Narrator: TU-UYEN NGUYEN
Interviewer: Kassandra Tong
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Audio [Track 1]

KT: This is Kassandra Tong. I'm conducting an interview for the oral history project. Can you state your name for the record please?

TUN: Sure, it's pronounced in Vietnamese it’s Tu-Uyen Nguyen. In American, the Americanized version is To-Win-Win.

KT: So last time we talked, you told me you were born in Saigon. Can you tell me what it was like growing up there?

TUN: I actually left when I was very young so I don't remember that much. But I do remember my mom had a pharmacy on the second floor—on the first floor, but we lived on the second floor. And so I just remember the metal gates that we used to open and shut her pharmacy every day. I would help her do that. I just remember going to school from kindergarten in Saigon and learning this song. It's called "Look at the Butterfly" (laughs). It's sung to the tune of Frarajaka, you know that song? Yeah, so I don't remember much from growing up in Vietnam.

KT: Okay, where were your parents born?

TUN: My parents—My dad was born in Hanoi. My mom was born in Quang Binh, which is in the middle region of Vietnam.

KT: Did your parents face any discrimination from, like, moving from the different parts to come and live in Saigon?
TUN: So my dad, he was actually part of the 1954 migration from the north to the south. And that was when a lot of people moved from Hanoi down to Saigon because there was a lot of religious persecution and at that time the French, right, they were at war with the French, and so there was a lot of migration of—that was sort of the first big migration that my parents went through. My mom actually migrated to the south after that time and so they both met in Saigon but yeah, they were born in different regions of the country.

KT: How did your parents meet?

TUN: So my parents, they had houses next to each other. They were neighbors and the story that I've heard is that my mom's home, the electricity shut down. And so she had to go over to my dad's house to ask if he could jump start the electricity so it's kind of like jump starting a car. But I guess they had connections from house to house and so she climbed over the fence to my dad's house and asked him and that's when they met each other (laughs). They say, it's funny, because they say it’s more than jump starting the electricity, they jump started other things too (laughs).

KT: What did your parents do for a living in Saigon?

TUN: So my dad was a dentist and my mom was a pharmacist. And yeah, they, they went to school. Mostly, I think my dad went to school mostly in Hanoi. My mom mostly in Saigon. But, you asked about discrimination and other than the religious and political persecution, I think that they didn't necessarily experience anything that was out of the ordinary as students so they were able to go to school. My mom came from a fairly richer family than my dad and so they both had access to education.

KT: Why did your family decide to leave Vietnam?

TUN: So, so this goes back to the political persecution. So after the communists took over, April 30th, today, 1975, Saigon fell to the communists and my parents felt that they couldn't live under
that regime because there would be no future for me and my brother. So after 1975, my dad actually was put into a concentration camp, or re-education camp, and he was in there for two years. And during that time my mom, who had that pharmacy, she had hidden some drugs when the communists took over so she was able to sell that medicine on the black market. She saved up money while my dad was in the re-education camps and as soon as he came out, she had already planned an escape route and she was able to pay some friends that she knew who was chartering a boat that was leaving the country. And at that time, whenever you got onto these boats, you have to pay a certain amount of money and they paid him, I think like two bars of gold, I don't know how much that was worth but she had saved up all of that money during this time, when my dad came out of the re-education camp, she said we need to leave, so they left everything behind and escaped in the hopes of providing my brother and I a better education.

KT: Do you know when your family left Vietnam for Indonesia?

TUN: Yeah, so, 1979 was when we left. It was in—it was about April, I believe, when we left and I was six years old at the time. And we left in the middle of the night. I remember waking up in the middle of the night, my parents said, "Let's get dressed. We're going to the beach." And I remember thinking, as a young kid, right, "Oh, great we're going to the beach," but why in the middle of the night? I didn't think anything of it. Of course, I didn't know at that young age what my parents were doing. So we got to the shore and we boarded this boat, basically, and I just remember feeling really cramped and getting in the boat and just being jostled about by other people. So we left in April of 1979 and then basically, it was this boat that was about 30 meters long and they fit about 300 people on that boat. Yeah, so, everyone was—they had two levels and I just remember sitting cross-legged style and just feeling very cramped and squeezed and crowded.
KT: Do you know how long the journey was?

TUN: So we were on the sea for six days and six nights and then on the seventh day, we landed in Indonesia and we were very lucky because we didn't encounter any pirates on the high seas. We barely made it there in time before the food ran out. I just remember getting portions of food, like a little bit of rice and water everyday 'cause they had to be very careful with rationing food 'cause we didn't know how long we were going to be on the seas and I think we were one of the few lucky, lucky refugees that were able to make it to land. You know, no one on our boat died, except for one man who, when arrived at—in Indonesia, he was so excited that he, he died from a cardiac arrest. I know, so, making that whole journey and then finally getting to land and then he died of a heart attack. But he was quite old. I remember my parents telling me that story. But other than that, no one else, yeah, everyone made it on the boat.

TUN: What were the living conditions like in the refugee camp?

KT: So when we got to Indonesia it was in, it was in April so, at that time it was 1979. They hadn't necessarily set up any refugee camps yet and so we actually were able to live with this family. Basically, took us in and we lived in their house, they gave us a room in their house. And I think they probably got some government assistance for doing that. But at that time, there were no barracks or camps, actual formal camps, set up yet 'cause we were still one of the earlier refugee groups to come to Indonesia. And so it was nice to be able to live with a family and they were really nice to us and I remember they had a girl about the same age as me and so we became really good friends and yeah, I still have some pictures from that time. I remember they had this really cool swing that they had built out of just regular rope and a big log and I remember swinging on that every day. That's what we did, we went to the beach and I remember playing with the little girl and yeah, so we were there for six months. Yeah, yeah. So we were
really lucky ‘cause my parents and I and my younger brother, we have a small family. We were able to all leave together and we made it to Indonesia together and didn't lose anyone so that was very lucky for us.

KT: Did you have family back in Vietnam or were they all able to come over?

TUN: So, immediate family, we were able to come together but we left like my grandparents on my mom's side. Yeah, she basically left her pharmacy and the house. We left everything and then the communists took it over when—after we left. My dad left his family as well. His parents had already died when he was fairly young and so I never knew my paternal grandparents, but I was close to my maternal grandparents and I knew aunts and uncles and cousins. Yeah, basically, we left all that family behind.

KT: Did a family member sponsor your family to come to the United States?

TUN: Yeah, so when we got to Indonesia, we were sponsored over to Virginia by my aunt and uncle who had left right after the war ended in 1975. So they were able to resettle in Virginia and so they sponsored us over. It took about six months, so we were in Indonesia. We arrived there, I think, at the end of April and we got to Indonesia, we stayed there for about six months and then we were sponsored to Virginia and yeah, so my, my, my aunt and uncle, they were kind enough to take us in. I remember coming to Virginia, you know this story, to snow and just being so fascinated, you know, with seeing all that. It was also Christmas time and so it was a nice, nice welcoming experience.

KT: So you arrived in the United States at the end of the year?

TUN: Mm hmm, mhmm.

KT: Okay, what was life like when you first arrived in the United States?
TUN: So when we got here, my, my aunt and uncle they lived in a part of Virginia called Falls Church and a burgeoning Vietnamese community was starting to form there. And so, at that time, there weren't that many Vietnamese but I remember going to school. I entered first grade so I was supposed to be in second grade but they put me back one grade because I didn't know any English at the time. And I was really shy and just really very different, awkward. And I remember being in class and noticing that I was basically the only Asian. Just, I don't think I knew what Asian was, or you know, but I knew that I was different. And I knew that there was no one else that spoke the same language as me, looked the same as me. I think there was one other Vietnamese girl in the whole school. And we found each other eventually (laughs) but I remember going into the classroom and the first day of class, you know how they, the teachers' always like, "Oh, let's welcome our new friend," and you know, I remember her introducing me and everyone said “Hi” (laughs). But I remember that first year, I never raised my hand in class for anything. I was just always really shy and whenever the teacher asked a question, I, I basically looked down and didn't want to make eye contact. And so, yeah, I knew that I was very different and I felt that difference. But everyone was really nice and it was funny because the first year of classes, you're, at that young age, you're trying to fit in and accommodate, assimilate and acculturate. And I remember there was a girl who was developmentally disabled and she would come to school dressed in just disheveled clothing and, and she wasn't quite put together and the other kids would make fun of her. And I remember just feeling this sense of compassion and sense of I knew where she—how she might feel and so I defended her and I made friends with her. And looking back at that, I think it made me aware of how, how people can make fun of you for being different and I think because I felt that at a very young age, I was able to relate
to her and to have this awareness that I think that kids at that age, I think, sometimes don't have, right? Growing up in a normal environment.

