Narrator: THAO NGUYEN
Interviewer: Mai Nguyen
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Translator: Joe Reinsvold

MN: Today is Monday November 19, 2012. This is Mai Nguyen with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project and I am interviewing Ms. Thao Nguyen. We are at her home in Santa Ana, California. Hello Ms. Thao, would you briefly introduce yourself?

TN: My name is Thao Nguyen.

MN: Born?

TN: I was born in Ca Mau, Vietnam.

MN: What are the names of your parents?

TN: My father’s name is Nguyen Van Vien, and my mother is Nguyen Thi Phung.

MN: What did your parents do? How did they live?

TN: Before 1975, my father’s family worked as contract laborers. Later on my father worked as a building contractor.

MN: Did you grow up in Ca Mau?

TN: Yes, I grew up in Ca Mau, where I went to school and then began vocational learning.

MN: What is it like in Ca Mau?
TN: Living in Ca Mau, well there were markets but nothing like now, living there was extremely miserable, but the situation wasn’t too bad because we had enough fish and other food to eat.

MN: Do you think that living in the United States is a lot different than living in Ca Mau?

TN: It’s definitely a lot different, even though over here I have to work it is not as miserable as in Vietnam, there’s just not enough time, yet even with very little work and loss of money it is still a more comfortable living.

MN: You prefer living in the United States right?

TN: That’s right.

MN: Isn’t it true that you had to live in extreme poverty when you were over there?

TN: Working there was very difficult. But back before 1975 business was really good. Then after ’75 there were the effects of war, and all sorts of other problems, bombs, having to seek shelter, and narrowly escaping death several times. Particularly my father. Then after a period of time we moved to the Ca Mau coconut vegetable market (Rau Dua). It was a good place for him to sell his building material, and after he started to earn a comfortable living I was able to go to school. I finished ninth grade and planned on continuing school but I had too many younger siblings therefore I had to go and learn a trade instead.

MN: Could you please tell me about a few of your childhood experiences?

TN: During the time when I was still little, besides generally just going to school, I would also play games like skipping rope, running races, practicing table tennis and a game called trong trai.

MN: What kinds of industry are there in your native region? (agriculture, production)?

TN: They grow a lot of rice over there, and then there’s the Ca Mau market where they sell things. It is also the place where my father would work as a building contractor selling fresh mortar.
MN: Were your neighbors kind to you?

TN: Yes. Everyone was so kind that no matter where I went they would treat me like family, and at Rau Dua, my neighbors never regarded me as a stranger, but more like a close relative.

MN: How did you celebrate holidays like the lunar new year, or birthdays? Would you invite your neighbors? Did you have large celebrations?

TN: They were quite large and well-planned, and we would invite our friends over to share in the fun. But the Tet new year was not the same as it is now, back then Tet was celebrated for 7 or 10 continuous days. Everyone around would come together for those happy and warm occasions.

MN: Was it different than the way it is here in the United States?

TN: It is completely different here in the U.S. because we have to work and don’t have the free time, often I only go out to church on Sunday, my place of consolation.

MN: Have you learned any special trade skills, like agriculture or sewing for example?

TN: During the time before ’75 when I was still young, I wanted to study nursing but my mother wouldn’t let me and I was forced to help the family back home. So I focused on working as a seamstress and later opened my own store.

MN: Who taught you how to sew?

TN: Mr. Anh Tu Cam and his wife who lived nearby. They were my very close neighbors, and just like family. They taught me how to sew.

MN: How old were you when you first learned to sew?

TN: My brother died during the military operations of ’68, and I started learning to sew in ’69.

MN: Was it easier to earn a living as a seamstress?
TN: Learning to sew provided me with a decent living. For the lunar new year I would stay busy sewing for an entire week, I sewed until my legs swelled up for a period of time after which my mother didn’t let me sew any more, and asked me to return home to help sell things.

MN: Thinking back to your childhood, what do you remember most about your parents and grandparents?

TN: I saw that my father’s family led a very hard life, working in cultivation. The fields they worked in were quite immense and it was a miserable work, they didn’t even have enough to eat and drink. Whenever I think about when I was little, I lovingly remember how my grandparents were only concerned about my welfare. As a kid, I remember that every morning, my grandfather would row over on a boat to ask my dad what he had for us kids to eat. And if there was nothing, my grandfather would go back out to catch us some food and bring it back for us to eat.

MN: Do you still think about your roots often?

TN: No matter how things are for me over here I still remember my ancestral roots. My parents are still alive and on the days when I don’t telephone them to hear their voices I am very sad.

MN: Can you describe the educational level of each member of your family?

TN: Out of all my younger brothers, my fifth brother received a high education, getting his baccalaureate, while I went up until grade 9 then I had to quit school early because I had too many younger siblings.

