that movie out Andrew.

AL: Sixteen Candles?

CP: Sixteen Candles. It’s basically a classic, it’s a nineteen-eighties classic. It stars Molly Ringwald and basically it’s one of these teen angst type of movies you know? But Long Duk Dong is just a classic figure. He’s generally a Chinese student, Chinese foreign exchange student who lives in the United States, who lives with Molly Ringwald’s family. And he’s like basically is the central…he doesn’t have a whole lot of speaking roles in the movie but when he does appear, it’s a riot. So you should check it out. But a lot of the non-Asian kids or more Caucasian kids, that’s their form of reference of what an Asian person is. Nerdy, can’t quite speak the language and basically just FOBs it up. And that’s the reference that they are making. And so you just have to deal with that type of behavior with intellectual discussion when you challenge
them on it and of course they won’t know what the heck you are talking about because they don’t know what they are talking about right? And so you see when you are like “Do you want me to teach you Chinese or Japanese? If you are going to insult me, I want you to do it right” And then they are like “huh?” And they are like “no, no, no, it’s okay.” And you are like “oh good!” But it’s fun. Always nice to turn the table.

AL: You seem very educated about current issues: stereotypes, race, and stuff like that. Could you tell me more about your education?

CP: Well I was very very blessed. I grew up in Indiana and I went to school in Indiana I went to Undergraduate at Indiana University in Indianapolis. And after college I went to law school over at Southern Illinois University. I was actually blessed to get into the combined degree MD, JD program over there in Southern Illinois. But I did my law degree pass Illinois Bar and I was accepted into medical school part of it and I found out I wasn’t quite cut out for med school. I did it mostly for my mom and so I asked my mom to let me go on my merry way with being a lawyer and she did. I’m happy to report now that my sister is the doctor of the house so my mom got her wish. After law school I went to join the navy as a JAG officer, a navy lawyer and just had a blast ever since. I served almost eight years of my life there on active duty. I was in New Jersey right after 9/11, actually right before 9/11 we were right there after 9/11 to help with the relief effort. After that I was in Japan. I was a naval prosecutor in Japan and we were based maybe outside of Tokyo? So it was the best time of my life. The best part is learning and meeting new people. Then after that, I requested to come to California. And then I was stationed with the seals down in Coronado. Also was deployed in Iraq for six months. And then after that I came here to Orange County after I passed the California Bar and then I’ve lived here ever since. Which is since 2008. Last year I was called to active duty for one year to help with the wounded
warrior program over in Virginia. That reminds me, when you were giving me that sheet to sign where I lived I forgot to include Virginia. Which I was there for one year.

AL: How do you identify yourself in American society? That’s a big question.

CP: Yeah, I would say I am a Vietnamese American. I think that I am more American than Vietnamese. But as living in California through the years I think I’ve gotten more Vietnamese. Which is good though because I think we need people who are basically fluent/diverse on both sides. And I definitely need to work on my Vietnamese side even more. I can definitely understand and speak it at a basic level but in order to get very cerebral with it, I need to study. And my hope and my goal is to be as efficient in English and Vietnamese, not only in terms of speaking but also in terms of understanding and just knowing the big picture culture issue. To basically help our culture be even better than we are now.

AL: What do you consider Vietnamese and what do you consider Vietnamese American?

CP: I think differences in the culture and the belief. I think if you were to meet somebody from Vietnam right now and say compared to me, I think you can definitely see a difference. Even though we can both claim to be of Vietnamese descent. I think you could probably tell the difference between night and day. The way we talk the way we dress, the way that we interact. So I think that just the differences in location and upbringing would differentiate between a Vietnamese versus a Vietnamese American versus and American. And I think it’s on a spectrum, there’s no right or wrong but if you are Vietnamese you are more than likely all Vietnamese all the way. Then you have the infusion, someone like me who is basically half in and half out. One foot is on the Vietnamese side, one foot is on the American side. And then you have the all
Americans and not only do I mean in terms of All Americans meaning not Vietnamese but even Vietnamese who are just all American.

AL: Who are born here and just live in the culture.