KT: How long did your family stay in Virginia?

TUN: So we stayed there for one year. And during that time, my dad, he basically had to work odd end of jobs on cutting people's lawns, doing landscaping. My mom cleaned people's houses. She was basically a maid for hire. And they made some money and after a year, they felt that they could move to California because my dad felt that he could have a better opportunity for business out in California. So he wanted to get his license in dental—dentistry, in California. So we moved to California and my dad basically went to school. My mom continued working odd jobs here and there. She basically was able to make some money while my dad went to school. And after he was done with his dental degree, then my mom went back to school and he was able to support her to do that. And they both got relicensed as pharmacists and dentists. Basically had to relearn the language and take all the exams. I remember my mom would travel to—we lived in, when we first came to California, we lived in Tustin and I remember on the weekends, my mom would go drive down to San Diego 'cause that was where some of the classes were being held for the Vietnamese refugees who were studying for their licensing exams and every weekend she would do that. And I just remember it was something that was just, you know, a normal part of our new life. Yeah (laughs).

KT: Uh, where did you grow up?

TUN: So I grew up—so we, we went to Tustin. We lived there for, I think, about a year. And then we moved to Monterey Park and my dad opened up an office in Monterey Park and so that's where I went to—so I went to middle school in Tustin and then I moved to Monterey Park and went to junior high in Monterey Park and then, I moved back here to, to Orange County and we
lived in Huntington Beach for a little while and that's where I went to seventh and eighth grade. And then we moved to Irvine after that. I went to high school in Irvine, University High. And then UCI [University of California, Irvine] for undergrad. Sorry, we moved around a lot during my, my younger years.

KT: What were the—what was the predominant ethnicity of the neighborhoods you grew up in?

TUN: So, in Monterey Park it was mainly Asian so I had a lot of Asian friends. I went to a school in Monterey Park that I think was predominantly Asian so most of my friends were Asian. And then I remember, it was funny because we lived in this, on this street that was way up high on the hills. It was on El Rapetto Street and I learned many years later that the land, the owner of the apartment that my parents rented from, she was the grandmother of my best friend at UCI [University of California, Irvine] (laughs). So it was just a small, small world. And I actually got in, reconnected with some of my friends from Monterey Park when I went to UCI [University of California, Irvine] because some of those friends also went to UCI [University of California, Irvine]. Yeah, so, it was mainly Asian communities that I had exposure to and grew up in. And then when we moved to Huntington Beach and Irvine, you know, it's a lot of Asian Americans students as well (laughs).

KT: Okay, what kinds of challenges did you face adapting to American society?

TUN: I think as a young kid coming here, the language factor was a big challenge because I think I felt very awkward not being able to speak the language and I remember being put in ESL classes when we first came over and just—actually, I had a lot of fun in those classes and I felt like I belonged because I was able to learn along with other students who were also learning the English language and I remember a lot of Latino students and yeah, so I felt it was fun at the time, at that age. Growing up, in Monterey Park as a junior high student, I think just getting a
sense of, I guess, communities outside of the Asian American community 'cause I didn't have that much exposure. I think I lived a pretty sheltered childhood in terms of my parents, you know, didn't let me go out necessarily. I didn't date until I got to UCI [University of California, Irvine] basically (laughs), so even during high school, in Irvine, it's mostly Asian as well. Yeah, so, I think in terms of challenges, just getting a sense of the bigger world out there, outside of the Asian communities that I was exposed to. And also, of course, the model minority, the model minority expectations of succeeding and there's also this refugee pressure that your parents came here to provide you with a better future and with better education and so I was basically pushed to excel and succeed. And I think, growing up, especially, during college, that was when I really learned about the history of the Asian American community and really got a sense of who I was as a person and what my passions were. And so I think I came from a pretty privileged background, and I think going through college, I think being involved in social justice, activism types of activities, clubs and organizations, really helped me to shape my world view of things. And really helped to break me out of my fishbowl, you know, of living in this very sheltered, model minority kind of life.

KT: Were your parents traditional in how they raised you and your brother?

TUN: Traditional in what sense?

KT: Just how—Did they raise you how their parents raised them or were they more open-minded about kind of you acclimating to American society and such? Or did they want you to kind of be more—not assimilate so much and become more American?

TUN: Well, I think my parents were aware that with the American educational system, right, a lot of the, a lot of the, I guess, nuance, they trusted me to learn about them and they didn't know the language that well and so they made an effort to go to parent-teacher meetings and things like
that, but in the end, I think they put their confidence in us to take care of what we needed to take care of. And they were very traditional in the sense that they felt education was our path to the future, right, and so it was very important that we got good grades. And I remember in Virginia when we first came, my cousins were in high school at that time and every night, I remember having to sit down to do homework with them and they would help tutor us and they were really good about getting us to make studying a regular part of our schedules. So I remember coming home from school and watching Gilligan's Island, right, and then after a little bit of TV, we would have to do our homework. And then on the weekends, we would have to do chores, clean up the house, things like that, and so I think from a very young age, they instilled in me the sense that education is your number one priority, right? And I had good role models in my cousins who did really well in school. And so I think they were very traditional in that sense in terms of emphasizing education. They were also very traditional in terms of gender roles, and I would have a curfew, you know, I'd have to be home at 10pm at night. Whereas, my brother could stay out as late as he wanted even though he's six years younger than me. Things like acting properly as a young Asian American or Vietnamese woman that you're not supposed to speak up or talk back to your elders. And you're supposed to be respectful and things like that. When I went to UCI [University of California, Irvine], they encouraged me to major in biology because they wanted me to go into the health field, preferably to become a pharmacist, right 'cause that's what my mom did. They felt it was a stable career and something that is appropriate for girls (laughs) to take on as a profession. So, yeah, I think they were very traditional in that sense. Family and education was something that was always emphasized in my family. And I wasn't supposed to date (laughs) until you know, until I got, you know, undergrad. I didn't date. They didn't allow me to date in high school. Yeah, and then I remember joining the basketball team in high school
too. And my parents were like, "Why are you doing that? You know, girls aren't supposed to play sports and you're supposed to be doing homework and studying." But it was funny because once I got into it, they would go to every game and they would cheer me on and they really got a kick out of it, so it was nice to see that.

KT: How did your parents help you stay connected to your Vietnamese culture while you were growing up here?