MN: Do you know any stories regarding the relationships of members of your family? For instance how your parents, grandparents, or other family members met their future spouses before getting married?

TN: No, from then until now I haven’t been married so whenever I take part in organizing one of my family members wedding receptions, I have a lot of fun, and most of my relatives and neighbors also attend. Generally speaking, in the countryside where
my relatives live everyone enjoys getting together in large family groups. Unlike so many people you see these days who just think about working and rarely pay attention to their neighbors.

MN: You don’t have a husband?

TN: No.

MN: Are you in any relationship?

TN: I just have my friends here.

MN: Were you ever in love with anyone back when you were younger?

TN: No.

MN: So you’ve just concerned yourself with work?

TN: I just stayed busy working, I had so many younger siblings that I needed to help my parents find wives for my brothers, I had to take good care of all five of them. Then after some time passed I grew melancholy and was compelled to leave the country in 1990, and on the eighth attempt I finally made it to Bidong island.

MN: Why did you think of escaping from your country, and leaving your parents behind?

TN: At the time my family was suffering due to all sorts of problems, and I didn’t make enough from working to get by. Life wasn’t treating us fairly, so I gambled my fate by taking to the sea. Yet when I set out by boat I thought I would surely die and never expected to live because so many others who went before me had died that way. But I still had to go no matter what might happen, if I lived then I lived, and if not then that would be it- I left it in God’s hands.

MN: Even with that belief you still went?

TN: Even though that’s the way I thought I still left, since if I was fortunate my family could have a better life, if not then oh well (I was resigned to my fate).
MN: Did your family have any special way of communicating or expressing their thoughts with you?

TN: At the time my parents didn’t allow me to leave, so I didn’t even tell them. One time I saw so many people getting caught that I had to return home in the middle of the night. My father asked me where I had been, yet I wouldn’t even dare tell my parents that I had tried to escape.

MN: You came to the United States all alone?

TN: Just myself, none of my relatives came over.

MN: None of your brothers had the will to come to the U.S.?

TN: There was no way they could have left. Men who were caught at sea would get beaten up or worse, so they didn’t even attempt it.

MN: Regarding the war between the Vietnamese and Americans, how did it affect you and your community?

TN: When the war came to us, we had to evacuate. At that time my older brother died, and my younger brother was ill and had to miss several years of school. Then my grandfather died. Then my mother gave birth but the baby died. All this happened within the same year, but I can’t remember what year it was.

MN: Where did you live during the war?

TN: Ca Mau.

MN: Did many battles take place in Ca Mau?

TN: Of course. Even though I can’t remember which year it was, there were many times when I was little that my father would instruct us to jump down into the underground shelter to escape the bombs being dropped from the planes. I was just a young girl but I remember hearing the planes along with the sounds of gunfire between the national army and the Vietcong, it was quite intense. There was an outpost near our home, at Rau Dua,
that was nearby to where my father also had us run toward. When we got there, the bomb shelter took a direct hit by an exploding shell. I narrowly escaped death so many times.

MN: How many siblings are there in your family?

TN: 5 younger brothers, and 2 younger sisters who are still living, originally my mother had 14 children altogether.

MN: Why did they all die?

TN: My older brother was shot and killed, he was the oldest. Then my mother gave birth to a child who died soon after, then my younger brother also died young while getting treated at the children’s hospital. Altogether my mother had 14 children, 7 died and 7 are still alive, but now there are really still 8 left, the reason being that my mother asked to adopt another daughter and then later gave birth to my youngest sister who is still alive even though all my other sisters died.

MN: During the war, did your family need to move or relocate in order to avoid the gunfire?

TN: Of course, quite a number of times. We had to constantly run from place to place over a period of several years, so my father had to work as a temporary contractor in order to earn a living.

MN: So your father took care of your entire family all by himself?

TN: My father worked hard to support us, so even my younger brothers and I went to work to help out.

MN: What work did he do as a contractor?

TN: At first he worked on a transport boat carrying raw materials which led to his gaining more experience and later getting work as a head contractor delivering construction materials. The other workers on his boat all loved him, and asked him to buy some land so that they could build large houses, then they supplied all the bricks, stone, cement,
tiles, equipment, metal roofing, etc., (for building homes) to sell for profit, and gradually he was able to earn quite a bit.

MN: What was your occupation during the war? Was it still sewing clothes?

TN: No, by that time I had quit that job already. That was during the 60’s, and the years of ‘72, ’68, in ’69 I was working as a nurse at Ca Mau hospital until ’73 when I quit.

MN: After that you sold merchandise?

TN: That’s correct.

MN: What types of things did you sell?

TN: I worked in a shop, selling coffee and food. That’s when I first started working in the retail trade. I did that until I grew discouraged and decided to flee the country.

