Pham Quan Tuan:

RL: Today is November 5, 2010. We are here in Westminster, CA at Nguoi Viet Newspaper, Headquarters. Today I will be interviewing an interviewer for the 500 Oral Histories Project, Mr. Andrew Tuan Pham.

Please state your name.

PQT: My name is Andrew Tuan Pham. But I also go by Pham Quan Tuan, which is my Vietnamese name.

RL: And how old are you?

PQT: I am 48 years old.

RL: Where do you currently reside?

PQT: I am currently living in Santa Clara, California, which is in Northern California.

RL: And what do you do in your profession?

PQT: Currently, I am self-employed, I am real estate agent in the Bay Area and also financial services.

RL: Could you tell me more about how your family came to the United States?

PQT: Yes. My story is a little interesting because I did not really come to the U.S. with my parents. I actually left before my parents. Not too far apart, but in 1975, I remember about 2
weeks before April 30th, I left the country with my grandparents as well as my brother. I was 13 years old then. My brother was 16 years old. I remember vividly that summer, normally we would be taking our summer vacation around the month of June. But that particular year, by mid of April, my school got shut down. Everybody go home for an early summer that year. So, we did, and so I went home for summer vacation, and the night… I remember one night we were watching TV and the president of the country, President Thieu, went on to the TV and announced that he resigned from his post. And the Vice President, if I remember correctly, Pho Tong Thong Huong, he’s gonna be the commander of the country. So, as a child, I didn’t think much of it. we went to sleep, and the next morning, my aunt knocked on my parent’s door and said, “Okay, we gotta go. You know, it’s time to go. It’s time to go to the airport and we are gonna try to leave the country.” So, I remember she told my mom, “Mom and Dad want you to get ready and go to your house and we are all gonna go to the airport and try to leave.” So, my mom woke me up, woke my brother up, and said, pack. Pack a little bag, and I’ll take you to grandma. And you’re gonna go. You’re gonna leave the country. And so, she dropped us off at my grandparents, but she decided not to leave with my grandparents… because my dad was in the service, and he was out of the city. We were living in Saigon, my dad had his post in Can Tho, which is a city deeper South, and she wanted to wait for him to come back from his post, along with my other four siblings. I have an older sister, and two younger brothers, and a younger sister, that would stay behind with my mom and wait for my dad. So, to make the long story short, so my brother and I actually left the country… flew out, because my aunt was working for a U.S. company, and they allowed her to bring her family and whoever she wanted to bring along to leave the country and go to the U.S. So we went to the airport and first flew to the Philippines, and then to Guam, to a camp in Guam, for two weeks. And right there, I remember when we were in camp, we heard on the radio that the country was taken over by the communist government. We were devastated, we didn’t know where my parents were, my brother and I…the whole family, we were devastated, weren’t sure what happened to my mom, my dad, the rest of my brothers and sisters. And we did meet our aunts in the camp, and my aunts were even like, oh I don’t think my parents made it… because we left the last day and they were still struggling to figure out how to leave the country. So, we went to and after Guam, we stayed there for two weeks, and they flew us over to Camp Pendleton. And we stayed there for about a month, and then, my aunt’s family, my grandparents, and the rest of the family found a sponsor
in San Diego, and that’s where we settled. We settled there, and I grew up there, went to school there, grew up there. But luckily, my family was very blessed. Because we found out right before we left Camp Pendleton to move to San Diego, that my mom and dad, and my other siblings were actually able to make it out by boat…right on April 30th. And we got reunited in San Diego.

RL: When you were leaving the country by plane, how did you feel at that time?

PQT: That’s a very good question. I remember…it was scary. It was a little bit scary, I remember we actually had to stay in the airport for two nights before we were actually able to…until they were able to fly us out. We slept on the floor of the lobby of the airport, and I remember…the plane could not leave until midnight, so it would not create any chaos in the city. And I remember we flew out…they call it the military cargo plane, it’s open at the back of the plane, and because it was a cargo plane, you sat on the floor. There was no seat, no seatbelt like your typical plane. So everyone had to sit on the floor, I couldn’t sleep at all. I remember, I couldn’t sleep at the airport. I guess I was about 12 years old at the time. Definitely, was scary. A little bit anxious, for sure, didn’t know what’s gonna happen. But, from stories, from my parents, my grandparents, I knew that I couldn’t stay. Because I was 13, my brother was 16, my we were boys, so we were at a very critical age. If something happened, we would most likely have to go to the military. We would be fighting. So I knew that we had to leave. But didn’t know what’s going to happen.

RL: Could you tell me how you acclimated to U.S. culture, and what you did your first two days in the U.S.

PQT: Well, you know, as kids, and life in Vietnam was hard. I mean, were not a rich family in Vietnam, but so, we…as a kid, I remember when we first got to the camp, we loved it. We loved to eat apples, because apples were rare and expensive in Vietnam at that time. So we loved to eat apples and oranges, we loved to get in line for food, for American food. But, it didn’t take long for us to get sick of it. Get sick of what the soldiers, the military could offer us. So, I remember, some day, we would just be asking for plain old steam rice, and soy sauce, and we just eat steam rice and soy sauce…and we were happy, because we actually missed our Vietnamese food. And then, so we got sponsored by this Catholic church in San Diego. And they were very, very nice people. They got a teacher and came to our house, it was summer time then, so there was no
school. So they got us a private tutor that came to our house...they rented us a big house, and then in the afternoon at 2:00 the tutor would come and taught us English. I had no language at all when I first came here. Back in Vietnam I started in 6th grade, 7th grade, and I took an English class, but that was nothing. So, the private tutor would teach us English in the afternoon. And when Fall came, they put us – myself, my brothers and sisters into a private Catholic school. And they also hired a Vietnamese tutor to teach us English. So, we would be going to 6 periods...one of those periods was supposed to be English, but that period they would pull us out and put us with our private tutor...to teach us American English.

