Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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Interviewer Daisy Herrera Duran
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DHD: Today is Saturday December 1, 2012. This is Daisy Herrera with the Vietnamese American oral History Project and I’m an interviewing Paul Hoang. We are at his workplace in Santa Ana, California.

DHD: Can you please state your name and spell it out?

PCH: My name is Paul Hoang, P-A-U-L. Last H-O-A-N-G

DHD: Can you give us your date of birth and place of birth?

PCH: I was born August 10, 1980 and I was born in Ngoc Ha, Vietnam.

DHD: What are your parent’s names and can you describe them?

PCH: My dads name is THUC HOANG, T-H-U-C. Last name spelling. My mom’s first name is Thom, T-H-O-M. Last Bui. B-U-I.

DHD: Can you describe your hometown, where you grew up?

PHC: I was born and grew up in Ngoc Ha. It’s a small village in South Vietnam. When I was still there it was very pleasant. Lots of woods and forests and trees. Natural resources streamed. The farmland is still close enough to the ocean when it’s fishing. Abundant of resources as far as fruit trees. People were friendly. The village were manly poor people living in houses made out of mood.

DHD: Can you tell me about some of your childhood memories, good and bad?

PCH: My childhood memories in Vietnams was, all that I remember, was good, just having fun. Getting into fights. Neighborhood fights. Kids fights. Nothing serious. Coming up with our own games, inventing our own toys. Cricket fighting was very popular in my village. Kids catching crickets and then raising them and having them fights. Yeah, that’s pretty much it.

DHD: Can you describe some of the traditions, music, story telling, dance or other cultural forms that you remember back in your childhood?
PCH: In Vietnam I remember celebrating Lunar New Year as well as a harvest festival in October. Also Christmas and then those and the days of were there... were remembrance of our ancestors. One of the traditional practices, similar to Memorial Day, what we would remember is our ancestors who passed away and then those who of recently passed away there be like a hundred days remembrance and those kinds of stuff.

DHD: What were the main industries in your hometown?

PCH: All off us were farmers, merchants, and fisherman.

DHD: Where there, one of those occupations the ones that your parents had?

PCH: Let’s see. My dad was underground, so I have no idea what he does. But yeah, he was hiding from the cops or from the communist party, which were after him. My mom was probably just helping probably buying, selling things to make things.

DHD: So you do not know your father’s occupation at the time?

PCH: No.

DHD: Okay.

PCH: A rebel. If rebel is an occupation.

DHD: What were your neighbors like?

PCH: Same as my family. All of us lived in villages, pretty much the same, do the same thing

DHD: What were some of the jobs that you had, if you had jobs, in Vietnam?

PCH: If you’re not rich there is no way of having a chance. Mainly in Vietnam, the highest level of education probably be fifth or sixth grade. After you get to that then you go to the farm or go to work or go to fishing boat and help out the family business and then work. Even if you pass high school or finish high school you’re rare to go to college because you have to be able to pay to go to college after you pass the national exam. And the national exam costs a lot of money and all the university or colleges are located in the capitol city so for those who are in a village or somewhere else you have to commute hours and hours to get there and if you don’t have money there is no way for you to commute back and forth. You have to live within a city and living in the city is very extremely difficult for people who are from the countryside.

DHD: Can you describe your schooling in Vietnam? What was the level of education that you had? What were your teachers and peers like?
PCH: Well I left Vietnam when I was seven, so the highest grades that I remember was after second grade. I attended Catholic school. Learned catholic educations, basic stuff. Don’t remember what I leaned. Just remember getting beat up by the nuns for not remembering poems and doing schoolwork assignments. But just remember having the strict structure for students and the rules and guidelines kids have to learn and go by.

DHD: How did your Catholic education impact you?

PCH: Always centered my faith. Faith is always in the center. What is education, social life, whatever it is, my faith is always in the center so far as I do, any of my action, bare witness to God’s love for us all.

DHD: What do you remember the most about your parents and grandparents when you were a child?

PCH: In Vietnam I remember going to both my grandparents. My maternal grandparents was quite far away. They have a orchid farm with different types of fruits, like the rambutan, the durian. At that time they had a big coffee farm. I remember going to help pick the coffee and learning hey had a hidden storage underground to hide from the official, the communist official, who would come during harvest seasons and tryna make people pay up and take all the crops away so we would hide and I remember going down in the storage and smell he coffee and I got high. And love smelling coffee. Fresh coffee. We would go to the fruit farm and just eating fruits and having fun. And then on my paternal family they also have small, smaller farm. The back yard was pretty big of different types of fruits and they were very strict. They could eat whatever we want but can’t take any home. So I remember just taken them and putting them in a bad and then throw to the fence with the farm and sand and dig a hole underneath the fence and just stuff all the fruits and then leave and then I would leave and come right the corner and grab the fruits and go.

DHD: What do you know about your family’s name? Are there stories about its history or origin?

PCH: For what I have heard, my paternal family, well both my families came originally from the North. We all migrated to the South in fifty-four, that’s the first time with communist came to Vietnam and then the death apparent where millions of people from the North Vietnam migrated to the South because we choose not to follow the communist party. My paternal grandparents, my grandfather, he was the high official back in the days in North Vietnam and had a high rankings standards and all those kinda stuff so they had it made in North Vietnam when I… went back and migrated to the South Vietnam and lost all their status of the wealth and everything else and that was the struggle of them as far to get to the eagle when through resources. My paternal, maternal family has always been farmers so.

DHD: What languages do you speak? Do you speak a different language in a different setting such as home, school or work?
PCH: Growing up I mainly speak Vietnamese at home. We were somewhat forbidden to speak English. That is how we learn Vietnamese. We would read the bible every day, every night, and pray together as a family, all in Vietnamese and that is how I learned and maintained to my ability to read and write Vietnamese and then speaking in Vietnamese family.

DHD: What memorable stories have your family members told you in the past?

PCH: Memorable stories. About me or the family?

DHD: Both.

PCH: Just remember, let see, not much. In Vietnam well I don’t remember much about family stories but they would always tease me about my experience of going to my maternal grandparents farm and getting lost because the farm has no fence, there is no separation between where, which farm belongs to what. So one day when I was visiting and kinda wondered off and I got lost and just walking around for hours tryna find my way back but couldn’t find my way back and I start crying and then this stranger coming by and I was, the only thing I knew, that I four years old or three, four years old was when my grandfathers families name was. I told them where I was from and that guy took me back. But they always teased me for getting lost because I wondered off.

