Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: JONATHAN NGUYEN

Interviewer: Janelle Aika Uchiumi

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TRANSCRIPTION

JAU: Today is April 26th, 2012 Thursday. Uh, this is Janelle Uchiumi with the Vietnamese Oral History Project and I am interviewing Mr. Jonathan Nguyen. We are at his home in Mission Viejo, CA. Also present is his daughter, Nadia Nguyen. Would you state and spell your name please?

JN: Jonathan Nguyen. J o n a t h a n N g u y e n.

JAU: Also your Vietnamese name please.

JN: Nhan Do Nguyen. Nhan Do Nguyen

JAU: Where and when were you born?

JN: I born in Saigon, Vietnam. Uh, Cholon, Ch o l o n.

JAU: And, what are the names of your parents?
JN: My dad name is the uh, Thanh Do Nguyen. T h a n h D o N g u y e n. My mom name is uh Huynh Thi um, oh okay, back up. First name is Them Thi middle name and Huynh is last name.

JAU: All right, so, when is the date of your birth?

JN: July 14, 1964.

JAU: And place of birth?

JN: um, Saigon, Vietnam.

JAU: Can you describe your parents for me please?

JN: Uh, wow. Um...They are very humble people. My mom is the business woman and my dad is just the um, uh supporting her business. Um, they taking care all of us. We have 10 brother sister, and um, they just like any other family. Um, making money and um and taking care children. Is that what you're asking?

JAU: Yes, uh, so you grew up in Saigon, Vietnam is that correct?

JN: correct.

JAU: Uh, can you describe your hometown, where you grew up for me please?

JN: I was born in Cholon, okay, where most of people surround me is they are Chinese people. They all speak Chinese language. Uh, some how some reason only few family around us are Vietnamese. And um, I grew up in the Chinese town but the my time I did not speak Chinese at all.
JAU: Uh, where have you lived in Vietnam, other than Saigon if any?

JN: From 1964 to 197...2 I live in Cholon, Saigon. And after 1972 we moved to uh Binh Trieu. It's spelled B i n h T r i e u. We moved there after 1972 and I lived there until 1979 and went to America.

JAU: Tell me about some of your childhood memories.

JN: Um, it's uh not a best but it is the best. I grew up in the very uh, somewhat um good family. Uh, we value the family. My mom made decent money so none of us had to worry about money or go to work. We are very tight family and uh all my life I just don't know or worry about anything about it. They take care of everything.

JAU: What were the main industries in your hometown? Such as farming...

JN: No, uh the hometown is we do not have farming or manufacturing anything at all. We live in the almost like uh, business district so uh, where they selling stuff um, yeah.

JAU: What were your neighbors like?

JN: I don't know much about the neighbor. I spent most of my life in school. Um, I attend to the uh one of the uh prestigious school in Saigon. It called La San Lossar. It's spelled uh, L a S a n L o s s a r, I think. It's a French school and I spent most of my life in that one so I have no idea about the neighbor.

JAU: Was that like a boarding school?
JN: Yes, it is boarding school. It’s almost like a boarding military school. I stay like a dorm. I go to school Sunday and go home Friday and all I have is two day with my family every week for 7 year straight.

JAU: What kinds of local gatherings and events were there?

JN: Um, I don’t think we have that kind of thing. Basically, is the um ...unless is the major event like for example a new year, those kind of that okay people kind of gathering. But basically is the um, I mean they don’t kind of have anything like in American gathering okay talking like that. They just kind of go out and eat, and do things that’s about.. It’s a different event.

JAU: How did you celebrate um is it, Tet?

JN: Tet, uh we celebrate very very big. Especially for my family. Uh, we as a Vietnamese traditional, we believe in celebrate Tet is biggest one of the year. Um I remember, every year when we still live in Cholon, Saigon. Um, every year my dad ..we have a four story high house. Which is pretty high. And every year, he he the way it works okay, for Tet okay, is um..When we celebrate okay, the first thing first is you hang the firecracker from the top of your house so to the ground so meaning that is if your house is a highest house okay, in the neighborhood, um that means that your firecracker okay would last a lot longer than anybody else. So that’s show your wealthiest, your power and everything else so it just happened that my house is four stories high. Probably the tallest one than anyone else in the neighborhood. So we end up with the longest firecracker of the town.

JAU: Did you also celebrate birthdays, funerals, or other special occasions?
JN: Uh, birthday definitely yes, you know for individual of the mom, dad, and then the kids stuff like that uh, yeah definitely we do the celebrate like everybody else.

JAU: Now, you also mentioned that your school in Vietnam was like a military boarding school

JN: Correct..

JAU: What level of education did you have?

JN: I start school from first grade to seventh grade until 1975. Uh, that was when I was in seventh grade and when the communist took over, I no longer attend that school.

JAU: What were your teachers and peers like?

JN: Um, teacher are very very professional. They are the catholic. Before, they are not the priest, but they are the next level to the priest. We call them, it translate okay, in French okay, friar meaning that the ‘brother’ in English. Meaning those guy okay they are very very high educated, graduated and they devote their life for the youth.