MN: Is that because you were in business and other people tried to undermine you?

TN: No, for example I started my business out by first renting a spot and then set out some tables and chairs, selling on a small scale at first, until I had more money and could rent out the entire shop. After awhile I moved to a place near the hospital and I built a house on a plot of land there in order to sell. And then after I tried to flee the country I would leave it behind, and once others found out they would take it, then I would try another plan. Then after I had left the country and first came back I started selling all over again, and once I had earned enough money I would leave it once more.

MN: Did you ever take part directly in the war?

TN: At that time the liberation forces had taken over already, so the war was already over. But at that time I had a shop near the bus station where I encountered many petty thieves, and because I didn’t agree to go with them, they started to steal money from me but I still tried to make money to pay off my debts, I felt so sorry for my parents. At the time my mother asked me what I was doing that made me look so sick, yet I didn’t have the heart to tell her the truth. After she had finally put up with enough I told her the truth,
and she gave me the money that was still left over from their savings so I could pay off my debts. That’s when I started to get depressed and looked for a way to flee the country.

MN: Even though you didn’t fight in the war what do you remember most that happened in Vietnam during that time?

TN: What I remember most from the war was that my brother died in ’68, he was hit by gunfire and died. It was a miserable time all the way until mua he do lua (Easter Offensive of ’72). At that time the two sides fought a battle in Ca Mau that left behind scores of civilian and Vietcong dead whose bodies were taken to the hospital mortuary, at the same hospital where I was taking care of the wounded. I can still remember one particular girl who lived in the countryside just raising pigs yet had been shot in the skull. I cleaned out several shrapnel fragments from her head, the poor girl, and even today I can still recall the pieces of her putrid flesh on my hands.

MN: You were still working as a nurse at the hospital so that’s why you saw all the things that occurred there, isn’t that right?

TN: Yes, that’s right.

MN: Were situations of panic common?

TN: Yes, one crisis would often be followed by another. Sometimes there would be blood everywhere but I wasn’t scared. During those frantic emergencies I would naturally gather the strength to go help the wounded, and wash their bloody wounds, I never got scared.

MN: Did you ever have contact with American soldiers?

TN: At that time there weren’t any American soldiers…we only had contact with the Duong organization or something like that, well there wasn’t really any contact… mostly just regular citizens.

MN: Were you ever arrested and imprisoned by the enemy?
TN: Oh my gosh, near the time when I fled the country, I spent six and a half months in Ca Mau prison after I was arrested for being a suspected nationalist sympathizer. That made me grow even more resentful, and it was because of that hatred that I absolutely had to escape the country, so many things had been building up that caused me to eventually try to escape the country by boat. At the prison they held me in a dark cell.

MN: Were there many people in there?

TN: There were a lot of people. They kept us in the dark with our arms and legs tied and they didn’t let me out for over 6 months.

MN: Did they give you anything to eat or drink?

TN: Inside there they fed us pork and stuff like that.

MN: Were the other people there also ordinary Vietnamese citizens like yourself?

TN: The people imprisoned there were Vietnamese from all different provinces, and criminals and non-criminals alike were thrown in there together. Inside the prison they thought I was a nationalistic activist so they locked me up down below in a dark, dank dungeon-like cellar. The stench down there was so bad that I wished I could die. Instead of a toilet they left us a chamber pot with a cover. More than ten or twelve people all used the same pot to go in.

MN: Did they separate the men and women?

TN: They divided us up, the men had their own chamber pot, while the women were kept separate, then for example at night they would make us take turns, every hour one of the women would clang a bell to wake up, then an hour later the men would do they same and if one of us failed to do so the rest of the cellmates would all get punished.

MN: Thinking back (to those experiences), how does it make you feel?

TN: My feeling then, well now I am hardened, yet remembering that terrifying place again, I thank God that from prison, to all the death, and every other rancorous event that befell me… not to mention the fact that my family grew impoverished because of me
when I was forced to confess to charges of treason and my despondent father had to transfer over the house near Ca Mau market, the one which he had constructed. It was my fault we had to return to our hard life in the countryside, and it saddened me to witness my family’s devastation. I was so upset and angry that I just had to escape by sea.

MN: Was anybody in your family wounded or left disabled because of the war?

TN: I can’t remember if any of my uncles were, but my youngest brother was shot and lost his arm.

MN: Is he still living in Vietnam?


MN: When you go back to Vietnam, does he ever talk about what happened then?

TN: No, it’s not mentioned at all. To do so would simply remind him of all the emotional pain and devastation we suffered in the past. Yet we are no longer living in the past so we shouldn’t bring those things up.

MN: How did you rebuild your life after the war, and how did it feel to be away from your home country?