DHD: Which occupations have your family members held in the past?

PCH: Occupation? My dad has been, was a fisherman after the war or before the war. And then after the war is pretty much underground working and underground help people escape Vietnam, organize events to oppose communist party. Coming over though the years, beginning my dad was pretty much landscape, working in landscape with my uncle. And then after that, after my mom left he started to stay home, apply for government benefits and just be at, full time home mom and dad for all of us because he believed that it was important for the children to always saw the parents visible at home and because of that we all grew up well. Always have been there at home to prepare everything and grew up presence.

DHD: How did the war in Vietnam affect your family and community?

PCH: It affects my dad, my parents more cause my dad after the war was sent to, was caught, got to prisons, go many re-educational camps, escaped and have to live underground, always saw the family wealth, anything that accumulated they took away. Have to escape, so move from one village to the next to keep on hiding. And because of the war we had to escape Vietnam for the freedom and for the future of the kids. Because of the escape, my parents had to be separated and because of that experience, my family now is not a united family. My mom and my dad were separated due to situation that occurred after the war and after the escape that led them to be apart.

DHD: Can you talk more in detail, I guess, the cause of your family being separated.
PCH: The physical separation is the escape for my dad and my two older sister and myself when there the final escape were we went to the refugee camps and get sponsored, came over to the U.S. And the physically separated, my dad, my two older sister and myself from our mom and my younger sister, who were, who was two years old at the time. And because of that physical separations and the time were we at see for thirty days my mom thought we were dead. She had to find ways to reestablish herself and trying to find ways to support herself and my younger sister. Sure she developed this relationship with a Vietnamese official, which my dad found out later after we came over here and sponsor over and let her and my dad to have this great fights. And my dad resentments towards communist party would all transfer into her so became very abusive to her. And because of that the physical abuse that my mom had to live through to what she felt had to be done to safe her life. So she left all of us one day, I guess she, what she told me later she when worked at different sweetshops night and day just to make enough money so that she can buy ticket to go back to Vietnam. And because of the, all these incident that my families are not together.

DHD: Do you keep in contact with your others side of the family?

PCH: I do. Mainly when I speak with my mom and my aunts around and I speak with them and my cousins over there. I keep in tough with my cousins. One of my cousins over here, my aunts and uncles over here. To some extent. Not as much as I want to. To some extent I do.

DHD: Did other family member migrate as well, before or after?

PCH: My dad helped all my paternal family and some of my maternal family left in seventy-five and after seventy-five. Throughout he helped so many people escape Vietnam and he decided to stay behind to continue to help people move, escape. So yeah, he helped a lot of my family to go ahead so they could go ahead of us and because of that they were able to sponsor us from the refugee camps straight over.

DHD: How many attempts were there in order to escape Vietnam?

PCH: My family alone, I think, at least four or five times and all of them were, until the last time, they all got captured and imprison, tortured, electrocuted and all different types of physical punishment to both my dad and mom and my two older sisters who are still have PTSD from that.

DHD: After all the attempts, can you describe the final attempt that led to leaving Vietnam?

PCH: The final attempts were that my dad ha no intention in bringing me along. I was only seven but he wanted me to stay home to watch my sisters and my mom to anything happened to them. But the night before I had a dream, a flash of the dream or vision I remember seeing an angel coming to me and telling me to tell my dad to bring me along. The exact words was if he bring me along we would reach our destination. And so I woke
up and told my dad and then for whatever reason he took me along and I still remember that night when we all were carrying our luggage’s and walking from my village to the main street our way. I go from bushes to bushes so that we wont get seen escaping. And then we were instructed that if we, when we get to the next village were the boat is waiting and to escape that because every village there’s a gate we had to go through to get to the village and every gate there’s government official watching and guarding, so we would strap to that. If before we get there and they ask where we going and why do we have luggage is with us say that we are from out, from a different kind of village and we’re visiting family members. So I remember telling them that and made it through. When we made it to Vung Tau we left. I remember getting separated; my older sister and I were separated. We were sent to the house to go underneath the house. In Vung Tao’s costal village, so all the houses big ol’ pool was they’re built above the ocean, so underneath the house there would be the ocean. Though we were sent underneath the house is to stand and all the waters up to our chest, hiding in there and took the right time when all of us were rushed out to the coast, to the beach to get into the canoes to stroll to the fishing boats. So we were all waiting there and then we got a final signal to go and then we were all when out to the small canoe and then the man rows us out to the fishing boats and then when we were there, partly there, one of the guys, one of the crew member who was suppose to be helping us, and they up stole, stealing everyone’s luggage’s and money and everything and calling the cops saying that if you come back the cops will be waiting for you. So some of us made it out, some didn’t. Once we get to the finishing boat none of us have any of our belongings with us because it was taken on different boat. So once we on the boat we have to leave cause now the guy blew the whistle on us, we kept on going and then on the third day after we left the port and the engine broke. The captain of the boat didn’t have any tools to fix it so just let it float and the group of people wanted to turn around and my dad told them that we can’t go back because either way if we go back, if we go continue then would take our chances and make a rescue. If we go back we would for sure get caught and get sent to prison, some would be shot, some would be tortured. So people agreed to continue forward and on the trip takes about thirty days, where we were attacked by Thai pirates three times and we were safe both, each of those times by either passing by cargo ship that saw what happened but couldn’t save us. So they gave us food but then they left. So we continued to float, survived three storms, starved for consecutive days after days to the point where one time one of the guys or the group of the guy conspiring to kill one of the other guys who were the sickest among us to eat him, so that everyone could have some food to survive on. But my dad stopped them saying that we’re Catholic’s that we don’t murder or kill people to eat them and kinda continued to pray. Close to the end were we were rescued by fisherman’s of the Island of Kuku. So after were rescued by them we were transitioned from one refuge camp to the next. We started out in Galan, Indonesia. Stayed there for a couple of months and then got transferred over to Singapore for two weeks and then finally went to Batan Island in the Philippines for six months before we came to the U.S.

DHD: How was your encounter with the pirates through sea?

