Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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TVD: Today is December 5, 2011. This is Thuy Vo Dang, interviewing Mr. Dan Nguyen in Santa Ana, California. Sir, would you state your last name and agree for the research team to record?

DN: My name is Dan Nguyen. I consent to speak with Thuy today about the biographies of the past along with the questions that Thuy have set out for me today. I am very pleased to be interviewed by Thuy Vo Dang.

TVD: So, could you tell me what your date of birth is and where you were born sir?

DN: I was born on June 25, 1948 in Northern Vietnam, in the province of Ha Noi. In the past it was the capital of Vietnam, so it belongs to the northern region of Vietnam.

TVD: Were you born there and also raised there?

DN: Yes. I was born and raised there until 1954. After the Geneva treaty, our family migrated into the South, in the province of Da Lat, which later belonged to the province of Lam Dong. It is a plateau, a venue for tourists in Vietnam.

TVD: While you were growing up in the North, what memories do you have about that time period? Such as the experience you had during the time that you were studying.

DN: The memories that I have for that time period in Ha Noi are very vague because it has been so long. Afterward I went into the South, lived in Da Lat; so all the memories of the past, of the childhood are very little and faint, not clear.
TVD: Then, do you remember anything about the neighborhood?

DN: Absolutely not. Can't remember anything at all, a lot of time I can't even recall the house that I have lived at.

TVD: Could you tell me briefly about your family sir? How many siblings do you have? What were your parents’ professions?

DN: I have a total of 7 siblings in my family, 3 older sisters and 4 brothers. According to the ages, most of us have matured, have aged. You can say that we are all elderly now. Some have passed away, such as my oldest sister and my second oldest sister. The remaining older sister is currently living in San Jose with my two older brothers up there. As for me, I live down here with my family.

TVD: What about your father and mother?

DN: My father and mother have passed away, died a long time ago.

TVD: Then, could you turn back to the time when you were growing up, during your youth, what were your parents’ professions?

DN: In the past, most of my father's life, his occupation was "thau khoan." I don't know what "thau khoan" would be called over here, a contractor or an entrepreneur. It's like setting up a business to subcontract for these services, for private or state jobs, and for government jobs. My mother was a housewife, she took care of the household, and raised the children.

TVD: After the family migrated down to Da Lat, your mother resumed that role?

DN: After migrating into the South, to Da Lat, my father still continued to bid for these services or for government jobs. My mother still stayed at home to care for all the children. As for us, we were still enrolled in high schools and in elementary schools of Da Lat; it continued like that until 1968.
TVD: Sir, could you tell me what status your family had in Vietnam, that we can define as a social economic class?

DN: You could say we belonged to the middle class.

TVD: Sir, what can you remember about the holidays, the customs, the traditional holidays in your family?

DN: We were like other families. We held traditional ceremonies such as Tet, did offerings in memorial of the deceased grandparents. We held memorials for grandpa on my father's side, for grandma on my father's side, for grandpa on my mother's side, for grandma on my mother's side, and for all the close relatives in the family who have passed away; we held the memorial on that day. As for the holidays when we were young, we had holidays for children (mid-autumn festival) but we no longer attended those events when we got older.

TVD: Then, what religion does your family follow?

DN: We follow the religion of Buddhism. However, looking at us in general, our religion is more about our ancestors. We worship our ancestors and respect the elderly.

TVD: So, what stories do you have in your family that were passed down from parents, grandparents?

DN: What are passed down stories?

TVD: Stories regarding the names and birth dates of your family which were left for the children and grandchildren.

DN: Oh. Well, honestly we were raised in a family of martial arts. In the past, my great-grandfather was an officer of the Nguyen dynasty. He was dedicated to taking care of the martial arts and the soldiers. He was considered as the master. He worked at a very high level, it was called marshal. However, if you compare it with the current ranks, then you could
say that he is a general.

TVD: That means it was your great-grandfather, right?

DN: Referred to as great-grandfather.

TVD: So, did you get to know your great-grandfather?

DN: No, we only knew through the history, the genealogy that was left behind, but we don't know him; he was of a time long ago.

TVD: Then your family in Vietnam have altars to these ancestors?

DN: Yes. My family currently reside in the countryside of our ancestors on my father's side, where there is a house shrine to worship them. Every year on Tet, we always pay our respects.

TVD: Do you know the story about how your parents met?

DN: Oh, in regards to that I don't know, I cannot remember, and I also don't know much about it.

TVD: So this story wasn't passed down?

DN: Right, this story wasn't passed down so we don't know. Majority of the elders in the past probably had more matchmaking than really knowing each other. The era before, majority of our generation had more matchmaking. The two families would organize a wedding together; not like these days where you could freely choose.

TVD: Then your marriage was also done according to the customary?

DN: No. It was different when it was my generation's turn. We figure it out for ourselves and we determine our own life. However, the generation before ours, majority of the people were by matchmaking, only arrangement; not free to go search like we did.

TVD: Then, tell me a little more about the time you were in school from elementary to high school. What do you remember about your friends and teachers?
DN: It's been a while since my elementary school days, so I can't remember much. However, during the time that I was in high school, I could remember quite well, because it was when I began to grow up. I started to have memories such as the image of my life while I was still in school. I remembered so much, that was during the time I lived in Da Lat. How friends played with one another in class, disruptive horesplay, and then each year we get promoted to the next grade and received various types of certificates. Additionally, there were in-school activities such as soccer and swimming, which we attended together and then teased each other. Very fun.

TVD: So friendship was very deep at that time, wasn't it?

DN: That's right. There are friends I've played with back then that I still keep in touch with here. Occasionally we meet each other and go to each other's houses to have a meal with much delight. Currently, I have two closest friends of mine from the past classes in Da Lat; they still reside here, one is up in LA and one in Riverside.

TVD: Then, do you participate in the alumni association?

DN: Before, I've done activities in the fellowship club with old classmates that I studied with in the past. However, later on I did very few activities because I've been very busy.

TVD: What about your teachers during that time period, what are your thoughts about them? Were they difficult?

DN: Actually, the male teachers who had taught me at school in the past have all been either difficult, easy, fun, or sad. However, during the student's childhood, there were many male and female teachers. During the high school time each male teacher was responsible for each subject, each female teacher was responsible for a subject, and each person had their own particular way of teaching. However, most of them have passed away these days.
TVD: Was there someone special that you had a special relationship with, that you can recall from back then?