RL: So much like ESL.

PQT: Exactly, exactly. Like ESL. We went to that private school for about a year. And then we went on to a public school.

RL: Could you tell me more about your educational background?

PQT: Sure. I went to junior high, high school, in San Diego. Like every Vietnamese in my generation, we all went into engineering. Well, most of us anyway.

RL: Where did you go into engineering at?

PQT: I went to UCSD, University of California, San Diego. My bachelor’s degree is in computer science. At that time, computers was something primitive and pretty new, there was a lot of demand for software engineers. So that’s what I did. I went to school, got my degree in computer science, and worked as a software engineer for about 10 years in San Diego. After that, I got kind of tired of engineering so I went back to school and got an MBA. It took me awhile to get that while working.

RL: And also at UCSD?

PQT: No, I actually got my MBA at University of Redlands. It took me about two years and some months, and decided to move up to the Bay Area, because I got a job with a startup company. And at that time, the internet, the industry started to boom. So I moved up there, worked for that company for about 5, 6 years, and then there was a downturn of that industry. So then I decided to do something else, real estate, financial services.
RL: What got you involved in the 500 Oral Histories Project?

PQT: Good question. Um, basically my aunt actually introduced me to the project. She told me about her experience volunteering in Washington. I guess that was the first stop that you guys that they interviewed up there. She shared with me her stories about what she learned there, and she thought it was a very moving experience for her. She recommended that if I had some time, that I should help out. And, I heard her stories, and I said you know, that sounds like a great project, because I knew that my family needed something like this. My first thought was, wouldn’t it be good for Mom and Dad to do this, so we could have something to remember them by in the future. And not only that, we hardly ever sat down and talked to them. They hardly ever shared their stories about the war, and how you know, the struggle they went through, so all of us could be here. So my first thought, wouldn’t it be nice for my parents to do this…for us. Kind of a selfish reason I guess. And I thought about my niece and nephews…they need to know why their parents are here, they need to know how they got here. So, I decided to help out with the project. And the third reason being that I would probably learn and benefit from this as well. I would get to learn about other Vietnamese Americans…why they came here, how they came here, and how they built a life…rebuilt their lives here. And it would be a very rewarding experience for me working with the project.

RL: What role did you play in the project?

PQT: Basically, I just interviewed. Because I could still speak Vietnamese fluently…so the Ms. Nancy Bui, she asked me to be one of her interviewers…typically interviewing the folks that could not speak English well, and interviewed them in the Vietnamese language, so that way they would be more comfortable to share their stories.

RL: Could you name some people that you interviewed?

PQT: Yeah, I actually interviewed quite successful people in the community. One person is Mr. To Van Lai, he’s the founder of Paris By Night, and if you’re Vietnamese, then I’m sure your family will have one of his DVDs. And, Mr. To Van Lai is one, and I also interviewed one of my dad’s dearest friends. He’s one of the very successful businessmen in San Diego. And the reason why he’s successful is not only because he’s a smart man, but he also has a heart. And I got to
learn from his business philosophy, how he treats people, and how he treats the community. So it’s been really rewarding so far.

RL: Do you think you’re adequately prepared in training for being an interviewer?

PQT: Well, I know that this is a small project. Small in a sense that we have very limited time to do things. And, because the project…we only have 10 days to do it in this region. So, I would say yea, if we have more time to do it…to do more training and prep. For me, it’s not a problem because I’ve dealt with other companies before, and I’m self-motivated. So I can just pick up and learn…it hasn’t been a challenge for me so far.

RL: What did you feel after you interviewed those people?

PQT: Just as I expected when I came in, that I would learn a lot from the people I talked with. And it’s been really rewarding.

RL: What have you learned?

PQT: The resilience of the Vietnamese people. They work hard, they work through all the struggles, and they rebuilt their lives from nothing. And, what’s surprising to me is that, I heard a lot of war stories, and I realize there’s a lot of heroes, war heroes that we didn’t recognize enough…the veterans, the Vietnamese veterans, and everyone had a very moving story, very moving experience, but we don’t get a chance to recognize them. So I’m hoping this project will collect these stories and someday the younger generation can learn from it.

RL: What impressed you most about the interviewees?

PQT: They’re all so diverse, and they don’t give up.

RL: Do you have anything to share with the older generation?

PQT: Yes, definitely. I deeply, deeply respect them, and appreciate everything they did for our country. And I’ve learned a lot from them.

RL: Would you like to share anything with the younger generation?
PQT: Definitely. If you have a chance, you know, listen to these stories. They not only humble you, but they will inspire you to be the better human being, be a better person.

RL: Do you think you think your perspective has changed after being involved with the project? If so, how have they changed.

PQT: No, it hasn’t changed my perspective. I would definitely like to be involved more, if I can, to help make this project more complete. Because as Vietnamese Americans here in the U.S., we definitely need it.

RL: Thank you very much for your time.

PQT: Thank you.