PCH: It was very traumatic. First time seeing the pirates, first encounter they came, boarded our ship with a big old ship that have with the cannons then pointing at us with
the pirate flags just like in the movies. The pirate flags guys coming down and surround and their machete and knives and sword coming over, stealing whatever they can. And I was on top of the cabin, and I can hear girls down in the cabin screaming so I didn’t know what was going on. I just know someone’s in trouble. Fortunately, no one got rapped because we were rescued, before that the cargo ship came before they get chance to do anything cause naturally they would try to kill us to keep us quiet and not report them. So that was one of the first times were we that was experience and then the second time was even more cause my dad, I remember my dad saying that since none of us know how to swim, he was the only one how to swim among our family that they said that if they’re gonna crash our boat and kill everybody his gonna jump off and tryna to tell the story of what happened to the at least some people would know what happened instead of dying alone the rest of us. And then the third time were we were rescued, attacked by pirates we had nothing left. They came by when, boarded our ship by boat and couldn’t find anything and all the families, people who were dying of thirst and hunger and no valuable position left so they took pity on us and took, gave us some tangerines and they left because another cargo ship was coming by. Until someone that, with the Gods blessing, none of us, about hundred and twenty seven of us, no one died, no one get injured, no one got rapped or anything. We all made it to land safely.

DHD: Did any of the cargo ship attempted to rescue the boat?

PCH: We asked why to the interpreter and they said by that time there was has already ordered to not save anyone on sea anymore. So they couldn’t, none of them couldn’t, were willing to save us. The only thing they gave us was some ration of food and then they left.

DHD: On your arrival to the Island of Kuku, do you remember how it was?

PCH: It was, for me, it was very exciting seeing all these the native coming out, just like Native Americans. Half naked girls and men and women, just have something to cover their private parts and them coming out in their canoes with all gifts of fruits and food. The best food I would starve, must be cause starve and it tasted good. With all the sweet food that they made, came out, and the island was so beautiful and they had, the water was crystal clear, I can see the sharks swimming underneath us. Well they treated us very nice and, but the board of patrol, and then the coastal harbor patrol was more cautious because about fishing boat has the nickname “VC,” which stand for the town we were from, but they thought that stands for “Vietnamese Communist” so they thought I was, so they treated the men differently. For safety reasons they left the men and the young men and male over on our boat where they told us to the refugee camp to get us process.

DHD: Do you remember being, I guess, cultured shocked due to the arrival in the island?

PCH: No. All the memories I have throughout the experience was that of an adventure, its all that I remember was having fun and was throwing up like crazy when I was in the boat. After the first few days of throwing everything up, I had nothing left throw up. So I got used to that. But I just remember having fun, even on the refugee camp. In the
refugee camp I remember at night time my sister and I go bother kids with somebody, go into the field to catch frogs so that can cook and eat, and then we would go and try kill the komodo dragon. But man, they used me as bate those bums. They used me as bate to send me to the opening of the komodo dragons layer. We tried to tease them so they can come, but those things are huge, bigger than me. It was coming towards me and I ran the hell and then the guys would all get the sphere and then jab and kill’em. But they used me as bate.

DHD: Do you remember, I guess, what were some of the, since you mentioned good memories, do you member some of the bad memories in the refugee camps?

PCH: I don’t have any bad memories. Maybe that’s my perspective in life, always trying to see the positive in life but I don’t have any bad, well I heard, it wasn’t my memory, I heard about a group of Vietnamese on the refugee camps who swam from the camp when we in Galan, Indonesia. And a group of Vietnamese. I’m not sure they were from our ship or from different ship, but I knew they were form the refugee camp who swam from our island, Galan, to different island and throughout the native of the stuff and killed a lot of people. I heard about it from in the refugee camp. As a kid I didn’t think much of it.

DHD: Did you hear of any other stories?

PCH: No. That’s all the thing I heard about. The rest is just I was being a kid, going around, and have fun, whatever I do was having fun.

DHD: What are some of the things that you learned in the refugee camp?

PCH: I was in school. I was suppose to be learning English but I don’t remember learning anything, just remember having fun and doing a lot of things there was fun, playing with kids, going around. I got trouble once, and I was in the Philippines in Bataan Island were my dad and his friends were having party, just a get together, eating and drinking and I was outside playing with the other kids and I remember letting one of the kids borrow my kite, and he was flying it and then got caught up on the roof and I told him to go get it, and I guess, and he said, “No, I’m not going to go get it.” And I told him, “I let you borrow it. You lost it, you have to go get it.” And he refused so I cursed at him, kinda like an F-U in Vietnamese. And so he went in and told my dad I cursed, and next thing you know my dad was drunk that time already so he went after me with a knife and chased me throughout the refugee camps. So I went to one of the ladies that was an acquaintance friend of my dad and just hid under her bed for nights. Sleep down over night, wake up in the morning, come back home and he’s already sober. It was madness they wanna kill me.

DHD: Do you remember going through every other refugee camp, like your experiences?

PCH: The Philippines as far, I mean the Singapore, was very beautiful. I remember when we’re being transported from Galan to Singapore on by boat. The moment we reached Singapore and the port, oh I see all this yate, I see which all these yates so beautiful, the
water was clear. Singapore was one of the cleanest place I have seen since, up to, even today, cleanest city. The parks were filled with fruit trees, apple trees. And if you litter you get fined, expensive fine and so that’s what I would very clear. And yeah, we was housed in the thing apartments set up for then we would stay in apartments. And yeah, which they let us go on tour bus and visiting the cities. Yes, Singapore was the cleanest and nicest place of all the refugee camps. Was a temporarily place but it was very nice. I was just amazed going like a kids go to candy land and just opened my eyes and saw wow.

DHD: What was the last refugee camp that you were in?

PCH: I was in Bataan in Philippines. Yeah, just remember have to get crickets, playing, making kites, having kids fights, going to church and to yeah. Nothing serious, nothing bad. Yeah. Just being a kid.

DHD: Do you remember any specifically, like school through the refugee camps?