DN: Actually, there was nothing special at all. In general, everything is similar, nothing special to pay attention to.

TVD: So, you said that friendship was very important in that time period, is that right? Do you remember the details, specific story, stories about friends or hanging out with each other in any activity? For example, my generation goes to the movies, to the beach. But how did you hang out with friends back then?

DN: In the afternoons, we did activities together. The school once in a while would organize a camping trip. The forest and mountain was filled with students who stayed with each other. They brought pots and pans, cooking together a couple nights, then afterward returned home. It was lots of fun. Then I participated in scouting; beside the school activities, I further participated in scouts and it was also fun.

TVD: Then, were there any songs, any particular games that you can remember?

DN: Actually, back then there were many but right now I can't recall.

TVD: We're still talking about the time in Da Lat, right?

DN: Yes that's correct, majority of it was in Da Lat. Went through high school in Da Lat, elementary school in Da Lat, and then went to college in Da Lat as well.

TVD: I often heard that you must take a test to move up a grade, is that correct?

DN: That's right. Back then during my time, from kindergarten to the end of fifth grade. Then after elementary school, moved on to high school. In high school there were two, that means the first level is from grade 7 to grade 3. Well, back then you must test; pass that one, then you can move on to the second level. After that one, then you go to the end of high school level. Then
there were two rec, which is baccalaureate 1 and baccalaureate 2. So, after you finish
baccalaureate 1 then you may test for baccalaureate 2. If you don't pass baccalaureate 1, then you
don't get to test for baccalaureate 2.

TVD: Then, was each one of these tests difficult?

DN: Overall it was difficult. However, back in those days, studying for the exam was strenuous.
They even divided the degree, which they referred to the people as degree A, degree B, and
degree C. Degree A followed biochem as it is now, degree B is about math, and degree C is
literature, which is "van chuong." So, which ever subject that person likes, they could test for
that subject. The score of all those degrees are the same.

TVD: If you selected a subject and pass the test for it, then do you have to continue in that field?

DN: No. You only need to pass the test. Even higher than that, when you get to the University,
then it depends on your choice. Well, you could graduate baccalaureate 2 with degree A and
you'll be the same as the person with degree B and the person with degree C. It is not necessary
to take them all, you only need to choose one.

TVD: Do you have to have a major while studying in high school?

DN: Yes, you must have a major.

TVD: So after you passed, which college did you attend?

DN: I studied business politics in Da Lat.

TVD: You often studied there, what was that timeframe?

DN: Studied for 4 years.

TVD: Four years as well. Then which occupation did you choose?

DN: Back then I chose politics.

TVD: After you graduated political studies, how did it turn out?
DN: Be a police or a politician if you want.

TVD: Be a politician to lead the country?

DN: If you're lucky, then you get to lead the country.

TVD: Why did you choose that occupation?

DN: Because I liked it.

TVD: Did anyone advise you or inspire you to go toward that occupation?

DN: Actually, it was in that year that I just grew up and that was the first school in Da Lat. That school trained people for business politics, they were the first. From then until now, they have never had that program, so that was the first program. I found it to be different and I was curious, so I studied it. Studying must be this way and that way, no one urged me at all. I thought it was interesting and studied it for fun.

TVD: Then, what did your family think about that occupation?

DN: Back then my mother did not care. "You like to study, then study; don't like to, that's fine."

My dad liked and urged me to study to become an architect, drawing houses and doors because he was also involved with constructing houses. He must have wanted me to learn and graduate so that later on it would make him more steady. When he heard that I was studying on this side, he shook his head. "Whatever he wants to study, then study it."

TVD: So when you recall the time you studied in college, how do you feel? Do you feel happy or recall challenges?

DN: College at that time was not fun like high school because it was specific already, mostly independent study. In high school, there was only one or two male teachers. When I got to college, it was different.

TVD: How was it different?
DN: The learning style is different. You have to self-study, be more independent. In the past, homework was self-studied and not having to go every morning for the teacher to call you to the board and have you answer homework questions; none of that. Going to college was different. It was no longer fun like in high school.

TVD: How old were you at that time?

DN: Roughly, about 18 to 19 years old. But afterward, while I was in the middle of studying, I had to join the military because the brutal Southern war had began.

TVD: Which year was that?

DN: In 1968. At that time, the fight caused so much death. Especially in 1968, the year of "Mau Than," Vietnamese Communist attacked intensely and the Americans prepared to withdraw from Vietnam. They called it as Vietnam resolved warfare by letting Vietnam undertake itself. Thus Vietnam forced everyone to join the military, even students had to join the military. People at that age were all drafted. They did not excuse anyone.

TVD: Then you had to quit school?

DN: Had to quit school and join the military.

TVD: Which branch were you in?

DN: In Thu Duc, that school was like the reserve, not like it was professional as ---Bomb. At that time, there was a school for martial arts, so I volunteered myself in. As for the school in Thu Duc, I was forced to go in, even though I did not want to.

TVD: It was known as Thu Duc School?

DN: Thu Duc was also known as Preparatory School -- Reserves.

TVD: So when you went into the Reserves like that, did you have to learn more?

DN: Yes, the time spent learning in Thu Duc was pretty long, about 8 to 9 months.
TVD: What did you learn during that time?

DN: Learned the basics about the military, weapons, modes, tactics, and strategies in there. Like what we must do every time we fight or how to do something. All that training for an officer to know the normal command; how to fight, how to command, and where the target is.

TVD: So you finished learning, then what did you do?

DN: After I finish learning and graduated, I came out of the unit, which was division 22 Viet Minh.

TVD: How old were you then?

DN: Probably about 20 or 21, roughly 21, 22, somewhat old. At that time when I got out, at first I was just a first lieutenant. Everyone who just graduated from Thu Duc is first lieutenant, which is below second lieutenant. They called it first lieutenant but it was not necessarily first lieutenant, it was only preparation. Then a year later to second lieutenant.

TVD: So where was your base located?

DN: Out in central Vietnam, in Quy Nhon province.

TVD: During the time you were in the military, what did you see? What were your deepest memories?

DN: The deepest memories was the battle to regain the three counties that the Vietnamese Communists occupied, which were Tam Quan, Binh Dinh, and Hoai. At that time, out in Central Vietnam was very intense. The war at that time was the most fierce, that was red summer fire. Countless people died, countless families torn apart during that period. You could say that period was the most severe in the Vietnam war. Well, many died on our side but many died on the other side as well. Fortunately, I was not killed.