JAU: I see, now what do you remember most about your parents and grandparents when you were a child?

JN: Uh, my dad is one thing I remember the most about my parent especially my dad because he is very tall guy. He’s about oh my god, 6’2” or 6’3” which is very special in Vietnamese community. So uh every year, when we, on Christmas night, after the mass if we need to looking for him, all we have to do is stick our head up a little bit higher and we can see him from far away and recognize him right away and it works every time. And the
problem is, my mom okay is super short. She's only .holy cow. She's only 4'7", 4'8"
whatever that is. So when those two both took a picture, everybody start laughing because
you know, guy is about 6'2" tall and woman is about 4'6" 4'7". So it's kind of funny.

JAU: What do you know about your family name?

JN: That I don't' know much about it. I really do not talk much about that one with my mom
or with my dad. No, no I don't.

JAU: Are there any stories about it's history or origins, or are there any traditional first
names or nick names with your family?

JN: No, no basically I was told that the..Actually yes, my mom okay, last name is Huynh.
That name okay is somewhat high rank or famous in the uh, middle section of Vietnam.
Vietnam they divided up into three pieces, north south and middle section. And she come
from the middle one and uh, I was told that her last name was one of the uh high rank of
that one. However for my dad, his name is Nguyen. I'm not sure about that one um I would
guess that come from the Nguyen king. Which is the I don't think my dad has anything
related with that one however, I was told a lot that a lot a lot of the Vietnamese family they
change their last name to Nguyen or Tran just because to get the uh to avoid politic or to
to kind of get close to the king that way you know, they can get something good out of it.
That's all I know for that.

JAU: What languages do you speak?

JN: I speak right now I'm speaking English as primary one. However, I do speak fluently in
Vietnamese. I used to know how to speak French because I spent 7 years in French school.
However right now if you ask me, I don’t think so. It’s all gone. Probably no more than 10,20% of it. And Spanish, I know a little bit about that one. Technically, two languages that I know most is English and Vietnamese.

JAU: Do you speak a different language in different setting? Such as home, school, or work, or any other place?

JN: No, I don’t think so.

JAU: So at home it would be mixed.

JN: Yes, at home we speak English and we kind of mix between English and Vietnamese back and forth. The point is the uh I’m trying to teach my kid to know Vietnamese language okay. And keep them on line with the Vietnamese tradition.

JAU: Which occupations have your family members held in the past?

JN: You mean my family? You mean me? Or we talking my mom, dad or who?

JAU: Yeah, in the past, so your parents, or ...

JN: Oh okay, my parent okay. They um, like I said my mom okay she’s a business woman. She owned the business construction material in Vietnam. My dad he doesn’t have he doesn’t do anything. He just providing support for my mom for her daily business.

JAU: How much education has your family had in the different generations?

JN: Um, if I’m not mistaken, my mom and my dad they do not have any high education. My dad probably no more than …well, no more than high school, I don’t think so. My mom,
probably a lot less. But the rest of our brother sister, we finish high school and some of go even further.

JAU: Uh in Vietnam, or America, does your family hold reunions or annual gatherings?

JN: Um, not in Vietnam, but in America, we do all of our brother sister and my mom are living in Orange County. So, we are very often see each other and have fun.

JAU: What kinds of activities take place?

JN: Well, basically we do several thing. I mean, if it’s a small event, we just eat, and we play sports such as tennis and stuff like that. However, if we decide to go for a vacation, I mean we gather several family and go for wherever we wanna go.

JAU: Are there any sorts of stories that are told at these gatherings?

JN: Um, not that I know of. Basically, we don’t look at in the past a lot. We discuss, we talk a lot but I don’t recall we talk about anything in the past.

JAU: Do you have a spouse, if so, how did you meet and marry?

JN: Uh, yes, unfortunately I do. Um, we’ve been married for 24 years already. And we have two children. First one is Nadia Nguyen, and second one is Nathan. 21 and 18. Yeah.

JAU: What do your children do?

JN: They are still in school right now. Uh, they are in college already. Nadia in UCI and Nathan in college. Okay.

JAU: Do you talk to them about your history? If so, what do you tell them, if not, why?
JN: Um, yes I do, I do try to tell them about the Vietnamese history, Vietnamese culture, and this and that. Uh, I mean not to hope that they know but I’m just hoping that they understand where are they come from and how did their parent or their grandparent survive.

JAU: So earlier, um can you mention, can you go in more depth about how you met your wife and how you married her?

JN: Oh, yeah, um...well, I came to America in 1979. And I spent four years in high school and then go to college and thing like that. So, when I was in college, we had friends you know, uh so I just happened to met her at the one of the party with friends of hers, I mean you know, where friends invite her friends and my friend invite another friend a bunch of them, okay. So we just happened to see and we, there’s a group of us about I don't know..8, 9 or 10 of us and we go places, we go to big bear for ski, which is I love ski, and at the ski slope that is where I met my wife and we go from there.

