Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: Đan Nguyên
Interviewer: Thúy Võ Đăng
Date: December 5, 2011
Location: Santa Ana, California
Sub-Collection: Thuy Vo Dang Oral Histories
Length of Interview: 01:30:01

Field Notes

I have known narrator Dan Nguyen as “Bac Phuong” or “Uncle Phuong” since I was a little girl. He and my father met each other while working at a furniture store doing deliveries in Orange County in the 1980s. Bac Phuong has a daughter my age and he brought her over to play with me. His daughter, Giang, and I became good friends and we remain so. When I set out to find narrators willing to participate in the VAOHP, Giang suggested I interview her father. There were stories that she yearned to hear and we thought this could also be good practice for me—a warm-up interview of sorts.

I arrived at Bac Phuong’s home in a mobile home community in Santa Ana on a sunny December afternoon with Giang. She joined us for the first part when we went over the consent documents and she took some photos of us together. After this, she left us to begin the interview.

Bac Phuong seemed at ease in his dining room with the recorder on and our tea set out on the table. I did have to stop tape several times during the interview because he had to take calls for his work. He is currently a home health nurse, having put himself back to school not too long ago after a life spent working many different types of jobs. He also asked for a few cigarette breaks during our interview.

I had the sense that he responded to many of my questions with vague answers because of the proximity I have to him, as his daughter’s good friend. It may also be the very public nature of such an archive that I am building that might give him reservations about imparting too many personal details. I felt as though he did hold back and spoke in generalities rather than provide me with specific examples. He didn’t elaborate and I found myself flailing at intervals to find a way to ask the harder questions about his life and his memories of a past filled with loss, struggle, and triumph. I tried to probe by using the arsenal of knowledge gleaned from my acquaintance with Giang, asking him about being a “single father” during the early years in America. He often shrugged off the question, even as I tried to explain that this is a remarkable experience few people know about—a Vietnamese refugee father raising his little girl alone.

This experience has made me long for a chance to re-interview Bac Phuong, if he is open to the idea. I think we barely grazed the surface of a much more interesting story that he might be willing to share once he sees how the archive unfolds.