TUN: So my parents, even though they knew that we needed, you know, English skills to succeed in school, they always emphasized speaking Vietnamese in the home. And so at the dinner table, my dad would say things like, “If you don't speak in Vietnamese, don't speak at all,” kind of thing. And so often times the dinner table would be very quiet, right (laughs)? No one would be saying anything. But I think it also forced my brother and me to keep our language. And we conversed with my parents in Vietnamese and I think, I'm really thankful that they did that because it helped me to retain the language. And they would always take us to community events, I remember going to all the Tet Festivals every single year, right? I’d be like, “Oh, why do we have to go again? It's always so crowded,” and I would complain. But it was really nice to be able to have that and I think, also, participating in community events with my parents, my dad was involved in all the Dental Association Vietnamese reunions and organizing a lot of the dental meetings. And so it was nice to be a part of that and I think growing up, even though I don't think they necessarily thought of it as cultivating social justice orientation, you know, if anything, I don't think they wanted us to get into community work. My parents have always kind of been like, “You need to focus on education,” and you know, “As long as you get good grades and you get a stable job, that's what we're looking for,” right? And so I think the intent behind them getting us involved in the community, it was more because they didn't have any childcare
basically, so they dragged us everywhere they went. But I think being exposed to those kinds of things in some ways helped to shape my sense of what it means to be a part of communities. And it was always really fascinating to me how my parents, coming here as refugees, they would reconnect with friends who they knew from elementary school in Vietnam. You know, they would come here and they would somehow get in touch with each other. And it's just really fascinating to me. This was before Facebook and emails and all that stuff. That sense of community and being able to stay connected. It was really, always really interesting to me, and very powerful. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I wonder how technology will change how people keep in touch with each other. Like how many people do you keep in touch with from elementary school?

KT: Actually, there's only a handful of them because most of them are ones that I've known, so we've kept in touch the whole time. I think, out of all of them, I think there's one that I've kept in touch with completely, though I've known her since second grade. But it's hard.

TUN: But, I think there's something to be said about going through tragedy and trauma together as a community, you know, it really connects people. And so, being able to reconnect with someone from your childhood, right, here in a different land, that's something that's huge and really powerful.

KT: So, I was going to ask, did your parents talk about their journey and everything that happened in their past or were they more of, they didn't want to talk about it at all with you?

TUN: No, they've been pretty open. And I mean, I'm thankful that I was part of that journey too and that we were together as a family unit. And so I can remember a little bit of it, but I remember doing projects in school and asking them, and I just remember them being very open and telling me stories so they were never hush-hush about things, or you know, they can't talk
about that or—Yeah, so, I think, just asking them about it got them to tell stories. And sometimes they would be around the dinner table or conversing with friends, and I would just sit there and listen, and they would tell each other stories, and so I think I absorbed a lot of that. I was able to pick up on a lot of things through that as well.

KT: Interesting. What generation do you identify with?

TUN: So, generationally, I guess, I would be considered part of the 1.5 Generation. So, as you know, that's basically, the generation that was not born here in the U.S., but that came here at a young age, pretty much grew up here, so I think it's—there's certain challenges. Going back to that question about challenges that I encountered growing up, I think being aware at a very young age, that you're straddling two cultures that are often times very dissonant. And so you're told one thing at home, and at school you're told another thing. And you're expected to act in different ways. And, so, I think, being a 1.5 Generation, you have those challenges, but I also think, on the flip side, you get the best of both worlds too because, I know and can remember, a little bit from growing up as a child in Vietnam. I learned the language and was able to retain a little bit of it, and so I have that connection with cultural ethnic roots of my family's background, but then I was able to come here at a young age and adapt fairly quickly, right, and basically, acculturate fairly easily in comparison to others. And so, I tend to look at it as the 1.5 Generation is when you're straddling two different cultures, there's always the possibility of falling off the ledge but at the same time, you get to be on the fence and see both sides. And, have this broader perspective and viewpoint about world issues. So it's, yeah, I see it as a blessing (laughs).

KT: How do you ethnically identify yourself?

TUN: I say I'm Vietnamese American.

KT: Okay.
TUN: Or, sometimes I just say Vietnamese because American, the American part I take for granted, unless it's questioned. I don't question it myself. And I think growing up my parents always instilled in me that, "You are Vietnamese. Even if you grow up here and consider yourself American, others will look at you and see something different," right? And so there's always that sense of being proud of who you are and where you come from, and I think it wasn't until college that I really understand what my dad meant by that, in terms of being able to, you know, be proud of who you are and not be ashamed no matter what your background.

KT: Do you feel caught between two worlds or cultures, or do you think that you equally kind of embody both the American and your Vietnamese culture?

TUN: I think there's always instances growing up where I felt like I had to reconcile or try to explain one part of myself to another, to someone who didn't understand it. Like, my parents, if, for example, oh, I'll use the basketball thing again, where I just enjoyed playing basketball and I remember seeing the Lakers playing at the (unintelligible) when I first came over and it was just something that was really exciting and I wanted to be a part of it and I felt I was good at it too. And so I was really proud of that. It was a way for me to make friends but my parents didn't understand it initially and so they questioned it. "Girls aren't supposed to be physically active" and, "you're not supposed to be a jock," and things like that. They were afraid that it would take away from my studies, and so having to explain that and making a point for why it was important to me, right? And then when I got to college, they wanted me to major in biology and so I did that because I didn't quite know what I wanted to do with my life, and so this was something that was guidance for me. And so, I came in declaring a biology major and then took some classes in the humanities and really loved them. And just found that I really liked to read and write creatively, do creative writing and learn about the humanities and so I took on a double major in
comparative literature and I didn't tell my parents 'cause I knew they wouldn't approve. So I got really far into it and I was close to graduation before I told them and by then, it was too late, they couldn't do anything about it (laughs). So I think, sometimes, it's not so much caught between two cultures but figuring out how to reconcile and how to—and always being aware that, yeah, there's another purview, another perspective out there that may be different from my own. But I think that's one of the great things about sort of being in the minority and being able to see both sides, right? When you're experiencing expectations from others, right, it's easy to, I think it's easier to see an alternative world point of view, right, 'cause you see someone's expectations and you know that you have your own expectations. It's challenging to reconcile the two and figure out what do I really want, but I think, if you get past that and are able to figure it out that's—you have this much richer experience. Actually, one other thing I wanted to add, so, during my freshman year, right, so going into UCI [University of California, Irvine], I was majoring in biology and I was enjoying the classes. It was just a new experience being in college, right, it's something new and being in these huge lecture halls with 400 other students who are bio majors and we would learn about all kinds of biological sciences. And, you would make friends who are also the same major but then you start talking about things, and I got involved in this organization called Project Ngoc, I was telling you about earlier. It's an organization that was started by a math student, a graduate student at UCI and he got other Vietnamese Americans involved and during my freshman year, Project Ngoc had this opportunity where you could apply for a volunteer mission to serve in Southeast Asia and Washington D.C., to actually go and check out some of the camps where the refugees stayed and then to come back to Washington D.C. and do some policy advocacy. And at that point, I had just been involved in Project Ngoc for one year, and I really just connected with the stories that I heard because I had gone through
it myself, right, and I was learning a lot about my history about my family's journey and experiences. And so, I really wanted to go on this trip, I wanted to see the world basically, and get away from home, right? So, when I presented it to my parents, they said, "No way Jose, there's no way you're going halfway around the world," and "Who are you going to be going with? And, you're only 19 years old, what are you going to be doing? You're going to be far away from home for three months," right, “during the whole summer.” And I had never traveled anywhere really before that but I kept, I, I didn't give up. Basically every single week, "Dad, can I please go? If I raise the money,” you know, it being sponsored, you know, half of the money, I only need to raise a little bit for my meals and stuff. He kept saying, “No, no, no, no, no,” but after a few months, he saw that I was really serious about it, and I kept pushing and pushing and he saw how adamant I was about it, and he said, "Okay, you can go if you promise me that you're going to have someone looking after you and you're going to check in regularly and you're going to be safe and take care of yourself." And looking back, I can see, you know, 19-year-old girl, never traveling anywhere, I can see how hard it was for my parents to be able to let me go, right? But yeah, I was just a rambunctious, little 19-year-old (laughs) freshman, right? Just finishing up my freshman year, and basically, went off on this trip to Southeast Asia and had very little idea of what I was getting myself into, but I think that experience really changed my life because it opened up, again, just this whole new world to me of how, in a sense, lucky I was and how other people in the world don't have the same kinds of privileges that I have, right? And to be able to see that, it really, I think, helped to solidify for me, what it meant to be in America and to be able to have this educational experience, right? And I had better make some use of it for myself, right, so, I think, it was a really life changing experience but, it took a lot of pushing (laughs). Yeah, so, yeah, yeah, I wouldn't necessarily identify myself as someone who's like rebellious or out there
always raising my voice, but I think there's always that little streak in me and it comes out (laughs). Yeah, so, it's interesting, actually, looking back at that. How certain experiences change your whole trajectory.