CP: Right. And who does have any idea how to speak the language. They look Vietnamese and their skin tone is of yellow hue. They have no other idea. Which I actually think is kind of sad because I think that one of the things that I always believed is that you should always embrace where you’re at and embrace the American culture and society but I think it’s a blessing if you are able to keep your culture. So I always want to encourage if you have the ability to keep your culture may it be Latino, may it be whatever culture you come from, keep it. Because you can certainly be very proficient in English to assimilate to America but the other side of the coin is invaluable. You shouldn’t lose it.

AL: I feel the same way. As a kid I never wanted to learn my Chinese roots but as I grew older I wanted to get more of the culture that I missed out on as a kid. Did you ever feel the same way?

CP: Absolutely, I mean, growing up in Indiana, I was white-washed to say the least. But I was blessed that my parents would always speak Vietnamese at home and so at least I was always able to keep the rudimentary language that was needed. And now that I am here in California I definitely try to develop more of the Vietnamese side. Not only for my own personal reasons but also because I want to help the community more and in order to do so, I need to be able to interact and communicate with the older Vietnamese population. And so I think that I have a long way to go but at least I’m on my way.

AL: Have you ever been back to Vietnam since?
CP: I have. When I was stationed in Japan, I was closer to Vietnam, so I brought back my mom to Vietnam to visit my Grandparents’ graves. I was there but you know what I have to say after the visit, I didn’t really care much for it, the people have changed. I don’t know how to say this but I think the government is very corrupt. I try to remember going through custom and I would not put a bill, you know a five dollar bill in my passport. I basically had to stand there for like an hour because he was trying to ask for the bribe. You know, stuff like that and I’m like, we as a country need to stop that in order for us to step into the twenty first century and be respected on the world stage.

AL: You are talking about Vietnam right?

CP: Yes. And just the disparity between the rich and the poor. I stayed at a fairly fancy hotel when I was there just because we have some cousins who worked for the hotel chain, so we were able to get a good rate but when you look out your window, you see just on the horizon, all these shanties and just dilapidation. The disparity is so big that it just depresses me. That communism by its pure intentions and form should make everything equal to everybody. But it’s worse than capitalism! You don’t have the middle class over in Vietnam, you have the ultra rich and the ultra poor. That’s it.

AL: Do you think it changed while you were away? Because you were very young. I don’t know if you would’ve been able to analyze it as fully as you would now.

CP: I probably can’t. I think that, the rich has definitely gotten richer and the poor has gotten poorer. Before, I can’t speak for the Northern side because I wasn’t in the north. But I know for us in the South, we were okay. Or at least where I was at. We didn’t have much but we were not dirt poor. But going back there to visit my grandparents’ graves now, you can definitely tell that
they’ve gotten poorer. And as far as the rich, I don’t know the rich, I don’t know where they are from or who make them up but I can only assume that it’s definitely not the folks of Southern descent. So, by these years of basically the process has definitely deluded and kind of morphed communism into a much different thing than I am sure than what the founder Ho Chi Minh imagined it to be.

AL: Is there anything that reminds you of Vietnam? Like any songs? Any poems or anything that you remember? Artifacts?

CP: Here, living in Southern California, it’s a bastion. I love it. One of the reasons I came to Garden Grove and why I want to run for city council is, you probably know Andrew. We have the largest Vietnamese concentration outside of Vietnam here in the city. I’m so happy and honored to have the opportunity to run for office here. I hope a mad truck doesn’t hit me tomorrow and this is all for naught. But so far in my life I’ve just been extremely blessed. To be here to enjoy our culture. Every year you know we have the Tet festival. Everything that is so true in Vietnam we have here except on a much more sane and clean level. The food, and you know everything here, you know? We have the same type of food in Vietnam but I will guarantee you as far as health I wouldn’t touch it. I’m sure I would have major issues with digestion for a good week.

AL: Are there any cultural differences? Like anything that is different in Vietnam than here? Besides the cleanliness or food? Anything you feel in Vietnam is more authentic because it is from Vietnam?

CP: I am such a Spartan when it comes to either food or consumption. That if you just give me the bare minimum, I am happy as a clam. So I really don’t know to be honest with you. I’m sure
the art and stuff like that maybe. Foodwise, I am sure some of the fruit and whatever, but I’m sure what we have here, my expectations for greatness are so so low and I’m not a snob when it comes to these things. As long as it’s passable “I’m like ooh that’s so good!” So I think if you would ever own a restaurant, pick me as your food critic. Because I’m like “ooh so good” when it’s crap.