PCH: Yeah. It was going to school. First time I was shocked was, I think she was Hispanic or Filipina but dark skin, maybe white. One of my teacher, I knew she was not Vietnamese but she spoke Vietnamese, which blew my mind. First time I see someone who is not Vietnamese, speaking Vietnamese and I just that, my jaw dropped. Said, “How can that be? How can they speak Vietnamese if not Vietnamese?” So that was the only thing I remember and then the other experience was my first time seeing a AmeriAsian. I see this black men in the refugee camps speaking Vietnamese. I was blown away again. This is a black man. He is not Vietnamese. How come he speak Vietnamese? He said, “No. He is Vietnamese.” No he is not! He’s black. I remember having a conversation with somebody is it he’s black, he’s not Vietnamese. No he is Vietnamese. He escaped with us that’s why he’s in the refugee camp. No he’s not! He’s black! But he would stop speaking Vietnamese. That’s it. That’s of all my experiences.

DHD: What happened after leaving the refugee camps?

PCH: Well we were sponsored in eighty-nine and left the camp in eighty-nine to in late December of 1989. Upon arrival LAX, my uncle came pick us up and was the first and only time I threw up in a car as motion sickness. I remember the trip from the island over we made a stop over in Tokyo then we came, and I remember we almost missed the boarding in Tokyo because I was having fun running around the airport. And then I remember on the plane seven forty seven I was, the plane was big enough so I was running up and down the isle. First time being on airplane. So just ran up and down, I having fun, for little kids were back and down, up and down. My sister would throw, knock left and right. I was just having fun. Running up and down. Then after arrive LAX got picked up by my uncle, when to the car and went back home.

DHD: Do you know who sponsored the trip to LA?
PCH: My uncle who is my brother’s younger brother. So they, all my aunts, uncles over here who came before us were because of my dad who helped them escape out of the war and they all owe us so they sponsor us over.

DHD: How did it become, like, I guess, you reestablishing your life here in the United States?

PCH: How they came over here? Or how do I establish my life?

DHD: Yeah. How did you establish your life?

PCH: Focus on educations. My dad has always instilled in us the importance for educations that since he didn’t like, going to be a better person in life, we have to be educated. So you know difference between right and wrong, you need to know about God, about faith, about people in general and so education is very important in treating people with respect, it’s very important. He was supportive of me just exploring what I wanted to do, been very supportive in what I do, enough so now my stubbornness was make my mind and no one can change it, so once I make up my mind, the only way he’s do is supportive or guide me, he try to change me anything else, I would go different opposite direction. And so went to the missionary after high school. After the missionary then was in the missionary for seven years. After that I won to the career of as a social worker. After I graduated in 06, I stayed in Chicago and worked as a therapist first and then got recruited to be health department director were I oversees she grant for five different agency and I ran a health program for the Vietnamese Association of Illinois. First time getting into politics, trying to be in advocacy and trying do community organizing to get the chair person of the agency I was working for to resign because they were corrupt. So again Chicago treatment involved, getting the office of congressmen, forgot his name now, congressman’s office as well getting mayor’s daily office involved, state senate, getting the whole Vietnamese community involved. All tryna pressure the person to quit because of corrupt leadership and stealing money from the agency. But now throughout the whole process it got burned out and so I decided to leave Chicago because I was there by myself. And I was the only clinical clinician, so Vietnamese social worker in the whole state. I was doing therapy and so I decided go back to California were the weather was lot warmer and better for my health. I was dying up the cold weather over there. Coming back to California in more support over here as parents, emotional, family and then also within mental health professions are more, provide support. So after coming back here I, working for a year, establish myself and build my network and get people involved to establish VIET-CARE, Vietnamese Community Action for Resources Empowerment. A non-profit organization to help improve the lives of people who has mental illness so due, so by helping support service providers or professionals so that, to avoid burn out, help caregiver and family member so take care of the people with illness, so they don’t have burn out. I empower people, who as much interested, as well as community members so that they can take ownership of their own recovery process and regular training for professionals and community members, as well as agencies to that they can be more crucially competent about their mental health as far as for the Vietnamese community, as well as the Vietnamese community factors. As well as
through regular tv show on the Vietnamese tv show, to educate the public about mental illnesses and different aspect into, bring every taboo subject out there so that they can address it. None of them repress it or avoid talking about it.

DHD: Do you remember the city that you came to live in after coming back from the refugee camp?

PCH: Yeah. I came well, after high school my family moved from Moreno valley down to Orange County. And so naturally after I left Chicago to come back here. I came back here and stay in Irvine for two years and then working in final place and moved to West Minister and then now to Garden Grove.

DHD: Do you know why your father's decide to reside in Orange Country rather than staying in Moreno Valley?

PCH: Growing up my sisters and I we were the only one who would translate for him and so when we all grew up, we all left home, so there is no one else to translate for him or with doctors appointments and everything else. So it make more sense for him to relocate to a Vietnamese community where he can live speaking Vietnamese and doesn’t have to speak English or learn how. And so he can still be involve and active in the community without having that barrier.

DHD: Is your family still active, or you father still active in the community?

PCH: My father is very active in the community in the religious sense, helping people with retreat and their spiritual lives and support group and yeah.

DHD: What was something memorable through your education, especially after coming

PCH: Back or coming into LA? Since I came to LA?

DHD: Yeah.

PCH: All my memories been of fights. Lets see. First fight, lets see. The most memorable of my experience in LA was that I’ve, third grade was the first time I know my real name. I still remember first day of school, teachers were having roll call and calling out my Vietnamese name and I’ve never known that was my real name cause I, at home they all called me by my nickname. So I thought that was my name. And so the roll call she called everybody and called my name and I didn’t answer so she skipped my name. So she called everybody and everybody say yeah, yeah, yeah. She knew I haven’t answer and my name was the only one there, so she kept right in front of me and called my name right in front of me and kept sitting and staring her down. And said, and she pointed me, “Is this you?” I said, “No.” Last time she said, “Yes it is!” I keep arguing with her. “That’s not my name. That’s not my name,” “Yes it is!” And so I got upset and I went home, later on I said, “Dad is this my name?” He’s like, “Yes.” “Why is it my name? I cannot believe this is my name.” He said, “This is your legal name. The name we call at
home is your nickname” “Oh now you tell me! For seven and up, nine years, ten years, I
didn’t know what my name was!”

DHD: What was the nickname?