JAU: Does your family have any special saying or any expressions?

JN: In regarding what?

JAU: Just within the family. Like do you guys have a saying that you say often in certain situations or if any?

JN: I’m not sure I understand that question.

JAU: Um, like. For example, um..let’s see.. If Nadia were to come to you and ask for advice...
JN: Oh I see, I see. Um, we are very very open about that one. Uh, basically is the um most of my time at home especially nowadays, I am not considered myself as a parent or as a daddy. A lot of times I treat them as the friends. They can, I mean we discuss all kinds of topics everyday, we, I offering all kinds of help mentally, physically, and all kind of things like that. Kind of basically all I want is for them to get to know how the world and to prepare for.

JAU: Are there any special family traditions, customs, songs, or foods?

JN: Um, well tradition not really. Uh we pretty much Americanized nowadays and uh, for that however, you know we still try to have our kids to wear ao dai which is the uh, what do you call that..

JAU: the traditional..

JN: Yeah, the traditional thing for Nadia okay. And for food, definitely, we my wife cook okay Vietnamese food one or twice a week, thing like that. We try to mix up okay the American and Vietnamese all together.

JAU: Has your family created its own traditions and celebrations?

JN: Uh, well, no, no. We just follow whatever that is you know. Uh, we figure out we are more like a melting pot country. So therefore, when the time for the Vietnamese tradition, we go with that one, and when it go for the American tradition we go for that one. We even go for the Cinco de Mayo you know so.

JAU: What religion do you and your family practice?
JN: We are Catholic.

JAU: Do you belong to any temples, perish, churches, organizations?

JN: Yes, we like I said, we are Catholic. So therefore, we belong to Catholic as a whole and um, the Catholic just one of the El Toro, what is that called. I'm not good at that part so.

Yeah.

JAU: In what capacity do uh...

JN: St. Nicolas that's right.

JAU: Do you attend church every Sunday, or..

JN: We try.. we try. Technically, supposedly, but no. I mean, we try to go as much as we could. However, if there's certain thing that we cannot go so be it. We are not really hardcore of the religious. If you will, so yeah but we try as much as we could.

JAU: What special foods, traditions do you have? Do you have any special recipes that have been passed down in your family?

JN: Oh no, no. Basically, we love all kind of nationality food. Uh, you name it. American, Vietnamese, Iranian, Thai, you name it. We respect each of the culture they have their own unique foods. So therefore, we enjoy them all. In terms of Vietnamese, no no we don't have any special you know. Basically, all of the Vietnamese food that everybody knows you know we all eat that kind of thing.

JAU: So when you have such family gatherings, does everyone usually cook whatever they would like to? Or...
JN: No, no what we do is okay. We set up a theme for each event. And then, some event that we notify everyone that the ‘Hey, you know, this time is the Vietnamese one or this time is American one, or this time this and that.’ okay, and everybody has to look into that type of food and go for that kind of create and that kind of fun atmosphere for everyone.

JAU: Do you have any photo albums, scrapbooks, or home movies?

JN: Ohhh yes. I have a lot of those things. As far as I ‘m concerned, those are my favorite thing to do. Because the picture, video, it’s a thousand words so definitely I cherish those things a lot.

JAU: So were you the one that kind of organizes everything?

JN: Yes, I’m the one.

JAU: So, all of the contents are like when your children were born, or a lot of family gatherings?

JN: Yes, yes. Uh, definitely we have like I said the, I have picture, movie, recorded from the time that we dating, until our first child born, all the way to today.

JAU: So, how did the war in Vietnam affect your family and community?

JN: Um, well I am sure what I speak right now is the same impact to any Vietnamese family who lived through the 1975 up until today. Um, it is impacts somewhat some people okay, you know minus some people major but for us, I consider is major impact to our family.

JAU: Where did you live during the war?
JN: Um, like I said, like after the 1972 we moved to the Binh Trieu. We sold the house in Saigon and then we moved back to that place um, and um, and lived through the between the 1975 through 1979 and after that I left Vietnam.

JAU: What occupations did you have during the war?

JN: I was too young. I only uh what is that now..um, during the war time, I'm about 9 years old and when I left Vietnam, I was uh 14.

JAU: What do you remember most about that time period?

JN: (sighs)...very very hard very very difficult, in term of the uh, of economy..uh, survival, um...it’s not that we don't know what to do but we cannot do anything. In term of the economy, in term of the making money. They won’t allow us to do anything at all because they consider us as the um..How do I translate this one..they consider us as the um, as a rich family. As a business family. Therefore, they hated us so they won’t allow us to do anything. So, it was very very hard for my parents to learn how to survive of those throughout those days.

JAU: Were you ever captured or held by enemy forces during the war?

JN: Uh, no, no. It's kind of ..it happened so quick um..In 1975, you know the uh communist took over the Saigon within a matter of few hours. So technically, no one really recognized of thing happen. And it just happened so quick so when the war is over, and you know everybody say, ‘oh okay-‘ there no fighting or anything at all so therefore, it just uh I can say that smooth transition of that one.

