Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: TU-Uyen Nguyen
Interviewer: Kassandra Tong
Date: April 30, 2012
Location: Fullerton, California
Length of interview: 01:47:37

Time Log

Audio [Track 1]

00:05:28 Nguyen remembers her family’s escape journey by boat from Vietnam to Indonesia.
00:08:05 She discusses the conditions living in the refugee camp in Indonesia.
00:10:43 She explains how an aunt and uncle in Virginia sponsored her family to come live in the United States in 1979.
00:13:31 She talks about what it was like to go to school in America as a young Vietnamese child.
00:14:50 Her family moves to California the next year and her parents both return to school to obtain dentistry and pharmaceutical certification as well as work odd jobs to support the family.
00:17:42 She talks about moving around in Southern California—Tustin, Monterrey Park, Huntington Beach and Irvine—and what her neighborhoods were like.
00:20:11 She explains the challenges she faced as a Vietnamese American growing up in predominantly Asian American communities in Orange County.
00:24:01 She discusses how her parents raised her and her brother traditionally, and instilled in them the importance of education and success.
She explains that her parents encouraged her to major in biology at the University of California, Irvine, as an undergraduate.

She talks about how her parents tried to foster an appreciation for their Vietnamese heritage at home through speaking the language as well as attending community events.

She considers herself to be within the 1.5 Generation and explains that this means that she straddles two different cultures.

She talks about her undergraduate years at UC Irvine and explains her involvement with Project Ngoc.

She talks about how she came to identify herself as a woman and became interested in women’s studies.

She talks about her realizations at UCLA about her identity and discrimination and feeling different.

Audio [Track 2]

She talks about her high school experience, explaining her favorite subjects, the basketball team, her speech and debate involvement and her friendships.

She explains that her decision to go to college was never a decision, but something that she was supposed to do. She talks about the application process.

She had wanted to attend UC San Diego but her dad wouldn’t allow her to, which explains why she would go on to attend UC Irvine as a undergraduate.

Her parents wanted her to major in biology so that she could pursue a medical degree afterwards.
00:10:52 She talks about her new interest in humanities courses and how she decided to
double-major in biology and comparative literature.

00:11:59 She discusses her college experience and her extracurricular activities, which
included Project Ngoc, which allowed her to travel to Southeast Asia as a
sophomore to work with Vietnamese refugees.

00:17:14 She talks about being in the Vietnamese American Coalition, meeting her now-
husband and joining Club O’Noodles together.

00:19:24 As an undergraduate student with traditional Vietnamese parents, she felt the
pressure to perform as part of the model minority stereotype.

00:22:36 She discusses how her parents pushed her toward a pre-med degree after
achieving her bachelor’s degree.

00:24:37 She took a year off in between to study for the MCATs and began working in a
physical therapy office.

00:25:58 She decides to pursue a master’s in public health at UCLA

00:27:40 She discusses how she got involved with and interested in research her professors
were doing on Asian Americans with cancer.

00:29:58 She talks about how she was offered a fellowship by a professor in the field to
continue her PhD in public health.

00:30:52 Her parents didn’t understand her decision and what she would do with the degree
she was pursuing.

00:33:06 She explains how she began her position as a teacher’s assistant in her third year
of her degree—a position that she enjoyed and that propelled her to become a
teacher later.
She talks about her definition of activism and how community involvement plays a huge role in this.

She discusses how her parentsmain concern was her happiness in life, even though they had wanted her to have a medical career.

She explains the beginning of her teaching career in public health at UC Irvine and then at UCLA.

She talks about the importance of self-empowerment, passion and making a difference in education.

She explains how she assumed her current position at California State University, Fullerton as an Asian American studies professor.

She talks about the importance of practical and service-based learning in her teaching style.

She explains that she finds it important for her students to feel inspired, empowered and firmly rooted in an identity as a result of her classes.

She discusses why she loves teaching.