TVD: Have you lost any loved ones?
DN: Yes, I've lost many friends in the same unit as well. One day we'll be sitting and talking to each other, the next day I’d get news that they were killed by artillery. That was very normal, many died.

TVD: What about your family, did anything happen to them?

DN: No, my family was lucky that no one was killed. Later on, there were deaths because of the escape by sea; not killed on the battle field. Siblings were relatively safe.

TVD: Surely those people that you were friends with in your unit were important, is that right?

DN: Important as to what?

TVD: Like you still remain in contact with those people who fought the enemy with you.

DN: People who later became part of the team, meet again?

TVD: Yes.

DN: There are some that still meet each other again later.

TVD: From what I saw about the teams, I don't have experience about this, so I don't know the feeling of having to join the military. My generation only gets to look at films of the war. In the films, they have an image that was very scary but I noticed the majority of those soldiers are people who don't know much, don't understand the reason they must go fight the enemy. It seems like they were only there to take orders.

DN: Right! That was the majority. My time was also like that. I followed orders and went blindly but didn't know why I had to go. We had to go because the war came; however, at that time we couldn’t not go.

TVD: But at that time, did you think you knew why you had to go?

DN: No, no one asked at the time. After entering the military academy, then we realized that
there is only going forward, no turning back. No one questioned it, as long as they completed their mission. We were hoping that after the war we would get to go home. No one thought about the reason they were forced to go like this or like that. I personally did not think of anything at all. It is possible that people were thinking but I don't know.

TVD: Were there any women in the Southern Army?
DN: Yes, there were many women in uniform as well.

TVD: What were their duties?
DN: Majority of them were nurses, more about supplies. About military---they were not, but they were those who were in the support. Very few were in combat, virtually none.

TVD: Going to combat like that, do you have time to visit family?
DN: Yes, on average every year there were 10 days allowed. Approximately, 10 days to visit family each year. Many people cheated, they took additional time on their own and were penalized.

TVD: So was your family still in Da Lat?
DN: At that time still in Da Lat.

TVD: Then we're talking about the time period ‘70-‘75, correct? Were you married yet?
DN: I was already married since 68, when I went in the military.

TVD: How did you meet your wife?
DN: At that time, she was the daughter of a restaurant owner outside of Quy Nhon. We occasionally ate there, so we met there when we were on leave.

TVD: Back then if you want to get acquainted with a person, what did you have to do? Did you seek permission from the parents?
DN: In the past, during my time was already relatively easy, not as difficult as the elders in the
past. You get acquainted with each other and then go out, go to the movies, go out to eat. It was interesting. With anything, it must be as such.

TVD: Like young people in Vietnam?

DN: Yeah, something like that. Invite each other to go to the movies, go eat ice cream, the likes.

TVD: When you wanted to get married, what was the process like? Such as, did you have to go home to seek permission?

DN: That, I had to go home and call my parents. Back then we still had procedures just like the elders in the past, that is to ask first. At that time, you must have the first official meeting, afterward is the engagement, and then the wedding.

TVD: So your wife's family was in Quy Nho and your family was in Da Lat.

DN: No. At that time my father and mother had already gone to Saigon, left Da Lat to Saigon.

TVD: So, what about you?

DN: I called my parents out to Quy Nhon.

TVD: Did you have to bring gifts, bring tea, or anything for the first official meeting?

DN: Yes, in accordance with our ceremony…tea and wine.

TVD: After everything had been said, then it was the engagement, is that right?

DN: After the first official meeting was completed, then it was the engagement.

TVD: I heard back then many people did it quickly.

DN: Asked to be married. It was during the time of war and every family wants to save money. Why do it extravagantly? It was costly. A lot of times they asked in the morning and have the wedding in the afternoon.

TVD: So did you do the same?
DN: We did the same. Especially since it was still during the war time, I didn't have much leave time. Got an approval for leave time, so I did it all in a rush to get it done. After the leave time is over, then I had to continue out on the battle field; not knowing how life or death will be. My fate at that time is to do only that.

TVD: Then after the wedding, the bride lived with the groom’s family?

DN: Yes, however, in the country's circumstances at that time, no one forced those types of things. The bride returned to her house and I also returned to my house. That was just my personal situation, but other people may be have been in better condition than me; that I don't know. It was not necessary that the bride gets picked up and then goes home with the in-laws, not as it is now.

TVD: Then did you see that during the war our customs also changed?

DN: It had to be flexible.

TVD: So after the wedding, you still continued with the war?

DN: Continued going to the unit.

TVD: Then where did your wife live at that time?

DN: In Quy Nhon, at home with her family.

TVD: So you returned home to visit every holiday and while on leave time as well?

DN: Just visiting, came home on holidays as well.

TVD: How soon after the wedding did you have children?

DN: Just one year, we had Giang's older sister a year later; it was in 1974.

TVD: Could you tell me a little bit more, like describe for me the life before April 30, 1975. Were you still in the unit?

DN: Before ‘75, I was still in the military, at which time we were just concerned about fighting
outside the front line.

TVD: Which region?

DN: At that time I had transferred to Pleiku, fighting in the mountains, the plateau. In the past we were in Quy Nhon, then the unit in Quy Nhon moved to Pleiku Kontum to fight. It's the content in the film -----. The team they described in that film is the three dots team on this side.

TVD: You saw that when you got married you still had to continue in the military. Did you find it difficult?

DN: You just have to accept it, that's how it was at the time. At that stage, no one dares to deny because they somehow imprisoned you for staying behind. They say you evaded military service.

TVD: Can you remember where you were on April 30, 1975?

DN: At that time we had already withdrawn to Quy Nhon, returned to post-settlement of Quy Nhon. There were orders to evacuate Quy Nhon because the Vietnamese Communist multitude had poured in. They began to gradually occupy, more and more over time.

TVD: You mentioned the command…were the orders for an individual or for the entire family?

DN: The entire family, no, the family had gone before already. At that time the family had all gone to Saigon. Only civilians remained, most of whom also migrated, all evacuated. It's because we knew the fight was about to overflow into the province. So everyone had given up everything, the city was virtually empty.

TVD: Did the family have any relatives in Saigon?