JAU: Were you or anyone you know in a reeducation camp?
JN: Yes, quite a few. I have an uncle, I have friend, parent all kind of thing. You name it.

JAU: What was that like?

JN: Uh, I have never been into those kind of thing before. So, I cannot speak for that one. However, from what I was told, is the uh, is like a living hell.

JAU: Describe any disabilities or injuries that you or any of your family members suffered as a result of the war.

JN: Uh, we don’t have… my parent and us we really technically we really don’t have any physically problem with it. However, for mentally, um..it turned us upside down. Imagine this. The um..i mean think about it okay, is one day that I mean..the night before that your families pray. You live in happy family, your mom dad okay, doing so so good for the economy. We have money. We don’t have to worry at all, and all of a sudden the next day uh, all money were gone. We don’t even have food to eat, and we cannot go anywhere, and thing like that you know. So, it devastated us.

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

JN: Uh, that day okay, it was like a normal day. No one really know or understand anything..we do not have a good communication in term of the new in term of anything at all. So no body knew what’s going on and all of a sudden the communist just walk on the street and took over. And, for us, okay, is the for my parent and us we are not heavily involved into the military so therefore we don't know anything about we don’t know much about it nor we care. We thought as the business people. We do not involve into the
military so therefore, we should not be impacted anything at all. But that was a mistake of us.

JAU: Describe what was happening around the time of the Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.

JN: Um, it’s a chaos. No one really understand what is that mean. No one really understand what happened. Um, there’s no fighting at all. Oh thanks God because of that because you know, otherwise there’s gonna be bloodshed and everything else. So when they took over you know, they just make announcement that ‘okay from now on okay, communist we won so we took over okay, so um..’ in the first few days, they just make sure that all family stay at home themselves that way okay it’s easier for them to be in control. And um, in beginning you know, they kind of try to be nice and within a few days the thing get uglier and uglier because the I mean, deep down you know they hate our guts you know, and um, we take it so therefore they win so they can do anything they want to.

JAU: What was life like after the war?

JN: Um, not good at all. Um, it impact to all families regardless rich or poor. Um, like I said, they don’t allow you to go anywhere, they don’t allow you to have any business at all, you know if you rich family, big house, they come in and they take over your house and they kick you out of the house. And they don’t care what happened to you, it doesn’t matter. They just kick you out of the house and you can go anywhere you want to. Uh, in term of the money if you have money, at that time okay, money mean nothing to them. They decide to scrap all of the money. Imagine this one for example, let’s say you have a $1000 in your hand. With a thousand dollars, you can buy this and that and all of a sudden the next day, that $1000 in your hand mean nothing. It’s just a piece of paper and it doesn’t count
anything anymore. So therefore, you from have a lot of money in your hand and all of a sudden you have nothing at all. So you have no money to buy food. You have nothing at all. So there’s a lot of people, there’s a lot of family they jump off the building and they commit suicide because they cannot take it. Because all their life they, all their life is making money and within a minute you have nothing. So therefore, a lot of people they cannot take it so therefore you know suicide, or getting crazy because of that.

JAU: So how did you rebuild your life?

JN: There’s no such thing as rebuild. Basically, all you have to do is accept it, and take it and as day by day. You just as a human you know, you just kind of learn how to adapt, learn how to go with it, and learn how to survive. So, I’m sure it’s like everybody else. We just figured out okay, all right you know, what can we do to survive through the day and that is what most of us did.

JAU: What was it like leaving your home and country? How did you feel?

JN: Oh, that’s extremely hard. I left my country when I was 14 in 1979, and summer of 1979, um, I said okay, in my family okay, we have parent and 10 brother sister. Me and my sister uh, we were the first frontier who tried to escape the Vietnam to go to another country in hoping for a better life. Um, the main reason was because the uh, when I was 14, within a year or two if I was still in Vietnam, I will end up to go to the military or camp or whatever that one. And I was told that the chances of survive that one is very very slim. So therefore, my mom find out a way to take me out of the country uh, to find a better life for myself and then hoping that you know, I can uh, take them after that. So my sister and I, we were the first frontier to escape the Vietnam and travel by boat um, through the ocean and
we land in the uh, third world country, and stay there for six months and finally we end up
in America. So...

JAU: What do you think of the U.S. policy during and after the war?

JN: Vietnam War?

JAU: Yes.

JN: I don't think..well, first of all okay, I kind of too young for that thing. However okay, in
my opinion. The American policy toward Vietnam was okay, kind of very cold-blooded. Um,
if American decide to help Vietnamese from beginning, they ought to help all the way. They
don't just help Vietnamese just because of the politic pressure. Meaning that ‘Today I like
you, I play with you tomorrow, I don’t like you, see ya, too bad’ and then left Vietnamese,
left left South Vietnamese okay, to die with the communist and to me, that is the uh, very
unhumanity and as a result, that thousands thousands of the family that losing the father,
the parent and all kind of thing like that you know and it’s happened today, so.