AL: Yeah I’m about the same as you.

CP: Cuz I don’t cook so I mean if the food is passable then I am happy.

AL: I am pretty much in the same boat.

CP: If it’s edible, yeah!

AL: So do you visit little Saigon?

CP: Oh yeah, I just live a few blocks from it.

AL: Um yeah, I don’t know what else to ask about that. It’s one of the questions so you pretty much answered it. Do you go there often? Is there a specific reason why you go? Are you used to it by now?

CP: You know what the funny thing is when I first came to California in 2008 or actually 2005 was when I was first here, I was actually with the Seals then for a few years. When I moved up here in 2008, I thought I was in Hong heaven with all the food and everything. But like anything else, as it becomes your backyard, you start taking it for granted. So I haven’t been to a lot of the Vietnamese restaurants much anymore and I tend to have my favorites now. The newness has worn off so now it’s basically now I’m here on a mission. That is to run for office. Before I was like a tourist. I was like “ooh” you know? But now basically the newness has worn off and I
know where I want to go for my pho, I know where I want to go for whatever I like so it’s no
longer just trying out the different buffet.

AL: I’m the same way. As a kid I used to always go to San Gabriel for all the Chinese
supermarkets and stuff like that. I’m so used to it now that I just know exactly where to go and
when I need to.

CP: It’s so sad though because that is where people around the world would pay a handsome
price just to fly here for the opportunity for a week.

AL: How are you involved in the Vietnamese community in the US?

CP: Well, quite a lot. When I was over in Iraq, when I came back we realized there was a need
for an association. Where basically in the military for all us who were Vietnamese American of
background to network and be together. So we formed the Vietnamese American Armed Forces
Association. And in Vietnamese it’s called Hội Cựu Quân Dân Việt Mỹ và Độc Minh. So
basically we started off as a networking association but then we went on to start toy drives for
kids over the holidays, and now our big thing is that we do scholarships. We try to raise about
thirteen thousand dollars a year for scholarships because we have thirteen Vietnamese American
brothers who have died in the line of duty for the recent war in Iraq and Afghanistan. So each
year we award thirteen scholarships in their honor to deserving Vietnamese American students
within the country. So that’s one of the big things that the organization or association does for
this time. For myself, I am also on the board for St. Ansem. I was the former chair of the group.
And St. Ansem is a cross-cultural center where we serve the indigent refugees and the
immigrants basically in the Garden Grove Orange County area and basically we have
transportation. We also have unemployment citizenships. So a wide variety of services to help
these people. I’m also on the board of the Vietnam War memorial over here in Westminster.

Basically we have an all American way there in order to honor our heroes. I’m one of the board members there. And I’m a part of the boys and girls club here at Garden Grove. If you ever want to come visit me on a weekend, I think I spend more time outside of my house activities than I do at home. I enjoy being out and about in the community.

AL: I’ll definitely be interested.

CP: I’ll take you.

AL: Sounds good. What are the most important things that future generation Vietnamese Americans should remember about their past.

CP: I would probably just say the language is important. The language and the culture and the tradition. In particular I always want to make sure that from my part Remember to honor our elders and how to do it properly. Perhaps with the weddings, the tradition of how you actually have a wedding. You have the whole tradition where you go to the bride’s house, you have the long ceremony line, you knock on the door to get invited into the house and stuff like that. Stuff like that I don’t want to lose over time. Which sadly Andrew I think we will lose. Because we are not infused with it every day as we are in Vietnam. And as our older generation passes on, we won’t have the past out. So my goal is to basically try to learn that as much as I can, so that I can pass it on to the next generation; to my kids. Because I think that is very important.

AL: Do you have any kids?

CP: Not yet. I took my good old time. I am very blessed. I am in a very happy relationship with a lady who is eleven years younger than me right now and I always joke that she pursued me so I
didn’t rob the cradle. It was the baby who tried to pursue me. Now, I think I will probably get married next year after the election but I’ve just enjoyed life too much. And I think having served in the military it wasn’t very conducive for a family life. Because we’d move every two or three years so it was probably best that I stay single, and live life to the fullest. But I think now that I’ve had a very good life and a very fun life, that it is time for me to slow it down and have a family.