DN: Yes, we did. Family on Giang's mother’s side found relatives and temporarily stayed there. At that time I was still in the unit, then afterward ran from Quy Nhon to Vung Tau. So the unit all scattered, every man for himself. At that time it was considered that we had lost, had to withdraw. Some people used the provincial highway 7B, 7A, some by sea, some traveled by
road. Then along the way, there were artillery bombardment, shots by the Vietnamese Communist. That period was very tragic. On one hand it was because of the EOAA radio, BBC; they kept saying on the radio today had gained Kontum, tomorrow occupied Pleiku, then now captured Quy Nhon. That made them so fearful, we kept on losing incrementally and accumulated to the South. Majority of it wasn't even fought yet, they had not gone in, Vietnamese Communist had not gone in yet but everyone already fled. At that time, it was a mixture of all offices and mixed forces. Afterward, my unit and I retrieved to Vung Tau, waited there until April 30. Then Mr. Minh surrendered, so we threw away all firearms. It was then that we ran home.

TVD: So you returned home with the family.

DN: Had to return to Saigon to find the family; to search for one another, you must have news.

TVD: Was it difficult to go find your family like that?

DN: No, at the time we already knew. We had contacted each other over the phone, so we knew.

TVD: After that day you were no longer in the military. What did you have to do then?

DN: Followed my wife trading odds and ends at home, helping my wife.

TVD: What was your wife's occupation at that time?

DN: Most of them at that time ran the flea market, trading whatever was available. There were people who cooked, some did not come to the market, spent whatever available. However, most brought gold and silver to the market to sell.

TVD: Well sir, after the year ‘75, the country also changed very much. Many people told me that they had to go to concentration camp, had to go across the sea.

DN: That's right.
TVD: Then, could you tell me a bit about the impacts that the war had on your family, on you personally?

DN: At that time, I was also like many friends from the former army. After we shed the uniform, instead of returning to our personal life, we felt much derelict. No money, no cash, no job, and no career at all. Our education was incomplete; while in school, we had to go be soldiers; while we were soldiers, the Vietnamese Communist had already entered. My period was the darkest phase, but most families were like that. Everyone was scared, confused, and did not know what to do; the future was dark. Some had to leave the country by boats and ferries, some in the city had the means to but didn't know where to go. In the past, I ran to the docks searching for boats and vessels but there weren't anymore, so we had to stay behind and live. About a month like that, then there was an order to attend training courses, go to jail. So, we had to obey them and went. Staying home was not an option.

TVD: Was it in ‘75?

DN: After ‘75 everyone went to jail, all military officials of the former regime went to jail. They used the term reform but in fact it was going to prison.

TVD: Could tell me more about your experience of being in the reform prison, people say that all men had to go?

DN: Yes. At that time, after the Vietnamese Communist occupied the South, a month or two months later they virtually captured all the previous Vietnam insurgents, those who followed the former regime. All must go to reform prison. They came to each house and searched it, then arrested all. I'm just the same as everyone, I was also taken away. I was told my level at first was Captain, so I would only go for 10 days and then return home. Just go, it would be alright. I believed the 10 days, for what it's worth, so I went. Who knew it would go on endlessly. After 10
days, even a month, still didn't see a return date. They brought us to training, made us learn this and that. They distributed seeds. Then we realized, oh damn, we got tricked.

TVD: Like what, for example? What did they say?

DN: That meant they came in the camp and they forced us to learn the new policy guidelines, and then about the clemency of the revolution, that they do not kill anyone, that they only want to help the training to clear the mind. Just consider it as being improved like this and like that. But how would they be able to improve? That was just a formality of the things they say to imprison us.

TVD: So where was it?

DN: At that time, they forced us to go in the main headquarter, a garrison of the past Republic of Vietnam, where the military bases were.

TVD: In which region?

DN: It belonged to Tay Ninh, somewhere near there.

TVD: Ten days turned to one month, then what happen afterward?

DN: Then after a month they would not release us home but gave seeds, surely we got tricked. So there were some people who found ways to escape; some people committed to stay, did not dare to do anything. Shortly afterward, they transferred my camp, some to the North, some to another camp. They wanted us scattered out like that. I was one of those who went out to Phu Quoc island. Stuffed a few hundred people on a tiny boat to go out to Phu Quoc. Being out there over a month, the war between Cambodia and China occured. They were afraid of fighting; therefore, they dissolved the prison and brought the prisoners back to the mainland, back to Long Giang. When I was brought back to Long Giang, I ran away, fled.

TVD: How long was your escape? How long was your detention?
DN: From Phu Quoc to go back home was about 3 weeks to a month.

TVD: What was your total time in the reform prison?

DN: More than a month, no, a few months.

TVD: So when you fled like that, what did you do to be able to escape?

DN: At that time in Long Giang, I went with a friend from the marines who I knew from the scout. The two of us then planned it together, while we were farming outside, we fled when no one noticed. Walked into the jungle, went all the night to get to the highway, then caught the bus to Saigon. Instead of catching the bus to Saigon, we caught the bus going the opposite direction. In case we head towards Saigon and they stopped us, we wouldn't get stuck. Go upward so they would not know, they would not see.

TVD: When you went like that, did anyone help you?

DN: No, I went on my own. No one else but just myself.

TVD: Could you tell me a little bit, tell me about the activities in the reform prison, how a day in there was spent?

DN: A day living in the reform prison, the first thing was waking up at 5 in the morning. Hit the gong, then everyone woke up and went outside to exercise for half an hour.

TVD: Exercise is doing what?

DN: Strength training, stretching, breathing, practiced in half an hour. Then went inside and eat whatever that was there. Anyone who has potatoes or has cassava, they would eat that. After eating for 15 minutes, then they hit the gong to go work outside. Sometimes we excavated in this area, then sometimes we worked on the fence in another area. The job was farming, cultivating crops until noon, when the gong sounded for us to return to the camp. Break for one hour until
the 2 o'clock gong, then we returned to the fields until 4-5 p.m when the gong sounded again, we went back in. Everyday was the same.

TVD: So how was the situation in the camp, such as your sleep?

DN: They arranged the sleep situation, called it spread across camp. Almost like assembled wooden beds, parasols about 2 feet were situated together.

TVD: During the time in the reform prison, did you know anyone? Did you have any friends?

DN: I had many friends, but they were not like friends in combat that I had in the past. However, friends that came from other places. We happened to live together, so we became friends. We got to know each other, embraced each other, and lived together very well. There were many great fellow inmates, embraced and protected each other.