PCH: Well my nickname in at home is Pho. It’s a common Vietnamese name but my real
Vietnamese name is ________. And there was a story behind that, why when I was born
my dad and his friends who does palm reading and all those star reading kinda stuff, then
they did all this kinda stuff before they gave me my name and when they give me my
name Hoàng Đế, without the middle name Chi, my real full Vietnamese name is Hoàng
Chi Đế. My first and my last name together means emperor and so my grandparents and
my aunts and uncles very objective, objected to giving me, my dad giving me that name
because customary people kept name after their family members, their grandfather, their
someone in the family, but no one else in my family has my name. And my name Hoàng
Đế seems kinda of an arrogant, pretty arrogant to name someone emperor or the king.
And so because of that idea they gave me a nickname, not until later on that my dad
explained the meaning is my name ________, meaning intelligence, the highest, that I
focused more, intellectual, I think that’s kinda true, intellectual and being the best of
whatever I do, doesn’t mean emperor. So without my nickname, without my middle name
then it would mean emperor, but with my middle name together and it stays together as a
phrase, and it means something else.

DHD: Did you experience any racist remarks or treatments in middle school or high
school?

PCH: Yeah. I’ve experience racism since I came to the U.S. and event til now. Now don’t
care about it. I confront it head on. First racist experience was in third grade for when I
started school. This Hispanic kids called me Ching Chon Chan and making fun of my
dialect and my accent and let to my first fight in the U.S. And throughout middle school
they always pick on me because I was Asian and small. I would get jump and I always
fight back. And then high school they still pick on me but they no longer pick on me
physically cause then by that time I developed this image already that I am not a kinda
guy you wanna mess with cause I’ll beat your ass. So racism has always been settle, some
more overt than others but there’s always beating around.

DHD: What were some of the things that were said to you?

PCH: They always try to make fun of my accent or my even my accent with of my
parents. Being Asian, they would call Oriental, cuss, other words, for me it has no
meaning and I don’t care less whatever you call me. So Ching Chon Chan is the, just
trying to make fun of the language cause they can’t understand what it means or how the
sound of the syllable, of the language, they make up sounds to make fun of the language.
And then there were times were, I guess, people would say they didn’t want to be my
friend because I was Asian this guys and stuff. But then hear people talks down upon
Asians. Being, all this kinda stuff and so I always push it aside, that’s not what’s
important in life. I’ve always focused on the message of loves. If it’s not that, I don’t care about it.

DHD: Was it hard to build relationships with other students?

PCH: Growing up I didn’t have trouble making friends. Never had trouble making friends with anybody. I was, up until senior year, junior year, I was very reserved and quiet but still and I made friends because of my academic ability that they wanted me to tutor them or help them with their work or and I made lots of friends through sport. All of my friends or most of my friends had two group, one for academic and one for sport. I was very competitive when I play all different type of sport. So it’s all street ball, never organized because my dad wont let me play organize sport. But because though the street that I’ve learn street talk, street life, play street ball, I would always gain respect though sport and because of my ability to play the sport that I’ve gained respect and earned respect.

DHD: Why respect important to you?

PCH: It was important to get accepted that if they don’t respect you then you won’t be accepted to hang out with them or do, yeah, to be with them. And so I would play basketball with all black, white whoever but I was always the smallest. And I saw in the street, there’s always no blood no foul, so when I was four they try to hurt me but never called back but then just its nothing and I thought of back too, so I don’t take things and go down easily. So yeah. Respect was important especially growing up where there were those a lot of gang. If you’re not respected then you look down and you be pick on, you be a target to be pick on to get beat up. So earning the respect would give you that space to be left alone. You’re respected; they come to you for help.

DHD: Where you the only Vietnamese student at the time in school?

PCH: In my middle school, I went to two different middle school, Alessandro for sixth and seventh grade, there were two or three Vietnamese, myself included. In eight grade is Mountain View Middle school, and also two different part of the city. And then in high school it was only three and by the time I was seniors I was the oldest of the Vietnamese. It was two younger girls who were Vietnamese. Yeah. Its only two or three of us off. Well my high school population was over three thousand student, so three thousand is three Vietnamese.

DHD: What was the majority?

PCH: White, Hispanic, and Black and then a small group of Asian.

DHD: How were your relations to the other ethnic groups?

PCH: I have friends of all ethnic groups of all ethnic groups except Vietnamese. I have friends from all different, Egyptian’s, Pakistani, Mexican, White, Black, Indian. In my
opinion then every ethnic, every color except the Vietnamese. I kinda stabled with Vietnamese for whatever reason.

DHD: Do you know why is that?

PCH: I guess during that time, growing up, I felt Vietnamese wasn’t cool because they looked down upon and so and yeah. The way my mentality is, I thought Asian. Growing up in Moreno Valley I had a chance to come down here in Orange Country a couple of times to visit family and hangout and go to the mall and I just looked at Vietnamese girls being snobbish, stuck-up and so I said, I don’t have to do anything with Vietnamese. So that was my mentality back then. And so I just stayed with Vietnamese people and then it was until my college year that I learn to interact and understand Vietnamese better.

DHD: How was your college career?

PCH: College year I went to seminary and undergrad college were eighty percent were Vietnamese. And that was my first overt experience of being discriminated by my own people because I grew up in a non-Vietnamese community so used to interacting with everybody and diverse community doesn’t speak Vietnamese that much and my accent wasn’t Vietnamese. My mind was more broad minded or more open minded and so they considered me as more of an American boy as a betrayal cause most of those recent immigrants are Vietnamese in college. So they pretty much outcast me being that me do anything and looked down upon me and I got upset. So I challenge them by learning about my own roots and presenting to the school about it, making a point that I’m the expert now, not you guys. And so I’ve always taken challenge and then turn it around, use that as motivation to excel.

DHD: What did you do to kinda learn about your roots?

PCH: I’ve done a lot of projects, used school projects and used that as an opportunity to focus on Vietnamese. Weather the history of Vietnam, the ethnic, the dialects, different cultures and the histories and so I was able to do all the study and research and that and present to them. Form that into projects and paper and so through that academic work I learned and I also initiated the talking with the Vietnamese students, joined the Vietnamese club, and learning the language, teaching them English while they teach me Vietnamese and that way.

DHD: Where you ever exposed to any, like Vietnamese history, through your K-12 education?

PCH: The only thing I was exposed to was Lunar New Year were I can come down here and go to the family and give them new year wishes and then they give me a red envelopes and got money, that was it.