AL: Is there anything you would want to teach your kids to maintain your culture? Anything specifically? Like the discipline they taught you, or anything that your parents taught you that you would pass down to your kids.

CP: Absolutely Andrew, I think discipline is very important. I, being a military man, would encourage my children to join the military. My girlfriend and I have this discussion all the time. She’s not of the military mindset, she more of the sheltering protective type of person. I’m like well, our children should be exposed to the military lifestyle so you know we always have this debate back and forth. I think it’s a good thing. I would definitely encourage them to give back our adoptive country and to serve. But as far as with culture, I think it’s something that we should maintain. And I would do my very best to learn it and pass on to my kids when I have them and when the time’s right.

AL: Let’s see what haven’t we gone over yet. I think we actually went through a lot of the list. Maybe not the cultural, tradition and religion one. Do you go to any monastery or anything outside the home? I know you have an altar at home right? Do you go to any temple?

CP: Yeah, my girlfriend is much into Buddhism so I go now more often. It was just harder during my time in the military because you just don’t have a lot of exposure. So, tend to be more
basically whatever the religion of the day happens to have for me to attend. So I’m very open when it comes to religion. I’m a Buddhist by upbringing and by faith but I respect and honor all religion. So I’ve been to Catholic, Mormons, you name it, I’ve been to. It’s been as an honor for me to attend such a diverse variety of traditions. What they do and how they worship and sometimes I feel like a duck out of water. I don’t know what’s being said or chanted by. But I do enjoy the variety and the differences.

AL: Is there anything you practice at home specifically? Continuously?

CP: Not so so much. I mean I’m a moderate Buddhist I would say, so I live by the Golden Rule which is do onto others basically. I just try to live a good life and try to treat other people well. I don’t know much about the scripture or much about the requirements of Buddhism. I hate to say it but I just do as other people do or as my mother does when she goes to temple. I also have to make sure I learn what is right or wrong, what to do. But for the most part I’m not much into the process of it. I’m more of into the bigger picture of it. Live your life right you know?

AL: Is your mom Buddhist?

CP: She is, yeah.

AL: Does she still practice at home?

CP: I think that she knows the formalities but she doesn’t really practice it. I think that’s why I’m not as fixated on the formalities because she never pushed it. She would always just say study hard, treat each other right, and that’s about it. And so I got that mindset. But I know my mom knows the particulars of how you should worship and stuff like that. Perhaps not that great but
definitely more than me. So I need to learn that from her and to learn from people in the know. So at least I would have working knowledge of it.

AL: Do you visit your mom often?

CP: Yeah I try to visit her once every few months if I can. Now that my siblings are all grown. My sister is married, she got married last year. My brother is now studying to be a navy seal down at Coronado. Yup, so we are all out of the house. My sister comes back to stay with her once or twice a night a day during the week so that my mom is not too lonely. So yeah we are so far away but I try to call once every few days so it helps.

AL: Do you think there is a generational disconnect between your parents and you?

CP: I think so, I think that we tend to be much more independent. I think parents I think we will probably be like this too when we get there Andrew, we will be a lot more overbearing and protective of our kids. So sometimes I have to catch myself because they would lecture me about how to do certain things. And I’m like okay okay okay, it just, I hate to say this but my level, my threshold of being told to do is dependent on how much sleep I had the night before. If I didn’t have a lot of sleep, I would be cranky. Usually I know that they do mean will and so I do listen to what they have to say and I do take it on board but I think sometimes parents can be a little too overbearing and you already thought of that and you did that but they keep reminding you to do it.

AL: I know exactly what you mean.

CP: I’m so popular I just can’t go just a few minutes without someone texting me or calling me.

AL: You’re almost a city councilman so you are going to be expecting these calls a lot.
CP: This actually is my personal phone because even at this point I am maintaining two lines, one, my personal one and my other one…

AL: So you carry around two phones all the time?

CP: Not both. I usually do but today I just have my personal phone. My other one is in the car. Which I check once probably every two or three hours. So hopefully it won’t be too stale if anyone calls me from the city.