KT: Do you think—was it difficult for you growing up as a Vietnamese American woman? Do you think being a woman made it more difficult for you, I guess, doing all of your experiences and stuff, if you had been like say, your brother?

TUN: Again, it wasn't until college I would say, that I really came into knowing about my identity and really discovering, really digging deep, right? To learn about who I was. And during college, it was during my sophomore year, this was after I had come back from Southeast Asia. I took this class in women's studies and it was taught by this African American faculty lecturer. She wasn't even a regular, permanent faculty member. But I remember she had just really—her pedagogy and the way she taught things, it brought things to life and so as a final project, she had us do a creative project. We could choose anything we wanted, any medium of art, writing, arts and crafts, whatever. And so we had this class project where we made a quilt, and each of us had a square, and together we made this really awesome quilt that told our stories. And as my final project, I did a poem, I wrote a poem for this class and performed it. And it was really nerve-wracking because I had never performed in front of an audience, right, but it really helped me to shape what I felt about myself as a woman. And I think it was through that class that I learned about the history of how women, being female and being a woman in society, certain privileges that you have, certain oppressive experiences, right, that you go through. And I read all of these awesome authors from all kinds of walks of life, you know, and that's when I discovered like bell hooks and Audre Lorde and Toni Morrison. All of these really cool authors and I started questioning, "Where are the Asian American authors," right? Where are those voices? And we
read a lot of poems and a few articles from Asian American women, but, they weren't necessarily your great American novelist, right, like the Toni Morrison and so forth. And so it got me questioning, yeah, where are Asian American women, where are the Vietnamese American women, right? And so it got me thinking about how I could possibly contribute to that, right, and that's when I thought about the humanities major. And I had started taking comparative literature classes, really enjoyed all the readings and writing about all of these different writers. Yeah, so, another life-changing class for me that I look back on fondly. Yeah, I don't think that I answered that question (laughs), sort of. So, was it difficult growing up as a Vietnamese woman?—I think the difficulty was probably again in reconciling questions that I had about my identity, and figuring out, because there's several layers here. There's the Vietnamese part and then there's the American part, then there's the gender, the woman part, right? And then you mix that all up, and if you throw in things like privilege and class issues and thinking about how my parents came here with basically nothing, right, and they were able to re-educate themselves and get relicensed. Seeing that kind of hard work mentality and how that also fit in with the whole model minority, and I had started taking some Asian American studies classes in college as well. And so I was learning about all of this history and getting active in community organizations and hanging out with my friends. You know, we would often talk about, "Oh, why, why do we have to be home early? Why can't we stay over?" and you know, I'd have to get permission for a slumber party like two months ahead of time from my parents. I had to let them know exactly where I would be. There was one incident where I had miscommunicated with my parents or something, and I told them that I was going to be at a friend's house and we had gone out somewhere that night, and they called just to check and I wasn't there. And the parents didn't know where we were, and so my parents were freaking out and they were, "Where are you? Why aren't you home?"
remember that was just a whole big fiasco, but it was, I think that's part of being Vietnamese American, right? I mean, growing up and having certain expectations placed on you. And my parents were very traditional in the sense that, yeah, you had to be home at a certain time, you couldn't hang out with, you know, people that they didn't know. Every single friend that I had, I had to introduce them to and if I was hanging out anywhere, they'd need to know exactly where I was and things like that. So, yeah, I think it's part of growing up, right, and being a teenager but there's these added layers that are put on top of that.

KT: Do you feel accepted by the mainstream American community? Do you feel like you're a part of the community or kind of separate from it?

TUN: I think that growing up, because I grew up in communities where I was in the majority, it didn't make me question as often as later in life. When I started going to school at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] for example, and then I started presenting at conferences as a graduate student, and I would go to places all over the country for different conferences, and I remember being—Actually, this was at UCI [University of California, Irvine] when I was still an undergrad, I was presenting at this conference on murals. This was from my bio major, I was working on rats in the laboratory and we did this mural biology poster that I got accepted into this conference in Florida, and I went with my advisor and we were in this city, my gosh, what was it—Sarasota, I believe it was. So, I remember being in a store and going to pay for something and the clerk says, "Where are you from honey?" and I said, "California," and she says, "No, where are you really from? Where are your parents from? Where were you born?," things like that, right? And, and I said, "Vietnam." And she says, "Oh gosh, I don't think we've ever had a Vietnamese person come through the store, and you speak English so well." (laughs) You know, and, that was my first time when I thought, “Gosh, this thing so happened." And I
had learned about this in my college classes but I never thought, oh I've never experienced any of that, right? And that doesn't happen anymore in this day and age. And so it wasn't until I went outside of my communities that I saw that, yeah, it does still happen. People don't necessarily mean to be vicious or mean, right, but it's out of ignorance, not knowing the history, right, so yeah, so that was interesting to me (laughs).

Audio [Track 2]

KT: Part two, okay, I already asked you what high school you attended, so that was University High. What were your favorite subjects in school?

TUN: I really liked English class—yeah, in high school, I remember reading and writing a lot. Just, what, what did we read in high school? Well, we read things like Jane Eyre, and Invisible Man, you know, all the classics. So I really liked reading those books and then, what else did I like? I liked history class that was interesting. Chemistry (laughs). Yeah, we had a really good chemistry teacher. A lot of our teachers had certain quirks about them, you know, and you always would bond with certain teachers more than others. I remember for English class we had a teacher. Her claim to fame was that she had been on Jeopardy and she had gone pretty far too. She had us play Jeopardy in class. We would go through different texts and try to figure out certain quotes from different books and things like that. So that was a fun class. Yeah, so, I had a lot of favorite subjects in high school (laughs). We had a lot of good professors so I think that makes a big difference.

KT: What extracurricular activities were you involved in in high school?

TUN: So I was part of basketball, is that considered extracurricular (laughs)? Yeah, I joined, like they had these speech and debate teams, so I was involved in that for three years out of the four.
So, I joined it sophomore year. And then, was pretty active in speech and debate. It was a lot of fun 'cause you had to prepare arguments and learn a lot about different topics, you know, what would happen if nuclear war broke out in Russia and so forth, things like that. So you learned about all kinds of weird things, and then, I think that's where I learned sort of my public speaking skills and not to be so afraid to speak in public and a lot of writing and arguing and crafting your arguments, being persuasive and convincing people. So yeah, speech and debate, basketball, what else was I involved in? I joined band for the first year, but then it was too much work, so I, I dropped that. I was involved in student government for a little bit, but then, I think, speech and debate took up a lot of time and so we would travel to different conferences, different competitions at different schools, so it took up a lot of time. And then, basketball too, that took up a lot of my time, so yeah. Those were the main extracurricular activities.

KT: Overall, did you enjoy your high school experience?

TUN: Yeah, I did. I made a lot of good friends that I still keep in touch with. Some of them went on to UCI [University of California, Irvine] and so, one of my best friends, actually, is from high school, we still keep in touch. Yeah, so it was a good, I think, experience where I felt like I had a good group of friends that we hung out together and—a lot of the friends that I still keep in touch with, they were on my basketball team too. And so, yeah, I would say it was a good experience, your typical high school experience, I suppose.

KT: Why did you decide to go to college?