DHD: What were some of the things that you use to do culturally in college?
PCH: In college because our college was one of the most diverse in the state, if not the country, were there was the most known of a different eighty to a hundred countries represented in our school and we are all different type of cultural event. Vietnamese we had the moon festival, and the harvest festival, the Lunar New Year, the different religious holidays, ancestors, the traditional dances. That’s when I, first time I see Vietnamese girl in Ao Dai, the traditional dresses, dancing and performing. Yeah. And then go to different and then would perform in martial arts and bracken dance to a different university to meet Vietnamese community from different colleges and different places.

DHD: How did you become I guess, involved in the different sports, like martial arts?

PCH: I always love martial arts. Whenever I have a chance to learn I’ll sign myself up. And it’s not about fighting it’s the idea of being in harmony with mind and body, discipline, and be able to be aware and the environment and of yourself.

DHD: Did you pick that up when you were a little kid?

PCH: My family on my maternal side had a fair of martial arts style that belongs to the family and now die out because nobody pass it on. Yeah. Martial is pretty prominent in Vietnam but it’s a family style techniques. But my dad never let me learn martial arts in Vietnam because he was afraid I would get into fight. Was until eight grade over here in the U.S were I first learn martial art through my church and was free. And after I learned martial art that’s when I stopped fighting out in the street because through martial art I learned that I can really hurt people. There was this one sporting match were I fought with this guy who was twice my size and I pretty much made him bed rest for two weeks. I did not know he was my sister’s friend’s brother and that I knew that I put him in a hospital, afterwards or at home for two week missing and school he survived, all bruised up, internal bleeding and all that stuff.

DHD: Did you end up competing?

PCH: No I never competed professionally on martial art. I just, I never see martial art as for me to gain any time of competition or fame. It’s just about learning for my own benefits and all the time, if I was within the range or within the sport just to help improve my skill.

DHD: What else did you do in college?

PCH: In college I was senior senate, I was lifeguard for Red Cross, I was on a college volleyball team, basketball team. For the postal studies, postal work we go and visit the homeless soup kitchen, visit the nursing home, the elderly to provide ministries, go to work with kids who have a developmental and emotional disability and yeah. And then also work with at risk youth and gang, to do pre-gang prevention.

DHD: How did you become so involved?
PCH: It’s I guess it would be a calling, a vocation of going to where I felt I was needed and do what I can to help those that I can.

DHD: What is something that is memorable that you remember from college?

PCH: College it would be most memorable would be my year in Japan. Where, if I had a chance to stay there, I would stay there forever. It was too expensive to live there. Yeah, just when I learned I love Japanese culture and the language. Learning is like an art. I love learning language. I was young, though about becoming a linguist but then figured I can’t help anyone being a linguist. So but I learned the Japanese pretty, not, yeah, somewhat easily. I was after few months I was fluent, great me in Japanese. Yeah but just the experience of learning Japanese, interacting with the Japanese culture, meeting friends and classmates who are now best friends to me and that’s what I learn. I had to travel across the country, across the world to find friends, to make friends and who are best friends because my high school friends were best friends and know each other for six or seven years. After high school we all got separated and no ne kept in contact. So even though people I thought were my best friends and kept promises they didn’t follow through were people from other countries follow through and kept in touch with me.

DHD: Is there any other languages that you speak?

PCH: I speak Japanese and French.

DHD: How did you learn French?

PCH: In high school were everybody was learning Spanish and I said, “No! I’m not going to follow the crowd.” So I went go the opposite directions and the only classes to teach were French and Spanish. So I went in French in middle and my sophomore year and I fell in love with it. And I went for French 1 to 2, and skip to AP cause I was very fascinating with whatever I love, I learned fast. Learned the French language and was fluent during that time and yeah, and learned what escargot and our teachers would let us drink wine and drink escargot after school. “Just don’t tell anybody. This is a French culture cause in France you can drink when you’re fifth teen.”

DHD: Is there any other languages that you would want to learn?

PCH: Oh I’d love to learn Spanish now cause it’s useful. Living in Orange County, Southern California. Learn Spanish, and Chinese, Korean. Oh I’d love to learn as many languages I can.

DHD: Do you have time to learn?

PCH: No. Not with the current schedule. I work full time with a part-time job. I have a non-profit that I run. And I have a volunteer were I go in tv once a week. I have a kid, family, and mortgage.
DHD: Can you talk about your family?

PCH: Met my wife though the community, through the youth group, with organizing the, its called VYC, Vietnamese Youth Convention and was the third one that was out at Cal State Long Beach. I was the head of the PR committee and my wife, at that time, she was just coming from Texas to visit her friends. And her friends happened take her along to visit, see how the youth is over here, and how they operate. And my job was a PR, was to recruit as many people as I can to group, to advertise and market the event. And so I approached her and talked to her. And I was, “this is a good girl.” And then had friends who were looking for girls so I was trynna switch her, set her up with my other friend. But leaned my other friend as interesting in one too many girls. I figured this is not a good match, that I don’t want to hurt this girls feeling, so I ended up taking her out. As you can tell how, just to continue the relationship and one thing got to then and another we developed a relationship after the event and continued and got marry. And then have eleven year old son, eleven months, oh god. Yeah. He is going to be one-year-old next Sunday.

DHD: Does she know about your past and your migration story?

PCH: Not to the same extent I’m sharing now. I mean, I’ve shared a little bit here and there but not to the same extent as the oral history. I’ve share with her a lot, and I’ve shared, I don’t keep anything from her, I share a lot. But sometimes unless you ask, I’m not going to share.

DHD: Do you plan to, pretty much raise your child, I guess hopping that he still continues Vietnamese traditions and the language?

PCH: Yeah. Definitely. Definitely. I do believe it is important to maintain connection to you roots weather is through language or culture because understanding your foundation, your grounds, you know where you come from. For me that’s important. Know you history will also help you to be more appreciative of life and grateful where you are so that you can connect it to other people. Understand their struggles and understand their situations just like this country was a country of immigrant but now so many people believe for generations doesn’t look at them as immigrants and look down upon other immigrants who come here.

DHD: Can you share other experiences through college? Or even through you graduate schooling that has shaped who you are right now?

PCH: What shaped me is my experience in the missionary, which includes my undergrad and partly my grads program. As a missionary, the spirituality of St. Joseph and the founder of the van work missionaries, Father Joseph and Father Arnold, both were Germans. And the development of the spiritually of divine missionary were about being open and inclusive and building community. So living a life where you help your
community in whatever you do, wherever you go. So in terms of building community is building relationships.

