Charlie Van Le (CVL): Hello, my name is Charlie Le. I am the Director of Operations for the Vietnamese-American Heritage Foundation. I’m here in Westminster, California; here to interview Tam Tran for 500 Oral History Project. It is November 10, 2010, and we are here at Viet Bao Daily News. And what is your name?

Thanh Tam Tran (TTT): My name is Thanh Tam Tran.

CVL: And how old are you?

TTT: I’m 24 right now.

CVL: And where do you live right now?

TTT: I live in Little Saigon, or Garden Grove, or Westminster part of California, but usually I go up to Northern California a lot so I move back and forth between San Jose and Westminster and Berkeley within California.

CVL: And where were you born?

TTT: I was born in Vietnam in 1986.

CVL: And how did your family come here to the United States?

TTT: My family was one of the HO, Humanitarian Operation people, so we were the number 40. We immigrated to the United States in 1997 and it was in April. And if I remember the day correctly, the day that we landed in the United States was April 23, 1997.
CVL: And do you have any siblings?

TTT: Yes, I do. I have two older sisters and one older brother, and I’m the youngest.

CVL: And what did your parents do back in Vietnam?

TTT: My mom, during the South Vietnam, she was a teacher and my dad was in the army. And then afterward, my mom basically just do farming on the patties and my dad as well. There were times when we had to sell a lot of stuff we got in the house and it depends on the certain time because the thing in Vietnam, farming is only two seasons, and in those times between the seasons, we usually make whatever we could sell or we just bought whatever we have and then resell them.

CVL: Growing up in the United States, did you face any difficulties, going to school or anything like that?

TTT: Definitely, yes. When I immigrated to the United States, in 1997 I was only ten, turning eleven. At that time, I didn't speak any English at all. One month when we got to the United States, we didn't go to school immediately. My sister, she did some work at a local restaurant, with a really low-pay job. And there was as well the discrimination, not the discrimination, but the kind of discrimination between the Vietnamese to the newer Vietnamese and there was also discrimination of Americans towards Vietnamese because we didn't speak any English at all. So I think there was a problems like that and in addition to that, we didn't have a job, we didn't have a stable income in Vietnam either, so we when we got to the United States, basically we didn't have anything at all and we had to start everything anew.

CVL: And did you join any organizations, activities that you have done in school?

TTT: Yeah. When I got to the United States, in California 1997, at that time, Westminster, there was a lot of gangs involved: Mexican, Korean, and Vietnamese. Relatively, Cambodian gangs
weren’t around, but they’ll come down from Long Beach, once in a while. So gangsters, gangs
violence was abundant, I would say. And ------ as well, at schools, and Internet cafes. I would
remember in high school, one of my friend’s friend within the circle, he got shot in his torso
three times, and he’s Hispanic, he got shot by a Vietnamese from mistaken identity at that time. I
was in the school’s journalism, and I did a report on that and it create some sentiments between
Hispanics and Vietnamese community toward me. First of all, I did, they said, “why do us?” I
just report the incident, saying, “A Hispanic got killed by a Vietnamese gangster.” And at that
time, a lot of Vietnamese kids in my high school thought that I was aligning with Hispanics, and
I didn't get along with them that much, but afterwards . . . I mean, we were able to reconcile, but
the tension was still there, and there was some tension between Vietnamese and Hispanics within
the school.

CVL: And are you still a student?

TTT: I’m not a student anymore. I graduated from college.

CVL: And what was your, I guess, field of study, or major?

TTT: I studied Phys-Interdisciplinary field, so it’s basically an involvement of politics, and econ
and society, but the official name for the major is Political Economies of Industrial Societies. So
it's a combination of international relations, urban development, and geography, demography,
everything that’s involved in building a country, from a Third World Country to its development.

CVL: And why did you get involved in the 500 Oral History Project?

TTT: I was applying for my entrance to law school and I got an e-mail from my older sister
who’s an acquainted with the professor at UCI who’s also acquainted with the director of this
project and through e-mails and things like, “Do you really want to help out?” and I was like,
“Yeah.” I already did this project before at UC Berkeley in which I was taking the class on the
Vietnamese-Americans and the Vietnam War, in general, through literatures and basically I just
did a project already and I just wanted to help out. That’s how I got involved.

CVL: What role did you play in the project?

TTT: I just interviewed interviewees. Some of them are leaders, public leaders, in the community,
some of them refugees, former refugees, but they are still calling them “refugees” because of
their mentality, but they’re Vietnamese-Americans, definitely. Some of them are reporters, some
of them are writers, so a vast majority of people that I interviewed.

CVL: How did you feel after the interviews?

TTT: A new perspective, maybe, but I feel that even though within my interviews, I did get a
diverse number of people, but I feel that there are some people I did not get into contact with that
if we got in contact with, couldn't show their face for recording because of the story experience
they have, or if they actually do record it, then my fear that backslash of the community reaction
toward their stories, because I personally know these stories off their record, but that's one of the
thing I feel even though we did a lot of interviews, but definitely we did miss some of them,
some of the categories that represented.

CVL: Would you be involved in continuing this project? I mean, 500 is enough, but do you think
we should go above 500 oral histories?

TTT: Yeah, if we could. I mean, the thing is that we need the manpower to be able to volunteer
enough to do the interviews and manpower to transcribe, manpower to translate, and also enough
people to volunteer without fear of anything to do interviews. So we have a lot of obstacles to
factor in as well. I mean, if we could get more than 500, the more people we get to tell their
stories, the better, because the thing with Vietnamese-Americans here is that each person has a
different story, despite there’s a general --------- that “Oh yeah, they escaped the Vietnamese
government and then they went to refugee camp and they got here,” but each person has a
different story to tell, and each story is from the subject’s point of view, and if we get more
subjective points of view, we might have an objective point to research about more.
CVL: And do you have anything to share with the older generation?
TTT: Me sharing with the older generation?
CVL: Yes.
TTT: I mean, there’s a lot of disconnectedness between the older generation and my generation,
that’s 1.5, born in Vietnam and grew up in the United States. For them, they have a lot of hopes
lost and stolen from them, and they place that hopes and dreams onto us and expect us to carry
out those dreams. And as a 1.5 generation, I do respect those things as well, and I do gracefully
accept their sacrifices, but the thing is that, there’s a lot of things the younger generation, the 1.5
generation, has to deal with. First of all, is to adapt to the new environment. Second, they have to
succeed in the new environment and then they can think about what their parents what them to
do. My philosophy in life is that, to pay it forward, rather than just thinking about the past. I
mean, the past is important, it makes us who we are, and we’re here today because what they
have given up before, but in commemoration of those sacrifices, I want to make those that
sacrifice before us, and the same thing for me, I want to make a sacrifice for the future
generation.
CVL: That’s all for today. Is there anything you would like to share?
TTT: Do you want to share anything else? Yeah, I just hope that this project can reconstruct the
Vietnamese-American identity and history in the mainstream history of the United States since a
lot of them have sacrificed, probably have risked their lives, to be here and just that we didn’t
have a name in the history, American history, and this project could actually reconstruct that Vietnamese-American identity and the history and for future generations as well.

CVL: Well, thank you for your time and this interview.