TVD: While in prison, did they allow family to visit?

DN: During my stage, we had no visitation. Did not have that regime yet. It was probably too early; therefore, did not have open night yet and I had already left the camp, so did not have visitation.

TVD: Where did you go after you had escaped?

DN: Went back to Saigon, made false documents, then lived a low profile life. Afterward, I walked with the friend that escaped from that prison. Walked to Laos, traveling contrary to my past military operation, which was in Pleiku Kontum. Walked over to Laos. We already crossed the border of Laos. One day we were so hungry and it was nightfall, we walked through the forest of cassava. We were too hungry so we took it and grilled to eat. They probably saw the smoke from the grill so they rushed over. The Vietnamese Communist soldiers rushed over there. It was rather known as guerilla. They saw smoke in the strange area, there wasn't anyone else, so how could there be smoke. They rushed over to see and arrested us. We got arrested and
questioned, but we denied being any soldiers. They were suspicious and confined us. My friend wanted to run rather than having to go back to prison, so he ran and eventually died. I was the only one left, so they returned me to the Vietnamese Communist military there. Then they investigated, but I was certained not to declare any military forces. I only said that I was a working civilian and got lost. Then they asked where my house was, so I told them my house is in Thu Duc. They said that if I was a person in the South, then they would transfer me back to the South, so I got back to Saigon.

TVD: So your friend got shot while going to military camp. Do you remember what the name was?

DN: I remembered, Nguyen Si Thach, of the marines.

TVD: Did his family know afterward?

DN: Don't know, didn't see his family afterward to ask. They probably eradicated the body and threw it in the woods, buried it in there or something.

TVD: Do you think there were many of these situations in wartime and post-war period?

DN: Maybe there were many people who were also shot dead, they just don't publish it or speak about it.

TVD: So you were transferred to Thu Duc?

DN: No, I said Thu Duc so they only transferred me to the center of Saigon. I was at the Phan Dang Luu camp for about 3-4 weeks, then I was in a terrain position so I fled, escaped once again.

TVD: Then where did you go?

DN: Also hiding in Saigon, I didn't dare go home. In the evening, went out to Binh Chieu and rented a sleeping mat.
TVD: When you escaped like that, you didn't give any name correct?

DN: No, I didn't give any names.

TVD: Then did they know your background?

DN: Declared false information, said I was in Thu Duc while the family was in Saigon. Just made things up. Back then, there was no computer, they didn't have anything to investigate.

TVD: But you didn't have any documents either.

DN: Right, no documents at all, so they didn't know who I was. They only knew what I declared, there was no such issue of investigation, no background check or anything.

TVD: When were you able to reunite with your family?

DN: Until some time later, I contacted my family and got false documents, then I went home. However, at that time we did not return to live at the old house, but rented another house to live so they would not know. We were afraid they would come searching for me.

TVD: So later on you declared a false name? Made all false documents?

DN: All false, no longer used any of the old documents.

TVD: I also heard from other elders that I've interviewed, they had three to four mixed names.

DN: Majority of the people were that way, very few used their old name. All fictitious names. They even made tiny counterfeit documents. They took a sweet potato, carved a stamp, then successfully printed a fake seal. The seal was a stamp.

TVD: Then later on you went home. How many people were in your family at the time?

DN: Just only Giang.

TVD: So just you, your wife, and one child?
DN: At the time, we rented, lived in underground, went around. At that time, no one in the family dared to let us stay, they were scared. They feared being implicated, Vietnamese Communists at the time remained too new.

TVD: So how did your family live?

DN: Back then Giang's mother traded clothing in the market, so I also went there to help sell, arranged the merchandises, then cleaned up after, living as usual. Because I used false documents, no one knew anyone.

TVD: According to you, life after the war was different?

DN: Life is much different after the war. It's more difficult, tiring, where you're always in a state of fear, always nervous. Life without relaxation for your mind, and so much pressure.

TVD: Then when was it that you decided to leave Vietnam?

DN: I had my older sister, so I confided with her that there is only one way, which is to find a route to go across the sea. She said to go inquire anywhere that built boats and ships. She gave the money to me, a dozen gold sticks to go build. Then invited a few more people to put their money together and then buy equipment to build things. So we built with whatever we had. We were not a business, but just a family together.

TVD: Then you just had to trust people?

DN: They were all brothers and sisters in the family, there were no outsiders.

TVD: So was your first trip sucessful?

DN: Not at all, there were rather many failures. Go in underground a lot. Went in a manner that many people let you go for free. I heard rumors that this place lets you go, then climbed up there to only eventually get captured.

TVD: But were you the only one captured or your family as well?
DN: Only myself got captured. At that time, I didn't have the means to take my wife and child. I got arrested, locked up, then escaped out of the camp. Kept doing that cyclically, just like that several times. Except once, went to re-education camp, then afterward about 6 times. Kept getting caught then jumped out. A total of 7 times, got through on the last try.

TVD: Then can you tell about the time that you successfully escaped?

DN: At the time, we could not travel from Saigon anymore. We went all the way to Nha Trang. At that time we ran out of money, only had enough for myself and Giang to go. Lead to go out there known as Vung Ro, in Nha Trang. Had to go from morning until late night to get there. Then we caught a small boat, went on a single small boat, like people say take a taxi out and waited until late night to 2-3 a.m for the big boat to come and pick us up. So that trip took about 7 days and 7 nights, got to Galang, Indonesia.

TVD: Then why did you decide to go with only one child?

DN: Did not have enough to take the entire family.

TVD: So your family at that time was much larger...

DN: The first child died, back then my older sister gave us the money. The trip in '79 failed. The boat busted offshore, submersed floating. At that time, I went with Giang's mother and she was pregnant with Giang. So we made the voyage, then went in and I was imprisoned. But it was easy to get released up there. Then I was taken away to another place, so I went.

TVD: Then the trip that you took your wife and children, was the trip that the boat busted?

DN: That trip was the one that the boat busted, so our first daughter, Giang's older sister drowned and died.

TVD: How old was Giang's older sister at that time?

DN: She was 4 years and several months old.
TVD: So your wife was pregnant at the time?

DN: Yes, she was pregnant with Giang. Named her Chau Giang because that's where small boats and big boats met, so people called it the Chau Giang dock. By then it was nearly time to give birth, and after birth we named her Chau Giang.

TVD: About to give birth but also went?