TUN: You know it was always something that was on, my, my path. Like I never questioned, you know. It was something that was expected that you are going to college kind of thing. And so it wasn't a matter of “Are you going?,” but “Which college are you going to?” And I actually applied to several schools, most, I think I applied to all the schools were in California, so this
was just back when it was one application, and you basically checked off all the schools that you wanted, like the UCs [University of California], for example. So I applied to UC Berkeley, UCLA, San Diego, UCI, did I apply to USC? I don't think I did, because it was expensive, but I think I applied to most of the UC schools. And I actually visited Berkeley, San Diego, UCLA, UCI, yeah, the ones that are close to here, and I really, really, really wanted to go to Berkeley. But my dad came with me on the tour to Berkeley and we explored one of the dorms, it was a coed dorm and (laughs) when he saw the coed bathroom, it was on the same floor, basically, he said, “You're not going here, you're never going here, there's no way” (laughs). So I should have been smarter and avoided those coed dorms. And I actually really liked San Diego, too. And we visited San Diego and that was my second choice, and I actually got accepted into all of the UCs and I really wanted to go to San Diego because it was closer than Berkeley and it was a good compromise. And on the day when the applications were due, you know, you're supposed to get back to the schools whether or not you want to go there. So it was a deadline. I had filled out everything. I wanted to go to UC San Diego and I had checked off accept, right? And all I needed to get was my dad's signature on that application. So he was working that day at the—at his dental office and I remember trying to get to the post office, right? I just needed his signature and I was going to put it into the mailbox and get it mailed off and he refused to sign it. He said, "You are not going to San Diego, you need to go to UCI. I am not letting you go away from home." And he refused to sign it. And I was so angry at him 'cause I had, I had asked him, "Why did you let me apply to the schools if you're not going to let me go them?" right? And “Why did I go through all that trouble of visiting the school?” and he said, “Well, I just wanted you to have the experience of applying and exploring schools but I want you to go to UCI and stay close to home 'cause it's more affordable, you can stay at home with us and you know be close to home
and everything.” I was just too angry at him, I remember, because I was so set on going to UC San Diego and so, the process of choosing the school was a very hard process and it was very disappointing that I couldn't go to UC San Diego ’cause I remember going on the tours and I was just so fascinated. Have you been to San Diego?

KT: No, I haven't.

TUN: They have— So, they have this really interesting library and surrounding the library, there's these trees that talk. It's like manmade trees (laughs). And I just thought it was so weird, how, how—but interesting. The campus is really pretty too, and it was far enough away from home and it's right by the beach and I thought, “Oh, how cool would that be to be able to live away from home and explore another community,” but yeah, my dad, he, he was adamant, “No way were you going away from home” (laughs).

KT: Oh, how did you decide your major in college?

TUN: So yeah, I came in, my parents said, “You should major in biology because then you can go to pharmacy school and if you want, you can go to dental school or if you really want, you could go to medical school,” right? But basically, biology is the degree to get into different professional schools, and so, it was just something that they suggested and I took on as something that was a viable major and I didn't necessarily question it because I actually explored some of the classes and I thought, “Oh this is interesting.” In high school, I mean, I liked the sciences. I gravitated toward more of the English classes, but I also enjoyed math. I was really good at math. I think I had a really good—several good math teachers. Loved geometry, calculus, chemistry. I had a fun biology teacher too. So it was, I enjoyed all of those subjects in high school and so, I think, going into college, I was open to majoring in something that looked like it was interesting and a lot of people were majoring in so why not? Yeah, and then, as I got more
and more into school and college and attending a lot of the bio classes, I didn't feel like I was—
getting meaning from what I was studying. It was fun to study as a group and, you know, figure
out the right answers and on the scantron test. I remember taking notes in class, there were all
these pens clicking, everyone had those four colored pens and everyone would be clicking
different colors, taking notes. This was way before, you know, computers, so it was a fun
experience to be a part of that really, really, huge— it was the biggest major on campus, biology
majors, and a lot of Asians. Right, so you would come into the lecture hall and you would see
this whole sea of black hair and you know faces, and so, I felt like this is where I'm supposed to
be right? 'Cause everyone else is doing it. And then I started taking humanities classes and, and
it was part of the general education requirements. And I took the Introduction to Humanities
class, and I forgot the name of the teacher, but she was really cool and she would do all kinds of
things like dress up in character from the books that we were studying. And she would play
music at the beginning of class, and got us thinking about things in a different way so I really
enjoyed those classes so I took some more, and decided I wanted to learn Spanish too. And so,
comparative literature, I thought, “Oh, this is a good degree, I get to learn about literature, not
only in English but also in another language,” right? So yeah, I decided I'll take on comparative
literature as my second major (laughs). Yeah, so it's funny how things happen.

KT: Were you—what activities did you participate in while you were in college?

TUN: So I think my college experience was a really, really much fuller experience than high
school in the sense that I really got involved in a lot of co-curricular, extracurricular activities.
And so in my freshman year, I got involved in Project Ngoc, or what they called Project Pearl,
and I got in just because my friends were doing it, right? And they said, “Oh, come to a meeting,
and check it out.” I came to the meetings and quickly learned about the situation, what was going
on with the refugee crisis at that time. This was in the early 90s, and so at that time, more and more refugees were coming, but the U.S. had implemented a comprehensive action plan where they basically had to screen whether or not you were actually a certified refugee before they can admit you to another country, because a lot of people were coming. And so as part of Project Ngoc, they sent volunteers to these camps to interview people, and so when I went on my, my trip during the summer after my freshman year, I went all throughout Southeast Asia and we went with Boat People SOS, this organization in Washington D.C. And I was able to interview unaccompanied minors, which are kids under 18 years old and they left Vietnam without their parents. They were basically just sent off and, basically, took the risk and didn't have any family. And so, once they got to the camps, they had to basically fend for themselves, or had to connect with someone to become a part of the camp. You know, basically, these minors as young as like nine years old, right? They had no one basically. And so I, my job was to interview them and make a case to have them screened as a refugee to get admitted to the U.S. or another asylum country. And I remember just hearing these horrific stories about—some of these kids, they would leave with their family members but some of them lost, you know, their parents along the journey or some, some of them lost, their family members. They didn't know what happened to them, they were murdered or they drowned. And so, these kids, they basically had no one and I, I interviewed them and just got really touched by their stories and then, when I came back to the U.S., I worked in Washington D.C. for two months with Boat People SOS. And I basically wrote up all of their stories and made legislative visits, wrote letters, all kinds of letters to policy makers, asking them to, basically, sponsor, right, these cases, to make sure that their screened as refugees, and so, I think that experience really helped me again to just get involved in the community on a very political level and, and learn about advocacy, and about how I as a student,
right? I'm a 19-year-old, Vietnamese American girl, what kind of a voice and what kind of an impact I can have? And when I came back to UCI, my sophomore year, I was very, very active in Project Ngoc, and we organized walk-a-thons in the community to get other people aware about the issues. I presented at conferences, and we worked with a lot of people and that's how I met a lot of people in the community, and to this day, I keep in touch with these people. I think it really introduced me to what it meant to be a part of this larger collective, this cause, right? And I found that a lot of my close friends from college was as a result of working in that organization as well. You know working together late nights. I remember spending time putting together slideshows and PowerPoints and choosing the perfect music to it and presenting at conferences and doing all that stuff, it really bonds you with other people and it's a lot of fun, you know, now being in APSA [Asian Pacific Student Association]. And so it's, it's one of those experiences where I feel so strongly that apart from the academics, right, students need to get involved in these co-curricular activities 'cause that's what you remember the most from your college experience. And then I got involved in the, this organization called Vietnamese American Coalition, VAC [Vietnamese American Coalition], it was sort of the more social justice oriented, kind of VSA [Vietnamese Student Association]. So it was made up of Vietnamese American students and we went to things like, go to little Saigon and have a clean up, and to this day, it still continues, right, and so it's really nice to see that kind of legacy left behind. And then, I met my husband in college and we were interested, because he was a poli-sci major. He started out as a bio major but he couldn't hack it. He said, “There's no way, I can't, I couldn't make it through,” right? He did really badly so he decided to major in political science and he really enjoyed the subject, minored in math and then we were always looking for things to do in the community because we gravitated towards those kinds of things. That was fun. We got involved in this
Vietnamese performance troupe called Club O’ Noodles (laughs). So they started out as a
comedy troupe and then eventually, when we joined, they started doing more serious things and
we were involved in this play called “Laughter from the Children of War.” And we went through
this whole yearlong process where we put together our stories and wrote stories and then
performed them on stage. And dramatized it. And it was also such a great experience in being
able to learn about our—my identity. And so all of these things, I think really contributed to
making my college experience really memorable You know being involved in like the hunger
strike with APSA [Asian Pacific Student Association] and UCI [University of California, Irvine]
and seeing that I had some sort of involvement in that legacy, right? That’s still there to this day,
it's really I think—what's the word I'm looking for—powerful. And to be able to use that in my
teaching now, to share that with my students. And I really do believe this is the time in your life
when you're open to so many possibilities and to be able to experience all that. It's a gift (laughs).
KT: Did you feel the burden of being labeled as part of the model minority while you were in
school?
TUN: I think being a bio major and having a lot of expectations about succeeding and going into
certain professions, definitely, I felt that pressure, I think more so from my family than anyone
else. And I think a lot of the professors that I encountered at UCI, in my other majors, they never
really questioned, like why I was majoring in comparative literature, why I wanted to learn
Spanish, but it was more, me questioning, like “What am I going to use this for?” and my parents
questioning, “What are you going to use this for? Why are you majoring in this? Do you need
this?” kind of thing. So I think, in that sense, being aware of how academically I fit in very much
so in the model minority mold and I think being involved in these co-curricular activities was my
way of breaking out of that, in a sense, I don't think I was conscious of it when I was going
through it, but now, I think, it was my way of dealing with the pressures. Because I remember feeling that there were these expectations and I had to get into a good school for, you know, pharmacy or dentistry or medicine or whatever. I went through the whole routine of taking the MCATs and doing the internships and being candy striper at the hospitals and, you know, doing all of that. That was expected of me, and I think being involved in these other activities outside of classes, right, allowed me to do the things that I enjoyed that weren't a part of the model minority, so yeah, I think, I was aware of the pressures, but I don't think at that time that I knew what a model minority was. I hadn't learned about the term until probably when I took an Asian American studies class, my sophomore year, so, yeah. And a lot of students that I teach now, they don't necessarily know the term model minority, what it is, but when I describe, yeah, do your parents have expectations and so forth, and so forth, they say, “Oh yeah, I can relate to that,” right? So you live through it, but you don't necessarily have a term to describe it until you learn about it in class.