DHD: How did you build relationships with those communities?

PCH: It’s personal relationships. It’s through living example. You don’t go there and you demand people make a connection. But you go and you show them, and show them through how you live. So it’s not that it’s, you talk the talk or you also walk the walk. And so if you talk about walking with people you need to demonstrate what’s your experience and your own actions, and you’re walking with people and so you are living the message you are preaching.

DHD: Where there any projects that you worked on through your undergrad or graduate career?

PCH: In my undergrad, I was working in the summer of 2000. I was working over in Chicago, south side Chicago, in a gang area were there was shooting every nights and the only place that was safe was the church in that block. It was a truce between gangs not to shoot in or through the church because we were there to make piece. I was again, the only Asian guy in the black community. And the rules were that after 6pm you don’t leave the house, you left the church with us, you might get shot. But being twenty years old and coop up in a house after six was not something I imagined myself an so I wondered off to the play yard cause I now, the school that we have there were guys playing basketball there. One day, one night, I just sneak out when to the school yard, watched the guys play basketball. And there are hardcore criminals and gangsters. And I just stand there; watch them and they keep looking at me and they say, “Kid are you lost! Do you know where you are?” Ad then, “Yeah. I’m just watching. You guys continue playing, just watching, I live here by the church.” “Are you sure? You don’t look like you belong here!” So I just watched the game, didn’t say anything, didn’t do anything, just watched for the first nights. And then the next night I return again. And the consistency shown that I’m not threat to them, they finally asked, “You wanna play? “Sure.” And I come and play and at that time, see twenty years old, 5’7, 210 pounds and playing against 6 feet 5’, 200 pounds guys and gangster and prisoners and made everybody else, looked at me like I was crazy meaning that, I played ball with them, again through my early. In the sport I gained their respect, so at the game, “We like how you play Paul. You can come back. You can play with us anytime.” So through that one game I’ve learned, I’ve developed trust and relationship through them. And so I continued to come back and play. And through the connections and show them how I play, treating people nicely is the way of witnessing to Gods relationship. It’s not judgmental, its open, not condemning but being caring. So one of the first lessons I learned that summer that basketball game was how humor can resolved conflict cause during the game two guys get headed argument over a foul. And started that to get into a fight, pull out guns, someone’s going to get shot at, I’m going to get shot at. All these things came to my mind. And all of a sudden they break out laughing and then that resolves the argument. They break out laughing, “No. I’m okay. I’m sorry.” They all started busted out laughing. So yeah, humor, humor helps. So I learned that though I can use the same to help resolve the conflict, in fact therapy as well.
So that was one of the first thing I’ve learned in. Another memorable experience I’ve learned through the missionary was after my year in Japan. That summer when I went to the Philippines I was helping out at the Smoking Mountain. Smoky Mountain is a mountain full of garbage, it’s a actual dump side, it’s so big it’s become a mountain. And people live there, the poor people live there, the big houses on top of the, eat trash that is from there and collect cans and recycle. So coming from Japan I bought some chocolate cookie and so was going to give to the kids and I realize one of the kids is birthdays so I gave him the box of chocolate and thinking in my mind that being kids in the U.S, selfish, more I guess the mentality that oh it’s my birthday and this a box of chocolate that I rarely get, I will save this and take home to share with my family, that was my mentality, that’s what I would do as a kid. But then my, right in front of me, this kid opened up the box of chocolate but gave him to share with all the other kids around him and he had all but one left for himself. He was smiling like the most genius smile I’ve ever seen. And that’s when I learned the message that happiness within poverty and that reconnected me with my own poverty growing up. Poverty is not about work, happiness is not about wealth but is about relationship. Every relationship you’re going to have happiness.

DHD: What were some other things that you experienced when traveled abroad?

PCH: Learning in Japan, how, I was blown away when I first went to Japan how safe everything was. At midnight little kids traveling by himself back and forth, have no idea where were going, but six or seven year old kids traveling by themselves and with all. Over here probably get kidnap, over there its going like the old way and then all the grocery store and the merchandise and electronics was being displayed out in the open, no one was watching. And growing up in Moreno Valley I was, if this is in my neighbor this would be gone in seconds. Right here is, oh no one care, everyone trust each other and no one steal. Even now in front of you, no one say, no one does anything so that kinda blew my mind away. And then when I was surprise was working with the homeless for so many years. I was very inspired by the model of working with the homelessness in Japan. I was with what’s call the Takadashi group, who father Takadashi got his group of volunteers, of students, go and every weeks. We would eat and cook, prepare the food for the homeless and then put it in a van and truck and drive to a location and then underneath the freeway pathway. And then they would all line up, six, seven hundred of them line up orderly, no talking, no arguments. They would line up, first hour we would set up mat, play table, tv, place ‘em to get free haircut, newspaper, news from the watch and though. After the first hour of socializing and playing, then second hours would be eating so we pass out food them come they grab their food. After that they would wash their own dishes, return the dishes and said thank you and I said, “after five years of being work with homelessness, it’s the first time people never argue, didn’t cut in line, didn’t spit at my face, and then washed their own bowl. And so I said, “These people are very orderly.” I so I love their model, its very effective. I learned ho in Japan they have a camp or a park designated for homeless people and where they go and none is bother them, they have their own time to live there. And then during the day time we don’t see no homelessness outside the park. People are for, it’s illegal to beg for money. You get arrested and send to prison. So there’s no, you can’t find a homeless person during the daytime. I have no idea where they go, what they do, but cant find them. And people who
are homeless over there clean, not stinky like over here. And they have jobs and so I’ve learned that people over there because of tax federal over there so high, some people chooses to be homeless to avoid paying tax. So they would go to work, go to sleep in their tent, see have their own tv in their tent, everything in the tent. They still have money but hey don’t pay tax. So it’s a nice experience that helped me putting things in perspective.

DHD: What about your, you going to a graduate program? Can you explain more of like what you decided to do.