JAU: So you mentioned that you came to the U.S. because of your mom wanting a better life
for you and your siblings. And you came through boat, how was that like?

JN: Each person, there’s so many stories regarding of the uh, escaping of Vietnam to looking
for a better life. I’m sure that now okay, the talk with anyone else okay, and I’m sure each of
us okay can provide you with all kind of real life story that they have from the uh, from the
worst of the worst. However, for my experience was the um, when I was 14, when my sister
19, we don’t know anything about that one. We don’t even know how to work, we never
work in our day so all of a sudden you know, that mom and dad okay, asking us to make
sure to go to the one of the beach, we call Song Be. That’s the name of it. Just to go there and someone will assist us to take us to the boat and then go. That’s all we know. We didn’t know any we did not know anything about it. We had no clue of where we going or whatsoever. And at that time, my sister 19, she has a boyfriend which is he 19 as well and they just date and um, they getting serious but not that serious so at that time okay, his family decide for him to go as well. So therefore, is just only 3 of us go. And um, so we went on summer 1979. However, for us okay, is kind of unique because the technically, when you leave the country it is illegal to do that one. So, when the communist okay military okay, police okay catch you okay, they gonna throw you in jail. However, for us it was kind of unique situation because we live in the corruption country so therefore, as long you have money, anything is possible. So what does that mean? Meaning that the communist okay, at that time, they kind of create the term that they call the what is that called..they called the 50-50 immigrant people. What does that mean? Meaning that the okay..it’s almost like uh, like because of the political silent okay, that if you are Chinese people and you think that you not um, happy within Vietnam okay so you have the right to go at another country. So, they try to use that term but the reality is they, you pay them money to look at that way. And then you can go and say ‘I didn’t see you’ thing like that. So each of us pay a lot of money at that time. Each of us was told to pay uh, 12 ounces of gold. We do gold only. Money does not mean nothing. So each of us pay about 12 ounces of gold. So think about it okay. Each ounce of gold nowadays is okay ..about $1300, $1400 ..so each of us you looking about, what is that now between $8000 to $16000 per person of U.S. dollar. And at that time, it’s a lot of money for that per person. So, for any family okay who come up with that
kind of money is okay is not that simple. So, lucky my mom and dad okay just managed to have enough for two of us okay so that's why two of us went first.

JAU: What possessions did you bring with you and why?

JN: Very simple. A short and a shirt. That fit in my body and that's about it. That's all I have. The reason is the uh, we got noticed such a short time there's no time to prepare or number one, and number two, when you leaving like that, you do not want to make people know that you go like a vacation or anything like that. No, no, no. This is somewhat illegal so therefore, okay you have to pretend that you just go places only has nothing to do with so therefore, all I have is a shirt and a short and a sandal. That's about that's what we had.

JAU: What was the journey like? Can you describe the conditions?

JN: Um, well, it's life and death. I mean you know, um, I'm sitting over here okay so it's kind of thanks God for that. But at the time okay, the chance of survival is only a few percent because of the uh, when we get into the boat, the boat was pretty big boat. Um, I don't know.. I'm guessing it's about uh, 80 ft boat, wood okay, brand new boat okay. They just built you know and um, instead of the uh the boat designed for about 400 people in it. Comfortable space everything like that okay, however, by the time we get to the water, we end up with the double number of people which is about 880 people. Um, and the boat is so packed that the from the top to bottom, that the everywhere people I mean. Wherever you need to go okay, you have to step over the people just because of that. Uh, and um, it's hard when you get out to the sea, um, I mean the first few hours okay is fine but after that you know, once you get to the ocean okay, it had on the seas and okay at the time when we went the it was a rough season. We got storm, we got rain and all kind of thing like that,
okay and the wave is somewhat incredible. Big. It’s about, like I said the boat is big okay but the storm okay the wave is about 4 time higher than our boat. So when it slammed to the boat okay, oh my god, you better grab anything around you before it kind of push you out into water. As a result, that on the third day on the boat on the ocean, one morning, when people everything settled down all the water calm, one of the family found out that one of their kid okay was fell off their boat that they didn’t even know in the middle of the night. So that’s what happened. It was very very difficult.

JAU: Now you mentioned that your sister and her boyfriend came along

JN: Yes.

JAU: So the rest of your siblings stayed behind?

JN: Correct, yes. Like I said okay, we are kind of frontier, so we go first and hopefully..well when we left Vietnam okay we do not know where we go nor our destination meaning that the once you get into the third world country, you sit over there and you waiting for the sponsor and whichever country that you wanna go you know, you can request for it. For my sister and I, we like I said, we had no one, we do not know anyone we have no relative whatsoever, in any country. So, uh, most people they prefer to go to uh, let me see...Australia, uh, French, Germany, thing like that you know. And uh, in term of the to go to America, not really at that time okay, you know only people who do not have anything else at all you know okay, and no one pick them up at all, so then they sign up for America. Because America is like a last resort for them to go. So, uh that’s what happened to my sister and I you know, we had no where to go so we just say ‘okay, let’s go to America.’ So that’s what happened.
JAU: Did you lose anyone in your family during the journey?