KT: So why did you decide to go and get your masters and PhD?

TUN: Yeah. So I was on this route towards pre-med, so I didn't want to go into pharmacy because I thought it was boring, I didn't want to count pills all day. That was my concept of what my mom did. I actually accompanied her to work a lot of times and it was never something that struck me as something I could do for the rest of my life, right? And then, my dad being the dentist, I would actually help him out in the office, doing both that administrative work and then, also, actually helping him being an assistant while he was examining patients, things like that. And again, I never felt that this was something I could do for the rest of my life, you know? And so medicine was the other option. And so I took the MCATs, I studied and was basically a pre-med major during school and, and I saw my comparative
literature major as something that was enjoyable, right? And allowed me to take additional classes that I really liked, but I never thought of it as a career necessarily, that I could become a writer or a teacher of anything. And so I was on this pre-medic route and I applied to several schools, took the MCATs, did okay on them, not that great. I was on the waitlist for, I think, a couple of schools, but didn't get accepted into any med schools so I applied to a lot of them and didn't get accepted. So after I graduated, I thought, you know, I'm going to take a year off. And that was hard because my parents were like, "You need to, you know, study harder and do better on your MCATs and get into a good school." So for that year off, I was interested in physical activity and I enjoyed sports and being active and so I worked as a physical therapist's aid in this office in Irvine, right by my parent's house. And so it was actually a really good experience because it gave me hands-on experience of what it feels like to work in a health—a physical therapy office. And they actually let me do things like help, help people with their exercises, how to do weights and putting electrodes on them and doing the electrical work on their bodies, ice packs and you know, things like that. And I did that for about a year and it was interesting but, again, it wasn't something that I necessarily thought I could do this for the rest of my life kind of thing. So I left it open but at that time, a friend of mine who was going to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]—She was in the public health program and she really enjoyed it and she said, you know, “Why don't you consider applying because it's, it's a good program and you can use it as a stepping stone if you decide to re-apply to med school.” And so on a fluke, I applied. I didn't even know what public health was. I was like, “What is public health? I have no idea what it is.” So I did research in the library, and I remember, this was before you could Google things, right? So, going into the library and doing research and was looking through the cards, “What is public health?,” and things like that. And I still didn't quite understand was it was
(laughs), but I applied anyways. And, and I thought, “Oh UCLA's a cool school, you know, I would love to go to UCLA.” So I applied. Got in and when I got in, I remember getting the acceptance letter and I remember showing my parents and I said, “I got in,” you know, “I'm so excited, I'm going to go to UCLA.” My parents, they weren't excited at all. They were like, “Why are you applying for public health? So what is public health school? What are you going to do, you know, with this master's degree? What, I thought, your path was medicine?” And my brother at that time, he, he was applying to medical school and he had gotten into St. Louis and so he was leaving and so both of us were going to be out of the house. And so I think my parents were feeling a little bit anxious and figuring out what, what is she going to do with her life? But I, at that point I said, you know, this is, I want to explore this. And so I, I turned in that application form and got accepted in and enrolled in classes. And then, I met up with Professor named Marjorie Kagawa-Singer at UCLA and she became my mentor and advisor. And I met several other really cool professors and they took me under their wing and got me involved in their research, which was on cancer. And I really loved learning about these issues in the community because I had never thought about these issues. And it was something that I always, I think I thought into that model minority myth of Asian Americans being healthy, and this was during the time, also, when my family was going through—various people were getting cancers and I remember my uncle from Virginia, the one who had sponsored us over to Virginia, he had passed away a couple of years before from lung cancer. And I remember he had lost his hair, he was going through chemo therapy and that people knew that he had some sort of health problem, but it was never talked about in the family because people felt cancer was something, was punishment, right, for maybe something you did wrong in your past life or it was karma for being a bad person or there was a stigma against it and even though my, my, my uncle was, you
know, a very kind man, he smoked and so forth, but it was never talked about, right? And so I was trying to make sense of that as I was going through public health school too. And it gave me a sense of “Okay, I understand now,” right? And why certain communities and certain cultures have certain attitudes and beliefs regarding health issues. And so I, as I started learning more, I worked with a lot of community members in different Asian Pacific Islander communities and it got me a chance to learn about different cultures as well so learning about Pacific Islander communities, about the Hmong community, about the Lao community. And I learned, you know, there's many, many ethnic groups under the Lao category, and so I met a bunch of community health workers who were really, really kind and awesome in what they did. So this was going on while I was going through the master's program, and as we neared, it's a two-year program, as we neared the end, my advisor at that time, Dr. Lee, Virginia Lee, she was this Chinese professor who had done all kinds of amazing international research on cancer. And she had a fellowship that she offered me, she said, you know, “I see potential in you and I think you would be a really good candidate for the doctoral program.” So she offered me money, a fellowship, basically, to pay my way through the doctoral program, and at that point, I hadn't really thought further about medical school. I had thought about maybe reapplying but not, nothing serious, right? And I didn't want to go through that whole cycle of going through the MCATs. And I was really interested in public health and really loved what I was doing and wanted to learn more and so, I, told my parents, “I think I want to go on for my PhD,” right, “My advisor is offering me this fellowship, it's going to be paid for, I don't have to worry about financing my way, it's a big deal,” right? And my parents said, “Why do you want to get a PhD? Why in public health? What are you going to do with it,” right? And at that point, I really wasn't clear, like yeah, what am I going to do with a PhD because I didn't really think about teaching at that point and there's many things
you can do with public health, right? But, I was looking into working for community-based organizations because I got introduced to OCAPICA (Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance) at that time as well, and I worked there as an intern. And so I saw those possibilities but I'm always a nerd too, in terms in wanting to learn more and more and more. And I like reading and writing and so I thought, you know I really want to learn more through this doctoral program and at that time, I was five, four years into my relationship with my boyfriend at that time and my, who's now my husband, so he was getting his masters' degree. Actually, I don't even think he had thought about getting a master's at that point, but—and so my parents were saying, you know, “Huy,” my husband, “He doesn't have a PhD degree, why do you need to get a PhD degree?” You know, “You just need to get married, have kids and figure out what you want to do with your career and you should just apply to pharmacy school,” and you know, “It's easy and something that can give you time for your family,” right? (laughs) I knew pharmacy was out for me and so, yeah, I just really liked the subject matter and I had also started taking some classes in anthropology and I really liked doing that research, and so I went against my parents wishes and just said, you know, what the heck, I'm going to do this, who’s going to offer me money in the future, right? Who knows where I'll be and I might as well take this opportunity now. If I don't like it, I can always drop out or, you know, but, I have this pot of money and it's financing my education. So I accepted the fellowship and entered the doctoral program. And the fellowship actually was for the first three years, and then after three years, the money, there was no more money, so, the first three years, it basically funded a lot of my classes and then I started having to think about, “Okay, how am I going to fund the rest of my doctoral degree?” And so I started taking on TA [Teacher Assistant] jobs and so that's when I started teaching, right, and I learned that I really liked teaching because it got me a chance to review the
material again. And being able to explain it to someone was another whole different level, right? You really know if you are familiar with a topic when you actually try to explain it to someone, right? So I really enjoyed being a TA and holding teaching sessions and that's when I thought, “Oh this is something maybe I might want to do,” right, “long term.” Because it was something that I felt like I was learning all the time and I was meeting students and I really enjoyed it. And so that's when I started thinking, “Okay, maybe I can get my PhD and maybe work in the community, do the research, and continue doing that. But maybe also think about teaching,” right? And so it's funny how things fell into place over time but I never—when I entered the master's program, I never thought of teaching as something that I would do. And it's funny because this poster right here, my, my dad got it for me after I got my PhD, and he said, “You know ever since you were a little girl, I don't know if you remember, but you would play with dolls and you would always set them up and you would pretend you were teaching them,” right? “And you would teach your brother things all the time, and so I think you were meant to be a teacher.” And so by that time, right, once I was finally able to get my PhD, they accepted it and they said, “Okay, maybe you can do this.” But they were still worried in terms of, “What are you going to do with this degree?” right? And they were always confused, “So they call you a doctor now, but you're not really a doctor?” You know, and, “What does it really mean, like, a doctor of philosophy? What is that?” We had this big conversation after graduation about what the difference between a PhD and a DR PhD, which is the other doctoral degree, so yeah, my parents, still to this day, I don't think they understand exactly what public health is. Yeah, but, yeah so, I think, things just kind of clicked and then I started working more and more in the community, met more people, got involved in all kinds of community projects and found that I really enjoyed the research and felt like I was making a difference by being able to contribute to the literature
and basically, giving back to my community. And so, wow, that was a really long answer to that question (laughs). I got off track there.