PCH: I decided to go to into social work and psych psychology because my mentor, Brother Dennis, recommended to go social work because as a missionary, social work would be more applicable throughout the world. Where as psychology would be limited to western countries. So I went to social work and fell in love with it the first day and knew this what I wanted to do. So within the two years of grad school, I developed the first international committee or club student who support the poor, support international students and also to address human trafficking and help develop the curriculum for international studies for international social work for the unit program. And then throughout the school and doing my clinical practice, learned the importance of mental health. Dealing with crisis, over and over again, people trying to kill themselves due to madness and people with severe mental illness. People who are suicidal, homicidal, people born-like personalities. People with different mental health challenges and challenges with the system to address those needs and support system that is available. So learning the systemic approaches, the systemic outcome of it.

DHD: What do you do now, currently?

PCH: Now I work full-time for Orange County Healthcare Agencies as part of the P.E.R. team and C.A.T team. P.E.R. team stands for Psychiatric Emergency Response team, which is a member of the C.A.T team, Centralized Assessment team, who is assigned specifically to a local law enforcement department. I’m assigned to Garden Grove police and I ride with them full time, ten hours a day in a swat car, in a unit, in a patrol car responding to all police calls where as mental health call, responding to all psychiatric emergency situation, domestic, any call I can be help for as far as being part of their hostage negotiation team. Then on every Saturday I work as a captain member, covering the whole county. And then part-time I work at a community clinic to provide therapy.

DHD: How is your experience in working with the police department?

PCH: It helps me to overcome my fear anxiety with police. I’ve always, and this is part of the cultural, I guess PTSD of uniform. Of course people in Vietnam, we experience so much corruptions and abusive by the local officers that after they see the uniform over here never reach reaction of fear, anxiety. But working with law enforcement opens my mind after seeing how human they are, of how vulnerable they are and the pressures and the responsibility as a law enforcement officer. I also see the challenges they face to respond to people with mental health illness because they do not have enough training to
understand and develop the compassions and the resources to help people with mental health challenges.

DHD: Do you they’re connections with the police officers in Vietnam and here, or do you think those connections are present today?

PCH: Yeah. Especially with the older generation. They are very suspicious of law enforcement and they don’t trust law enforcement. They don’t report crimes; they don’t report things because they don’t believe law enforcement would do anything about it unless they pay them. Yeah. There is still a large distrusts and fear of law enforcement over here.

DHD: In what ways does that create a negative impact for the community?

PCH: They don’t report crimes, they don’t get help and they don’t know how to respond or interact with law enforcement when they do get pull over which escalate the situations. The anxiety to them may seem severe, oh, so they’re hiding something. So with me ridding with the few police and working with them and respond to calls with them every time I get a response to Vietnamese call. Being both translator for them or interpreter, I also help explain the cultural differences and reassure anxieties so that they can, we can get more cooperation’s.

DHD: You mentioned PTS. Have you experienced it or your own family have been having that as well?

PCH: Having what? Anxiety?

DHD: Yeah.

PCH: Oh yeah. Everybody. My family having anxiety including myself until I start ridding with them. Anxiety of this, having law enforcement not know what to do, seeing law enforcement as the bad guy.

DHD: How have you cooped with it?

PCH: For me, I’m fine now. Except I’m even on the rode especially in Garden Grove could say, oh, the officer I dealt with them, I’ve even make ground report if I observe it. I’m more willing to do crime preventions. Invite them over for lunch and dinner. When it’s an accident I’m more willing to call 911 to make a report, just driving, and thinking someone will make the report.

DHD: Does the Vietnamese community see you differently because you work with the police officers?
PCH: Yeah. Those who do know that I work with police officers they have different respect for me. They see me more like ally to help out advocate for them and with law enforcement as a resource; they see me as a resource to the community.

DHD: What do you in vision or what do you see? A more close connection with the police department and the Vietnamese community?

PCH: Well I hope more police department, especially within Orange County, to hire and recruit more Vietnamese speaking, not just Vietnamese, but Vietnamese speaking officers, male and female. Cause even with the Vietnamese officer that we have now throughout, not many of them know how to speak Vietnamese because they are born here or they came here when their young. So the Vietnamese is not fluent and they don’t have the understanding of the culture, the cultural gap between the first generations and the second and that kind of stuff. So they’re gonna recruit, make recruitment efforts and tryna hire more. And that way, having a Vietnamese officer will also educate the department about a different culture as well as a way for them to get in to the subculture of the Vietnamese community.

DHD: Can you describe the gap between the old generation and the new generation?

PCH: The new generations are, the older generations of course because of their PTSD and trauma will law enforcement they don’t trust law enforcement as much. They’re very fearful and suspicious of their, of law enforcement intention. So if there’s conflicts and law enforcement respond more than they will respond more with resistant, then cooperation’s and more suspicions than trust. And the younger generations sometimes they don’t care, they don’t care. They look a lot for something to do, your work or you just gotta give me your tickets, instead of seeing law enforcement as someone tryna help the community be a safer place.

DHD: What would you like to see for the new generation to do?

PCH: To be actively involve in community policing. To be involve in community relation with law enforcement and to develop that relationships cause its work both way. If the Vietnamese community doesn’t establish a relationship with the law enforcement department then they don’t know, they don’t understand. So they need to have both ways so that they can both get educated about the culture and the law, the practices cause many Vietnamese both new and old and young generation doesn’t know the law that well.

DHD: What do you think are some problems that the Vietnamese community are facing now?

PCH: Lack or resources, lack or resources for mental health. As far as for advocacy, lack of funding and to have programs, and also lack of leadership. Even the leaderships, the elected officials, the Vietnamese elected officials, they care less for mental health issues. At least from my perspective. The only think that they focus on is business and how to get them re-elected. They don’t do much or anything to help with the develop social
programs to help the community and they know the program, they know the problem exits and through their own family but that’s not their best interest.

DHD: What are some of the things that you want to accomplish?

PCH: Just to continue to rock the boat in the community. Bring about awareness and education about issues that’s important to the community that’s not being addresses. So not receiving enough attention and resources so making that aware. And tryna inspire more people to get involve. Take care of community, ownership of the problem.

DHD: Have you reached out to possibly, college students around the area?

PCH: Yeah. I go. I’m a regular speaker at different colleges, universities. I speak, train at Fullerton University, Fullerton, Cal State Long Beach, Westwood College and sometime go to UCI for medical students program training and teach.

DHD: Is there anything else that you would like to share at this moment that I have not addressed yet?

PCH: No.

DHD: Okay then.