DN: The departure date arrived, so we had to go. Giang’s mother somehow managed to grab a piece of that wooden raft adrift. Then the next morning the fishing boat saw us and picked us up.

TVD: Then, it was only your wife alone?

DN: Yes, alone. At that time, I was also adrift, swimming in the edge of the shore. In the morning, the police came and led me to the station as well.

TVD: So they captured both of you?

DN: Yes, however, the two of us were a few kilometers apart. A while later they brought everyone to the site. Then we met at the station.

TVD: Men and women were also caught?

DN: Yes, accumulated all. Some of them died, the rest were all taken to Ben Tre. Then we met when they brought us in Ben Tre, they released some and retained some. Giang's mother was pregnant at the time, so she was released. Two days later, it was the 30th of Tet, she gave birth.

TVD: Were you present there?

DN: I was already locked up then, imprisoned at Ben Tre.

TVD: So the last trip was about how long after?

DN: 5 years later, only with me and Giang alone.

TVD: Then your wife and son stayed behind?

DN: At that time my son, Giang's younger brother was little, he was just only a year old or so.
TVD: The decision to go and bring one person, was it decided among the two of you?

DN: The two of us decided, worrying about death, that only one would die. Perhaps, not all will die. If we escaped, then we'd reckon that later.

TVD: It took 7 days? But it was such a small boat to travel for 7 days without problems.

DN: No, it was about 17 meters long but held about 395 people. The uneven water was near the side of the raft like this. We sat up here and touched the water. It transported such heavy weight, but fortunately did not sink. Full of refugees, all Vietnamese, went from Phu Khanh to a small island in Indonesia. Indonesia has 7-8 islands, but we stayed on that small one for about a week. They brought us to an island known as Kuku Island, then spent some time filtering through and completed our profiles before they brought us to ---------, which is the largest island that had those organizations of HCR.

TVD: What did you have during those days and nights on the boat?

DN: Had many difficulties, sitting crouched up in the cellar. Every 2-3 days they would throw down a handful of rice.

TVD: Then you had to buy that spot?

DN: Had to buy, had to pay to be seated there.

TVD: Did you get to bring food or anything?

DN: No, they only allowed a small bag to contain a few changes of clothes. That's all, nothing else.

TVD: Clothing, then what else did you bring?

DN: No silver rings, money, weapons, nothing at all. Before we left, they told us not to bring anything.

TVD: So there was no address of relatives or any contacts of foreign parties?
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DN: Apparently I also had a notebook that I had written in 1-2 addresses of my older brother and uncle, who were in the North but had gone over here first. In the notebook was my older brother's and uncle's address.

TVD: Do you still keep that notebook?

DN: Yes. Ah. Now it's lost somewhere.

TVD: If you still had that now, then it would be very precious.

DN: That would have be considered as documentation. Lost it instantly!

TVD: How was it like living on the vessel?

DN: Just so so. Toileting done right there, can't go anywhere.

TVD: Giang was 5 years old at that time, is that right?

DN: 4 or 5 years old, very young.

TVD: That was like going as a single father then, you went alone and had to take care of a young child as well. What were you feeling during that time?

DN: Actually we couldn't do anything for each other on board, couldn't go anywhere, just lay in one place for 7 consecutive days and nights. Afterward, when we got on the island, then began the main stage of life.

TVD: So when you went on board, did you know anyone?

DN: No, didn't know anyone, no one knew anyone. All strangers. Then we did activities together and gradually got acquainted.

TVD: Those people who sailed together, has up to----- together as well?

DN: All arrived, went together as well.

TVD: How long did you stay in the refugee camp?

DN: Just about 10 months.
TVD: Could you describe the conditions in the camp? The rooms, sleeping area, dining and such?

DN: The life in the refugee camp, you could say at that time was very happy. First, we thought we had escaped the evil Communist. Of course life in the refugee camp was needy, it was not fully equipped, but at least we had escaped the problem and had come to the shore of freedom. Consequently we lived comfortably then, carefree, and loved it. In the morning, we went to the beach for a walk, then went to school in the afternoon and learned English. Food was all provided by the United Nations for refugees. Then we also did sports and cultural arts activities on the island to help relieve boredom. There were enough books, churches, and temples for everyone to go, for whatever religion they wanted to follow. People did what they wanted to do, waiting for the procedure to travel to the requested country. Then that country's delegation would come to the interview.

TVD: So you're saying that you got to attend school, is that right?

DN: Yes, all complete. There was someone who taught English and carpentry.

TVD: Then which subject did you study?

DN: That's when I started to go to school for ESL, learning English. Until then, I'd learned the French programs, I did not know anything about English. I came to the island then learned A B C.

TVD: Then who helped you take care of your child while you were doing activities?

DN: At that time the activities were on the island, so while I was in class at school, she played with the crowd close to home or the kids in the same age range. Back then I didn't think about the kidnapping problems, did not think of the problem at all, just said: "Well stay home, I'm
leaving," it was very comfortable. Went to school from 8 a.m to 11 a.m, then went home and cooked meals.

TVD: At the time Giang was young, but did Giang know that she was far away from home and from mom?

DN: She knew vaguely. She didn't ask about mom, she was not at an age to be much conscious of those things.

TVD: That's when you did the procedures for the application to go to the U.S.?

DN: Went to the U.S. because they asked me whether I had any relatives in the U.S. So I said yes, I had an uncle and an older brother. Then asked where, and told them California.

TVD: How did the interview go?

DN: They must first ask me, what I am personally, what kind of component I am. That I was truely a reformed prisoner, a military personnel or civil employee; so that they could select which person went about politics and which person went about economics. If someone did not know how to declare, saying that they were very hungry in Vietnam and wanted to find a more comfortable life, then they'll refuse.

TVD: Just as you must confirm as a refugee?

DN: They only let you go as a refugee. There were some people who were not in the form of political asylum, they went because they were fishermen or traders across the border; did not meet the criteria of refugees, so they were retained. That crowd was put into the form of long stayers, stayed until the cows came home, can't go settle in other countries at all. They only let you go because of politics.

TVD: How did you convey that you were of political refugee?
DN: You had to tell them who you are. I said: "I am a veteran." They asked what the troop number was, which prison camp, where I went to training, so I must declare. Then I declared precisely. If I was a soldier staying behind, then it would be difficult. Therefore, they gave me priority to go. I had reason, while other people did not have sufficient reason, so they could not go.