KT: Well, it answers some of the other questions. But, you said you started becoming more active in your community and when you were at UCI, so how do you define activism?

TUN: So, activism to me is being able to stand up for what you believe in. And for me, it could be at many different levels, community activism is about being in the community first of all. And I think it's listening to the community, consulting with the community, learning from the community, working with the community. I think that's at the core of what activism is. You can't, I don't think you can be an activist if you are just in your own little office, right? All day long, and you don't have that connection with the community because I think that's where the grassroots organizing goes on. I learned about that in class. And so I'm a big believer in that activism has to start from the community and I think having been trained, and, sort of, the things that have happened throughout my life, and I'm really lucky in the sense that I see these pieces falling into place and it's funny how it all sort of came together, this puzzle came together, but it was sort of by happenstance in a way too, and it was through people that I met, that I saw as activists, right, who I saw as role models and who I could model myself after and so, I think, that's really crucial as well, being an activist and being involved in activism, also means connecting with people and connecting with others and being able to work collaboratively and the work that I do and that I'm involved in currently, right, it's all about that. I see how I get so much motivation and inspiration from the community members that I work with. And it's just funny how, yeah, a lot of the work that I do, a lot of the teaching that I do, it draws from that aspect of activism where it's always—you have to be connected to that community, right? And whatever community you find for yourself, but, I think I get my drive and I get my passion from
being in the community and learning from so many amazing people who have done this work, you know, and haven't gotten any recognition or don't have the big degree behind their name, but they've done it all their life, right? And then, they're so amazing and they just do it because it's a natural part of them, you know? And so I get so much inspiration from that and I think community activism, again, it starts from the community, it's a grassroots thing. And it doesn't have to be your big things out there, protesting with the picket signs or, you know, doing the hunger strikes necessarily but community activism to me is the women in the community who provide for their family day in and out. And you know who are making ends meet, you know, with the little resources they have. That's, that's the model of community activism, to me.

KT: Interesting.

TUN: Yeah.

KT: Were your parents accepting of the fact that you wanted to become an educator or is it still—(laughs)?

TUN: You know, I think they're main concern has always been that they want me to be happy and that they want me to have a life where I have a stable income, right, that I don't have to worry about being—making ends meet basically. So I think that's their main concern and as long as I'm happy, as long as I have a stable family and career that, you know, pays the bills and I'm able to survive and not have to struggle, I think they're—that's their main concern. And so I think their way of guiding me was based on their own experiences and what they knew, right? So they saw medicine and pharmacy and dentistry as being stable jobs that from their experience could provide for family and so that's how they guided me. I've always felt that they've support me, even though there's been resistance in terms of them questioning why I'm doing certain things and trying to understand where I'm coming from because they have their cultural worldview,
growing up how they did. And I admire my parents so much for being able to adapt, you know. I think back to—they came here, so we came here in 1979. My dad was 30—so, he was born in '38, so he was, ‘79, what's that math? 41. He was 41, my mom was 30—So I'm forty right now, my mom was 30—35, at that time, right? So I'm thinking, gosh, if I had to leave, tomorrow, and relocate to someone, somewhere else in the world, and relearn—learn language, relearn everything about that society, have to raise my kids up, right? How would I do, right? And so it's pretty amazing to me that they were able to do such a good job (laughs). I mean, I take credit for some of it too, but I think my parents, they were never like the tiger, you know, mom or tiger dad kind of thing, where you had to do this and this and this. But they definitely tried to suggest and advise, set a foundation based on what their experiences are. But I feel like they've always been open to a certain extent to what makes me happy at the end of the day. And it's funny because every so often I'll be driving in the car with my dad, and he'll ask me things like, "How are you doing with your finances? Are you paying the mortgage okay? You know, how're the kids? Are you supporting them?" So that's his main concern, right? That I don't have to worry about those things. And I understand that. And I think now having kids of my own, I totally see that as something that you worry about as parents.

KT: What was your first teaching position?

TUN: So I taught as a lecturer at UCI. So I taught a public health class, Asian American Public Health class. I did that for two years at UCI. And then I taught for one quarter at UCLA. The class that my advisor Marjorie Kagawa-Singer taught and I co-taught it with her, and so, yeah, those were my first real teaching jobs, you know, in a sense. And then this is my first permanent position. Yeah.

KT: What does education mean to you and why is it important?
TUN: [Laughs] Wow, you have another two or three hours?

KT: Well if you could sum it up, really short, what would you say is—?