JN: No, luckily okay, as of today, we have total 10 brother sister all 10 of us live in Orange County right now.

JAU: Were you or your family in a refugee camp?

JN: Yes, my sister and I like I said we were in refugee camp for 6 month.

JAU: What was that experience like?

JN: Um, well, think of this way okay, if the uh you live in the uh, the nice life okay, you have family, and friend and everything okay, and all of a sudden okay, I'll take you to places okay, on the desert island okay, and no one of them nothing at all okay, I mean, nothing nothing whatsoever. You have to learn how to survive on that island for 6 months. Uh, without any tool. Without anything at all. You just daily you have to go to the ocean trying to catch the fish, try to climb up to the coconut tree to get the coconut juice to eat, to drink, and you have to go to the jungle okay to cut down the coconut leaf tree okay, to build your own house to build your own shelter, to survive from the scratch. That is what happened.

JAU: What were some of your first impressions and early experiences in this country?

JN: In America?

JAU: Yes.

JN: Uh, oh- uh...it’s a great country. When I got here you know I see uh house, building, town, all kind of big thing and you know, and uh living life over here is great, everybody is
happy, uh, and then I realize that you know as long as you have money in this country, you're doing good.

JAU: Where did you first settle and why?

JN: We arrived in America um, our first stop was the California, Los Angeles. Uh, what is that now, LA International Airport. So and then, we go to Orange County, in Santa Ana, that was our first place that we ever lived in the United States.

JAU: Did your family settle in the same place, or move around?

JN: Oh no, no. We come to United States, we have no relative at all and we are first we live with a sponsor and after that, we move out um, my sister and I and her boyfriend, three of us okay, move out and rent apartment in at Costa Mesa, and those two since they are only 19, 20, so they are legible to go to work so therefore, they start to go to job and working and same time to go to school. And since I was too young, 14 of age, I just go to school only. And I attend high school for four years.

JAU: So how did you make a living after resettlement?

JN: Well, with the uh, hard work uh, and continuous school, that the and uh suffering you know, we managed to work in from uh, $2.50/hr we managed daily purchased money and go to school. So my sister, as today she has the she holds a Masters degree of business at UC system. And her husband which was her boyfriend at the time, he held the bachelor degree at the Santa Barbara I think. And um, for me okay, I finished only double A degree in college and we managed to work ever since.

JAU: How do you feel about your decision about coming to the U.S. today?
JN: That’s the worst thing I ever do. No, just kidding. To be honest, I have no say or whatsoever in regarding of that time because I was too young to make any decision at all. However, for saying that I kind of glad and appreciate of what my parent did for me because the uh, I was told that there’s a few of my friend at the same age with me at the time um, just because their family you know not did not have enough money, or they not thinking about sending their kid out or anything like that, so some of my friend in Vietnam end up go to the military so that they died because of that.

JAU: So in America, um, what were some of the challenges you experienced in starting a new life?

JN: Well, when I got to America, the first thing the only thing I know in my head is ‘yes’ and ‘no’. That’s all I know the two word. However, I don’t even know what is that mean. So um, it’s struggle to learn how to speak English at the same time and to learn all kind of thing in school and to find a job, to make money, for the to survive daily and everything like that. It’s tough, it’s extremely extremely tough but the uh, well America okay, is definitely is an opportunity if you’re willing to work hard so, as a result, that for many years that we work very hard and um, today we getting better.

JAU: Who helped you find a home in the U.S.?

JN: Uh, we did all ourself. We had no one to help, no one to support, however, we at the time when we arrive in America, the Vietnamese community are very very small and not as organized as what today. So, we probably was the first frontier Vietnamese group to come to America so, we get a very very little help from the Vietnamese community. However, we do get help a lot from the uh, American charity group for example, if you belong to
Catholics, Catholic will help you. You know if you belong to some other kind of member group, they willing to help you out you know, from the beginning.

JAU: So, how did you find a job?

JN: Just like everybody else, you just kind of you know, 15 ½ I found out that I can go to work so therefore, I go and apply to job, regardless of how much money they gonna pay, and um, you know, like I said, I started from ..well my sister started from $2.50, and I started from $3.25 and hour and we work you know, part time to go to school and then we work full time to go to school and thing like that.

JAU: What were the occupations you had in the U.S.?

JN: Oh, um, in beginning, I work for the fast food when I was in high school I work for let me see, I work for McDonalds, I work for uh, um...what is that now? Taco Bell, that’s right. McDonald, then Taco Bell okay, then I do the uh morning newspaper delivery, and go to school at same time, I remember that there was, since I need money for living, so I work two job, let me see. Two part time job and full time student in college, so everyday okay, for those three month, everyday I sleep for about two in a half, three hours. To survive.