AL: Do you usually have a busy life? You said you are outside a lot often but as an attorney do you have work you have to take care of?

CP: I do, this year I’ve basically cut down on a lot of the work aspect because I’m trying to run for council and do it well. But for the most part, as an attorney, being in the military before and transitioning over to my private firm, it has been very very busy.

AL: Are you getting into the community more now that you are running as a councilman?

CP: I always have, it’s always been in my blood. I’ve been a part of the community probably since 2008. Ever since I moved here, I’ve been going in basically deeper now. Before it was just the Vietnamese community. Now I am diversifying, spreading my wings to reach everybody. It’s pretty cool because with my background and my service in the military, I can definitely roll with most people

AL: You seem very open minded about a lot of things, so I’m guessing race will be no different.

CP: I am guessing we are all the same Andrew, we are all blue and red. So I think it’s a matter of trying to understand each other and working things out. I think one of the reasons our country is at a tail spin right now is because you have people republicans and democrats that stick to it. All
of a sudden you demonize the other side. I don’t think that’s the way to go. We all have our firm beliefs that we don’t break on but I think everything in between you have to compromise.

AL: You said your dad was a lawyer in Vietnam, was your mom educated?

CP: My mom actually got her law degree to. She, back in Vietnam, the women were never expected to do anything with the degree. It was basically for a mantle display. She did get her law degree as well too.

AL: So your dad and mother was a lawyer and your dad ended up working in the fast food industry?

CP: He did.

AL: And your mom was a baker…

CP: She’s a home maker, well she over in Vietnam was a baker and then a black market drug dealer. Not a drug dealer.

AL: Let’s say medicinal

CP: Yeah she never deal drugs, she dealt medicine you know. And then she came over here, she was a homemaker and then she also had her own seamstress store where she did alterations. I don’t know how my mom did it. I mean she also babysat for kids and everything too. She was able to save money hand over fist and I don’t know how she does it but she is quite a great lady when it comes to saving.

AL: Is your dad still working?
CP: He’s retired now. He’s happily retired. He has a few homes he’s looked after. He rents them out. He does that now. And my mom, she still works briefly but I think she will be retiring soon. But the fact that I’ve been a lawyer for over ten years and my sister is getting done with her residency and my brother getting done with his Seal training, I mean we could probably take care of her from here on out. So hopefully it won’t be for too long. The thing is I have to wait until the end of this election and then I’ll definitely get myself squared away more. Everything is kind of hinging on the outcome of this election to see which path I turn.

AL: What would you do if you didn’t win the election. Knock on wood.

CP: Sure, you always have to have plan B. But I would continue to serve the community. I could probably do a lot more for my family. I know my girlfriend is kind of hesitant, apprehensive about the political path. She would probably prefer a more stable lifestyle. And you know with a law degree I can certainly work for the government or myself or whatever I want to do. I would probably step back a little bit from the pursuit of politics and then just serve the community in different ways. That’s why I am going full war. It’s because I want to make sure that I do everything I can to win it on the first try. Because I hear people saying “If you keep trying…” I’m not that hard up for it. I think you are in for punishment if you go into politics unless you really want to serve. And if you really want to serve, then there are other ways to serve. You don’t have to put yourself through the scrutiny of elections every few years. I am just putting myself out there hoping for the best but if it doesn’t happen, I will service the community in other ways and I don’t think that I would run again. But who knows? The future can change and maybe I will get the itch and do it again. That’s why I am trying so hard on this first try.

AL: Well, is there anything else you want to talk about before we conclude?
CP: I am just very thankful for having a chance to talk to you and reflect upon my life. I hardly ever do that at all anymore. It’s not like a rat race anymore. To be able to sit back and think about where I’ve been and what blessings I’ve had. And my life has been quite surreal to think that. I just hope that at the next turn of the page I will still be blessed. Whatever life has in store for me. And hopefully it will be as rewarding in the future as it has in the past.

AL: You have some really amazing stories and I would sit with you even after this interview, maybe at another time.

CP: Well thanks Andrew, I hope that you got what you needed for the assignment there.

AL: Hopefully I did too. Good thing I recorded it this time.