TUN: You know, education to me is about self-empowerment and it's about learning who you are and how you fit into society. And what kind of difference and impact you can make. 'Cause I think, at the end of the day, we all try to figure out what is meaningful to us, right, what gives us meaning? What drives us to wake up everyday—oh, my gosh, I can't believe I'm getting emotional about this (laughs). What gets us emotional every day to come to work and do the stuff that we do, you know (laughs)? I don't know why I'm getting emotional. But yeah, I'm really thankful that I get to do what I love, basically and yeah, so that's what education means to me. It's about possibilities and just, yeah, self-empowerment and being able to do what you love. Opening up those doors (laughs). I was doing so good for the first two hours (laughs).

KT: You got to the education part.

TUN: I know. Oh gosh.

KT: Okay.

TUN: I was like, no, I'm not going to cry during this interview.

KT: What made you decide to become an Asian American studies professor at Cal-State Fullerton?

TUN: Yeah, so again, I feel very lucky to be here/ Again, it was sort of one of those accidents where it's not really an accident because I believe things happen for a reason. And so, Sora Park Tanjasiri, who's in the health science department, I actually talked about her, she and I have worked in the community for a long time and we've done a lot of community-based projects through the years. And so, there was a position, actually, in health sciences that opened up, a teaching position, and she told me to apply for it. So I applied for it and it would have been a
really good position because it's right in my alley of public health, right? But they didn't hire me so that was a year before this position opened up. And when this position opened up, Sora also told me about it again, and she said, you know, “I think this might actually be a good fit for you, because even though you don't have training in Asian American Studies, you've done the work and you've lived it. It would be a good, I think, sort of, meshing of your humanities background and your public health background.” And so at that point, I had never thought about teaching Asian American studies, it was—I mean, I enjoyed the subject and I had taken a few classes and TA'd actually for a Vietnamese American studies class at UCLA. But other than that, I never really thought I could have a career, right, in Asian American studies so I thought, “Okay, I'll just apply and interview and get some practice, 'cause I might want to go up for an academic position some other place later on.” So I really thought of it as a practice session for me and applied and learned about the program, went in for the interviews. And was interviewed by, you know, Dr. Noh, Dr. Fujita-Rony and Dr. Reyes, and I felt like I could belong here, you know, like I could fit in here. Like, it felt, it felt like a good fit. And the more that I learned about the program here and their intent behind why they wanted to hire someone who was community-based, I really liked that intent. And now that I've learned more and more about the field, I mean, my first year of teaching, it was a steep learning curve 'cause I was literally one step ahead of the students. I would be reading over the books, you know, the night before and teaching it, and I think having the experience in the community has really helped me to connect with my students because, and to connect with the field, and the subject matter, 'cause I'm also learning about it. You know, and I'm reading these books and I look at it from a very different orientation. I look at it from a practical, community-based, you know, participatory, research, kind of action, social justice kind of lens, which is where Asian American studies started, right? But over the years,
some people have said that it's moved away from that grassroots beginning because there's the pressure to publish and to speak a certain language and to fit in with what academia terms as legitimate research, right? And so, I think having the background that I have, it's really made me look at Asian American Studies as a really good fusion of the social justice aspects of my public health training and then also the social action parts of what Asian American studies started out as. So, yeah, I've been learning a lot the last few years (laughs). Yeah, so I, I never really thought about Asian American Studies as something, as a career option, necessarily. Yeah.

KT: How would you describe your personal style of teaching?

TUN: (laughs) Maybe I should ask you that question (laughs). I think for me—So I've learned a lot about teaching styles too, within the last few years and I think just having experience in it, and seeing what's effective, I am a big believer in that practical, service learning, community-based, grounded approach, right? To get students out in the community and to get them learning beyond the textbook, right? To use them and their peers as a textbook, to use the community as the textbook, and so it's very experiential and I think that's my type of teaching is "You need to get out there and experience it for yourself," you know. I think you need to educate yourself and read from the textbooks, I think there's a lot of value in doing that background foundation building, but once you have that foundation, right, you need to go out there and experience it and really also learn about how you fit into the community. And so, as you know, in all of my classes, I have these crazy schedules that I never, you know, am able to fit everything in and classes always run late and I'm always behind in grading and all these assignments. But I think it's part of also, my sense of how best to try to fit everything that I want to fit in for my students and having seen the value of being in the community. I want to throw all of that at you, you know? I, I think I just need to figure out a way that I can take you through the steps rather than try to, you
know, fit everything into one class kind of thing, over 15 weeks. It's a challenge, but, but I'm enjoying the journey so far, so.

KT: So how do you connect community activism with being an educator? And the classes you teach?

TUN: I think that is a crucial, crucial link that I need to remind myself all the time, in terms, of, it's something that I think comes naturally in the sense that I've been doing it for so long, that I feel something's missing if I don't have that link, right, but at the other, the flip side of it, is that it takes up a lot of time. And I find myself just being really tired, and you know, I think being a junior faculty member over the last few years too, having the pressures to do the research and publish and be a part of the academy, and you know, we as teachers, that's not all that we do, we have all of these other pressures and requirements, to get tenure. We have to teach a very heavy teaching load, we have to do research and the research that I do is community-based and so it often times takes twice the time or if not more, right, to actually go out there and make, establish the relationships, sustain those relationships and then, the service that I do, I've been told many times by my chairs and so forth, that I need to cut back on service, right, but it's really hard as, as someone who has been involved in the community for so long that again, I feel like something's missing if I pull back and I've been trying to get better over the years and especially the last year in trying to say no to things, right, because I realize I can't do everything and I also have a family and I want to spend time with my kids and my husband and so it's, it's, trying to find a balance is really challenging. And I think that as an Asian American studies professor who values that experiential, community-based, kind of research and pedagogy, I need to figure out a better way to balance things and it takes a lot of, I think, educating others as well, because others who have not done this kind of work will sometimes dismiss it as not being rigorous or not being legitimate
or not being enough, even though you're like wringing your hair out trying to fit everything in and you know how much work it takes and so it's about educating the academy too, and the institution, about what it means to be involved at the grassroots level, right, so, yeah (laughs).

KT: All right, my last question, what do your—what do you want your students to take away from your classes that you teach? Like your civic engagement class or 300 class? What do you want, what's like the overall kind of goal that you want them to take away from them?

TUN: I want students from my classes to take away a sense of knowing themselves better, knowing that they have a voice, that they feel empowered, inspired to do what they love, you know? And that they're able to pursue what their hopes and dreams are in life and to be able to realize that the path is not always going to be easy but, as long as you are persistent and you believe in what you're doing, that's—and you're getting meaning, right, from what you're doing. And you're helping others—that's, at the end of the day, that's, that's what it's all about, right? What gets you up in the morning? What gets—what drives you? What makes you passionate about things, right? 'Cause we can all go out and look for jobs that pay in the six-figures or whatever amount, right? But if you're not happy, right, and, and you've heard this throughout the semester from other guest speakers. That's really what's important and so I want students to come out better understanding what is it that makes them happy, right? And what is it that is going to get them there so that they can sustain that in their life and be able to do what they love and make a difference in whatever level they can, whatever communities they're a part of.

KT: Okay, so you had us in class, for our community-involvement stuff, you want us in six words to describe our experience, so in six words, how would you define who you are as a person?

TUN: Oh my gosh, this was not part of the questions (laughs).
KT: I'm coming up with more, while I'm thinking.

TUN: Oh my gosh, you put me on the spot here. Six words, huh?

KT: I'll give you a little bit more, since you didn't have notice.

TUN: —I think it would have to be something about I love teaching because teaching others, I also learn about myself. You know and what I hope for my students, I'm also hoping for myself—is that I'll always find meaning and love for what I do and so, yeah, you guys, students are my inspiration and you guys keep me going and it inspires me when I see light bulbs going off in my students and I see them discover, you know, their passions and I love hearing from students about getting into school and they're so excited about, you know, going on to that next journey in their life, that next chapter in their life, and so, six words (laughs). I'll have to think about that, I'll get back to you, Kassie.

KT: Okay.

TUN: I'll have my six words on Thursday when you present yours.

KT: And that's it.

----- End of Transcription -----