JAU: What are some similarities and differences between your old community and your new one?

JN: I’m not sure what exactly on that one..

JAU: So, from your old community meaning your home in Vietnam and compared to your life now in America. What are some similarities or differences?
JN: Oh, I see I see. Um, well they pretty much similar in term of the uh, living. Meaning that the um, as long as you make money, decent money, everything pretty much the same in term of the uh, of the freedom in term this and that..because at the time when I was young, I'm talking before communist. Um, like I said my mom and dad they make decent money so none of us have to worry anything about it so we just have to focus on school only and same things over here. I mean you know, um, I try very hard for the last thirty something year to build up the family and I try to provide you know, as much as the support money and everything for my kids as well just in hoping that they have the um, a same thing of what I had before and better. So...

JAU: Have you ever encountered racism?

JN: Yes, big time.

JAU: What was that experience like?

JN: Well, I mean you know in 19..uh, 1979, we come to America in 1979 and at that time, when we go to work whatever, work whatever we find okay, we think like a illegal immigrant, Mexican okay go find a job because number one, we don't know how to speak English at all. And number two okay, you know, we have very very little of education not enough education so therefore, people treat us okay almost like illegal immigrant one. And, also um, when you apply for the job, um, the chance that you get a job okay is likely less than the chance of the White or any other you know, skin okay that can get it so we are not okay, what is that now, third or fourth in line in order to get the same job and so therefore, my old life is like okay always try to remember is the as a Vietnamese, we have to be at
least one and a half better than the White people in order to challenge with them. So, as of today.

JAU: So in the American society would you identify yourself as Vietnamese, Vietnamese American, Asian, Asian American?

JN: I really don’t know how to put into that perspective. Because it’s the I really do not want to.. put it as the uh, racist in term of the uh comparison in term of this and that... um, well I live in this country more than my time spent in Vietnam so therefore, I consider this country is my country. So, for that, I will take this country no matter what. Um, I see this country as a great country with a lot of opportunity as long as you willing to work hard. And work smart.

JAU: Do you have a funny or memorable experience of culture shock?

JN: Um, probably yes, but the uh on top of my head I don’t think I remember anything but in term of culture shock, well, I’m sure there’s a lot okay, especially you know when I first come to America okay, because there’s so many thing that I used to do in Vietnam, when I come to America I cannot do okay. For example, one thing okay, let’s say for example, in Vietnam okay, uh if you have friend okay, like boys and boys okay, when they walk on the street okay, you put your hand over the shoulder okay, you walk okay as a pal. In America, I don’t think so you can do that you know. If you put your hand okay your arm around okay your friend okay, oh boy, you are 50/50. So therefore, that’s kind of example of culture shock meaning that the whatever some one country can do that does not mean that American they will take it so..
JAU: Are you a citizen? Why or why not.

JN: Yes, I am American citizen. Uh, I been American citizen okay after 5 year living in America. I decide to become American citizen for several reason. Number one is okay because of work they need for that type of paper, on top of that is not just because of that. Is because of the uh, I realize that the ..I.. this country is my grow up country and probably is where I gonna die, this country so therefore, I ...enjoy what I have and um, I decide to become American citizen for because of that.

JAU: Do you vote in the U.S. elections? Why or why not.

JN: No (laughs), uh...like I said, I love this country but in term of politic in term of the voting and thing like that, I haven’t vote for last I don’t know, five, ten years or so because the um, I am getting tired of politic, I am not in a favor of that at all. Even though a lot of people say okay, you don’t vote okay, you don’t count okay, your voice count thing like that, but the way I see is uh, it’s a bunch of B.S. no matter what you do, no matter what you vote okay, you’re not gonna get do anything anyway, it’s like uh it’s already set up already you know it doesn’t do any good anymore so uh. You cannot fool okay to blind man okay because whichever you vote okay they blind anyway so what’s the difference.

JAU: Do you..so, your family is all in residing in Orange County correct?

JN: Correct.

JAU: So how often do you keep in touch with them?

JN: Oh~ we~..we, well, not all of us are close , no. But the 50 to 70% of us are very close. We see eachother almost um, oh my god, every week or every other week.
JAU: Have you ever gone back to visit Vietnam?

JN: Once. For my 33 years, I went back on the 29th year. Which is about two, three years ago. That was the first time I come back to Vietnam as a visitor. And uh, that’s it. I haven’t come back ever since.

JAU: What was that experience like?

JN: It’s amazing. Uh, everything..well, before I left Vietnam okay, whatever picture in Vietnam okay, was in my mind at that time. So, when I come back and after 29 years, everything in my head is still on that day. And uh oh my god, since I land in Ho Chi Min Saigon, everything changed. Totally changed 180 degree changed. And um, I was kind of overwhelmed with the change.

JAU: Are there any songs, images, or artifacts that remind you of Vietnam?