TVD: Also within the same interview, were there any other tests?

DN: No, before I went on they just checked if I had tuberculosis, or had diseases, infection, or contagious to others. If not, then it's okay. If there was pulmonary TB, then they held you on the island and gave you injections for 6 months to have sufficient treatments, then let you go.

TVD: The area that you lived in Southeast Asia, were there also many people who tested positive?

DN: How would they know? It's a matter of immunization, or having it immediately after birth, anti-cancer, tuberculosis, then accidentally injected into our body. Consequently, blood tests would always be positive. Don't know why, they looked and said whether to stay or not. Later on they found so many, they started to ask questions and got the answer so it was okay. They only did film screening, after the positive blood test, they did screening for x-ray comparison. Almost everyone then all had x-ray.

TVD: So after you selected California, did you have to search for your interviewer?

DN: Did not need any guarantor. I was fully qualified because I personally went. Even if they asked the other people, that was for them to acknowledge the other side acquaintances to help me from feeling deserted.

TVD: Let me continue to ask you a bit about your experiences, your first thoughts when you just arrived in America. What were your thoughts about your surroundings?
DN: Oh, the first feelings in America were very surprised and very scared because I didn't know what I would do, how life would be, especially when I came with a small child. Bewildered, scared!

TVD: So what did you come here by, did you come by plane?

DN: Came by plane to San Francisco. Back then there was only a single station. The north had San Francisco, the south had LA. My brother’s address at the time was in Northern California; therefore, I landed in San Francisco and was welcomed home. At that time I shared a room, living with my nephew, then applied for myself to try the well fair government's program for newcomers settlement. Everyone at that time was just the same.

TVD: That was in ‘83?

DN: In ‘84. Some cash or food stamps. Life was okay because at that time I went from being empty handed to suddenly having a few hundred dollars, living happily. However, the thing I was concerned about was what I would do when this was all over. Some suggested going to school, some suggested that I was old and should find something to do quickly, something like that, so I was confused. There was a time up there when I did not have many friends, so I was also lonely and sad. In southern California, I had many friends and the activities were more convenient. So then Giang and I moved to southern California.

TVD: Which year was it?

DN: In ‘85.

TVD: How long did you stay in San Jose?

DN: Just a few months. After I found my buddies here, I went down to live here in Orange County. The first stage was to go find a job to use with the food money, well fair. So I went to a furniture store and met the lady owner at New Design Furniture.
TVD: Now you still remember the store name.

DN: I remember. How could I forget my early life memories? Back then I went in and met the lady owner, then the two of us carried the furniture together and delivered it together. The store's owner was a friend of mine who was also in the military in the past. However, they went as pilot and I went as infantry.

TVD: When you moved to Orange County, did you share a room or live with other people?

DN: Shared a room, father and daughter rented a room, that's all. Living was also okay. Then later switched to different jobs. After I stopped doing furniture, I went to the gardening business and repairing homes.

TVD: Who took care of Giang when you went to work?

DN: Giang stayed home, played with my roommates' kids. How could I have taken her with me? Back then I wasn’t worried about anything, there was no trouble, such as Vietnam did not require children under 10 years old to have a supervisor or anything. Childcare was nothing, feared nothing. Just left her at home to play with other children. Then mostly selected schools near the house so she could walk home. That's all. Just father and daughter living together like that. Until much later, when I'd done enough jobs, tired and bored, then I went to learn this nursing course.

TVD: Why did you decide to take this training?

DN: Back then seeing that my age was high already, health was all gone. Giang told me to find a job that was light and made the work less strenuous. She recommended that I go to Fountain Valley Hospital. She said the first thing to do is volunteer, before having to invest a lot of time in it, to consider if I could withstand it. So I volunteered in Fountain Valley. They interviewed very critically, they didn't just accept anyone that came in.

TVD: What were the reasons for the nursing profession?
DN: Back then getting feedback from other people, then heard Giang advising me to go volunteer to see if I could bear this profession. The hospital accepted me as volunteer. Every weekend I came in, the work seemed okay. I did it for 3 months and thought it was okay. Therefore, I told the supervisor there that I would attend the CNA class, which is a class to sub with nurse. She told me to go to school. I went to school and graduated with the CNA license. I presented it to her, and she accepted me for work at Fountain Valley Hospital.

TVD: How long did you study for?

DN: That class was only 3 months. After working for some time, I asked myself why not study higher, perhaps not sub all the time? I also told my supervisor. She was very hospitable to me. She encouraged me to study more so that the salary would increase and workload would be lighter. She kept me on her staff while I took additional training. So it was considered that she allowed me to work part time. Then I did both school and work while studying for the LVN. I finally finished the LVN license, which is higher than the CNA, had higher wages, and a more relaxed life.

TVD: Currently what is your job?

DN: After working at the hospital for some time, I stopped and worked for home care, which is to come visit in person at their house. I come to the house to check on the patient and do the doctor's order. It is more flexible, not restrictive, I just work independently. Not many bosses around like the hospital, the time was more flexible, I could come a bit earlier or later and its not a problem.

TVD: By listening to you, sounds like you did a lot of work? Went to the military, did construction, gardening, furniture, and then nursing.

DN: All sorts of training. I did landscape design. I built landscape, patio, and concrete.
TVD: In these jobs, did you find it fulfilling? Did you find that it was according to your potential?

DN: Actually, I did those jobs just to survive. It wasn't much, but perhaps landscaping is my favorite. There was something with creative design, so I liked it.

TVD: Then, do you have a hobby?

DN: I do have hobbies. Bonsai is the main hobby.

TVD: Earlier I forgot to ask you that after you immigrated to the U.S., did you contact your family in Vietnam?

DN: Yes, I did contact.

TVD: It was in the eighties. How did you communicate?

DN: At that time there were still difficulties, so I contacted by mail and sent gifts.

TVD: Sent by which method?

DN: Sent by air mail only, but back then there weren't as many as there are now.

TVD: Back then people rarely went to Vietnam.

DN: Not yet, very few. At that time no one dared to go back to Vietnam because they were very scared. Later when they changed the policy, they became more open, then people went back more. But in the past it was very limited.

TVD: In the past, did you have plans to sponsor your wife and child to the U.S.?

DN: Oh, afterward there were still many wobbly issues in the family. There were many things that was not as expected. Although those issues were not very good, I still sponsored Giang's mother over.

TVD: In which year was it?