JN: Song, no. Images, yes. Uh, yeah there quite of few of the images that is still stick in my head you know of my youth age okay, of the gray thing that I spend time with my parent, location stuff like that. Definitely, but they are all gone anyways so.

JAU: What traditions or customs have you made an effort to preserve?

JN: Number one, trying to keep my kid uh speak and understand Vietnamese. That is the primary key to do it. Which we haven’t done that much you know..so, hopefully our kid when they grow up okay they can recognize more and try to learn from that part. And then number two, is the um have them um, socialize with their cousin you know, niece, nephew thing like that that way they can stick with the tight culture Vietnamese on that part. And then number 3, hopefully that someday I can be able to take them back to Vietnam and
have a long vacation and show them places, you know all the good thing in Vietnam can offer.

JAU: Um, what traditions have you given up or changed if any?

JN: Um, for me, um is very simple. Um, I’m consider myself okay is very Americanized. What is that mean? Meaning that the um the good thing, if I see the good thing, I will keep it. If I see the bad thing, I will let go. So in other words, I do see some of the Vietnamese traditional way that is not that great so I just let go and so as the American way and on the other hand you know, Vietnamese way we have so many good thing and I still wanna keep that one and so does American way.

JAU: Can you share some of the good things that you would like to keep?

JN: Vietnamese okay, we have the one good thing is the um, community or tight community of type of the family relative. Um, we very often okay you know, kind of you know go as a group okay, or visit family okay, and have fun and um, for our generation right now okay you know, we as soon as we get together you know we eat, we drink, we sing, we karaoke, we talking about this and that and we go vacation all together okay, to keep us kind of close as possible. Um, and I sure hope that we are trying to kind of educate our kid with their cousin thing like that to do the same for the next generation.

JAU: In your opinion, what will become of Vietnamese culture in America?

JN: Oh...wow..That is a hard one. I’m not even sure how to answer that one. Uh, (sigh)..wow..I don’t think I..no. no..I don’t think I can answer that one.

JAU: How has the Vietnamese community changed?
JN: In United States, you mean?

JAU: Yes.

JN: Um, well, in beginning, you know, in beginning our time, meaning from 19..let’s say 1980 to 2000. Um, Vietnamese community okay they try to support each other, to survive in the new country. And, once they established, once they came the um, the power in this country they become like American. Meaning that the all they know thing right now is money talk. Money and power. So, they become American right now. Just because of that. They losing the value and culture of the Vietnamese of the uh, close tied group. Supporting you know, the poor, this and that that. Right now, all I see is just the uh, nothing but politic and money as well. So, in other word is the uh, I mean majority of them right now like American way now.

JAU: Are you involved in the Vietnamese community in the U.S.?

JN: No.

JAU: Do you visit Little Saigon? For..

JN: Food.

JAU: Food?

JN: For food and some activity event. But food is majority.

JAU: Um, what do you think of Little Saigon?
JN: Um, I think it’s great thing to have Little Saigon. It’s just to make sure that the America or whole world okay recognize okay, that we are Vietnamese in a small community. Uh, we came to the United States okaay, in a short time. Well 30 year 35 years sound like long time but in technically it is very short time when compared with the any other country. And uh, in such a short time okay, that Vietnamese community okay, can build to put together okay and become a giant Little Saigon today and um, that is in the California. But uh in Houston, in New York, New Jersey like that okay, you know, they are big as well so therefore, um, Vietnamese people, um they are really uh good in term of the uh community support. Uh, but like I said, you know, that is happen for the last okay for the past I don't know, 20, 30 years okay. But now, okay, they seem to losing the grip of it already. And, um, uh, everybody focus in the different direction right now the way I see it.

JAU: What are the most important things that future generations of Vietnamese American should remember about their past?

JN: In my opinion okay, you better teach your kid okay, of how difficult to survive. Um, the main thing is the um, the basic fundamental okay of thing okay is the kid now they too easy, they get everything they want okay, so they tend to forgot all of the difficult time. So, as a parent okay, I mean we need to make sure that they understand the past and how difficult for the past okay, and understand the future that way they can prepare for their future. Otherwise, you know I mean, right now okay, you know most kid right now they will not survive okay you know themselves.

JAU: Well are there any other memories or stories you would like to share?
JN: Uh yes, basically okay, it’s not just for me.. but I would like to speak as a whole Vietnamese community. There’s so many family okay that left Vietnam you know and some of them died, some of them got displaced from everywhere, um, husband losing wife okay, and uh, teenager okay they got so many case okay of rape, they got killed, you name it. You name everything. Those are the people that need to, people need to know and understand okay of the price of the freedom. The price of freedom okay does not come cheap. You have to pay for it. To get it. So therefore, as our generation, we know we understand it, we live through it, okay, and uh it would be nice that the um, the next generation or the next generation, should be able to understand, to know where the parent and grandparent come from and how to live the life of the Vietnamese way.

JAU: Well, thank you on behalf of UCI and the VAOHP organization, I would like to really thank you for participating and for your time for this interview.

JN: Thank you.

JAU: Thank you.