TVD: At that time your wife and Giang's younger sibling came over?

DN: Yeah, the two of them, sponsored them all.

TVD: Did you stay together when they came?

DN: No.

TVD: After the sponsorship was finished, then what happened to the relationship between the two of you?

DN: Broke, it wasn't very good.

TVD: So from then until now, the two of you no longer have a relationship at all?

DN: Not anymore.

TVD: So when you think of the images such as families being separated, I've heard a lot from other narrators, as the relationship no longer exist because of the war. Do you think it was because of the war, because of the time period, or both?

DN: Both were, it was both personal and circumstances. Which was probably all derived from economic problems.

TVD: Can you explain it?

DN: It means the life circumstances were lacking and was not good. It pushed people like that.

TVD: Could you tell me a little more about when you had to raise a child from childhood to adulthood over here? I've heard little about a father raising a child alone. I heard so much about when family separated, but I've heard little of what it would be like, the concept of a person having to raise a child.

DN: For me it was very scary. I was bewildered, worrying about the future and fearing about life while my child was still young. I have to say I was completely empty, there was nothing to ensure us at all. To say, it was a very hard time. I still had to shuttle my child to and from classes
at school every day. There was some fear, although I did not say it at the time. However, when Giang got a little older, I had to take her to school in the morning, then in the afternoon she couldn't go home, so she had to go to a friend’s house until I came and picked her up. Then she took piano lessons, so I also had to shuttle her. At first the teacher came to the house to teach but later the teacher no longer came. She opened a school at her house, so I had to shuttle; either sit there and wait or go somewhere and come back. It went on year after year. Then according to the classes later on, which was for children who has a bit more special education, the GATE program. So I had to shuttle her to school and also pick up after school, already tired from work but also had to pick her up again. There was a lot of misery.

TVD: Did you have to help with homework?

DN: When she was little then I helped with homework. All out of words when she got older. Where would there be more words for homework with her? Self studied, I just reminded her all along.

TVD: Do you think Giang is more independent?

DN: She had to be more independent, perhaps because of our situation. Which she later became independent minded. That's also good, the situation led to it. Giang is now independent.

TVD: Do you think the Vietnamese American culture is different compared to the culture that you grew up with in Vietnam?

DN: Rather different. Customs and practices are completely different. It is viewed differently by each person. Many people accepted the new life, followed such circumstances, followed blindly, became more Americanized. However, some people followed selectively, they kept things that are good, and got rid of things that are bad. But to find a person with that assessment is very difficult. There are many people who followed the American way completely, good or bad they
accepted all. That's America, America is everything. There are a number of people, then select out.

TVD: Then according to you, what do you think?

DN: I'm selective. Things that are good I kept, whereas things that are bad I didn't follow. One person I thought of that probably is not like me, that is, they followed blindly, in a way that is absolute. They think America is a place where everything is good, but I think of how the flip side, it's not all good.

TVD: I think any society would be the same way.

DN: That's right, but people can't assess that. They just follow and assume that their thinking is correct. They don't know the good ones from the bad ones.

TVD: Have you ever gone back to Vietnam?

DN: Never.

TVD: Why is that?

DN: Don't like to. The feeling is not comfortable, coming back to such a permissible society. The place that I left behind, now coming back, I would feel somewhat guilty. I have escaped and fled, now to go back for enjoyment is something I do not like. Unless the family members contacted me, such as death or illness and needed care, then I would go back. But to go back for enjoyment, I have not thought of it.

TVD: So the situation has never came up?

DN: No, did not have a chance. When my older sisters died, by the time the family found out, it was already late. If we came over to help, we couldn't do anything. My father and mother had already passed.

TVD: When did your parents pass away?
DN: Passed away a long time ago, a few years after the liberation.

TVD: So you have not gone back to Vietnam. Do you have any contact such as sending home money to relatives over there, or email, skype, communicating with people in Vietnam?

DN: Yes, occasionally we still communicate with each other through the mail. If they have difficulties, then I would send money to help a little.

TVD: Usually when is that done?

DN: Tet, usually during Tet.

TVD: So you said you have two older sisters and two older brothers up in San Jose. Then is there still someone in the family back in Vietnam?

DN: Three uncles, two younger sisters remain; children of the same father but different mother.

TVD: How are their lives?

DN: Also very good. The economy that it is now, life is really relieved and also adequate.

TVD: Living in Da Lat?

DN: One of them in Da Lat, one in Saigon.

TVD: Do you do activities with the community here? Because you live in a region with so many Vietnamese people so I wanted to ask.

DN: In the past I did participate in those community activities. However, lately there were things, particularly my job that takes up much of my time.

TVD: But you mentioned participating in the past. Can you provide examples?

DN: Those groups such as former military, the former combatants. Those who were in the surveillance group with me in the past currently still do activities together. They meet once a year.

TVD: What about cultural arts?
DN: No cultural arts. I don't have much talent in cultural arts.
TVD: But do you attend any performance arts session?
DN: Yes, I attend those type of activities, with the intent of being only an audience member.
TVD: Usually which programs did you like to attend most?
DN: Don't even know which program. Things come up that I can't avoid. Which ever tracks I felt that I like, then I just go; can't always be a specific time. Don't even know when. I just call and went. For example, there are a few artists that I liked such as Nguyen Duc Quang or Tran Tu Thien who had organized an event, then I'll attend. As for company group, I rarely go.
TVD: When you listen to music, what kind of music do you like most?
DN: Mostly love songs. As for traditional Vietnamese music, I've already heard too much of it daily, so it's just ok.
TVD: Earlier I forgot to ask you about your new family, that you had married later. In which year?
TVD: You and your wife currently reside in Santa Ana, so life is rather stable?
DN: Yeah, we're old already.
TVD: What are your plans for the coming years?
DN: Actually, until the end of my life, I don't know what expectations to have in my future anymore. Just only wish for piece. There are some days I also think like other people…they're healthy now but when they're old, then they would go back to Vietnam to live until death, so they'll be in the home country. But there are stringent conditions, I have not thought of.
TVD: Well, according to you, where is home?
DN: Right now, I don't know if home is in Vietnam or here, or accepting this place as homeland. I don't know yet. Probably when I'm a little older then I'll decide, but right now I can't decide.

TVD: Then I'll ask you again in a few years.

DN: Yeah, maybe

TVD: Yes, thank you sir.

DN: Ok, you're welcome dear.