TN: Away from home I felt the misery, imprisonment, and dying happening to my family, and many times I wished I could return to living like the person I was before being imprisoned, but I no longer felt like I was the same as the people around me. I was depressed with life and started to pull away from my family.

MN: After all your failed attempts to flee the country, did your parents ever advise you to give up?

TN: My parents didn’t want me to leave and questioned why I would want to go when we still had food to eat. Even if they didn’t let me go I was still miserable, and felt responsible for my family’s plight. It was because of me that my father was sad and had to sell everything he had, just to take care of me. So of course my parents never wanted to be away from me.
MN: Was it your desire to come to the United States so that you could later repay your
gratitude towards them?

TN: That’s right, to compensate them for all their struggles to take care of me.

MN: Why didn’t the rest of your siblings come over?

TN: They wanted to go, but simply were unable to.

MN: Was it because they didn’t want to sacrifice their lives?

TN: They were still young, and didn’t even know what becoming a refugee meant. They had no idea. When I was living in Ca Mau, various friends had told me to come over to get work. But my siblings didn’t want to leave, neither did they want to abandon our parents and grandparents in Vietnam. At the time we thought that if we left the country it would be forever, that we would never return. If they knew that they could go back like (people do) nowadays then they would also have left.

MN: When you left you thought that you would never see your native country again?

TN: That’s right, I didn’t expect to ever return.

MN: Then how would you be able to show your gratitude?

TN: I could help them by working hard and finding a way to send them money, either that or someday I would ask to return after earning enough money to live with my parents again. I had to make the sacrifice since there wasn’t anything I could do in Vietnam.

MN: What did you think about the policy of the United States during and after the war?

TN: ……

MN: You left your homeland to come to the United States looking for a better life and to return the favor you owed to your parents. How did you travel here?

TN: I took whatever means were available to me at the time; I left by sea, on a boat.

MN: Can you describe your journey?
TN: I told myself to just get on the boat and let it take me wherever it would take me, neither life nor death mattered as long as they would take me. I made the attempt a total of seven times, and had used up all my money. I could barely afford to bring along any food. That’s the condition I was in when I left, for I never expected to make it out. I had already tried so many times, yet I tried my luck again and was finally able to make it to Bidong island.

MN: What items did you take with you?

TN: Nothing, I didn’t take anything with me. At first we went on a small boat and planned to board a larger boat when we got to open waters. But when we reached the other boat we were surprised to find out that the communists had confiscated it along with all the extra rice and food, and after seeing them dump out all the food, our boat kept going with the communists shooting and chasing after us. They were close behind but we had a protective covering which saved us from the intense gunfire, and no one was injured. We then sailed on all the way to Thailand, and were almost outside of Thai territorial waters when we approached an oil rig and encountered pirates. They chased us down in several of their boats, then began making noises with hammers, while the women and children prayed with all their might. We had been at sea for 4 days and 5 nights or so, I forget exactly. We were so hungry that we all began to faint, for after our milk and noodles had been consumed, the smaller boat was left with only springs. At that time I fainted and didn’t know what was going on, I just remember opening my eyes and seeing the pirates standing there holding hammers. Later the other people told me what happened while I was passed out. The children were begging, and they could tell that we must be starving by our actions, as there was only one person who could speak English. So they then took out a saucepan for cooking rice, which looked like the type of cookware commonly used by Thai people, it had a round shape and black color. They then passed along their cooking pot and let the children eat. Then after that their crew chief ordered the line cut, to our great relief, and we then moored alongside the oil rig. The people on the drilling rig brought us water and fruit and offered to take us along, but we were still afraid they might be pirates so we didn’t dare go onboard. We told them we would continue on to Bidong island. They told us to go to Galang or someplace, I’m not
sure, anyways our group insisted that we go to Bidong island. It took a long time to get there, but they had given us enough gas and oil so we were able to make it to Bidong. But when we got there the ships wouldn’t let us dock, and I could see how crowded with people the island was, it was extremely crowded. I could see all my fellow Vietnamese beating drums as if in protest and our boat was given a number. When it was our turn the authorities waved us in and directed us where to go. I remember I was ready to faint, and when we first landed they gave us milk to drink and then cooked noodles for us to eat. Whoever felt like they were going to faint would simply scoop up a handful of milk to drink and then just lay there. Then the doctors examined us, and we were able to pass through after they gave us vaccinations and medication. At that time we were all crawling around in agony much like dead people who had been brought back to life.

MN: How many people were on your boat?

TN: Exactly 41 people, including men, women, and children.

MN: Did anything happen during those 5 nights and 4 days?

TN: Some people vomited and others fainted, yet thank the lord nobody died.

MN: Nobody was beaten?

TN: No.

MN: Was that only your group?

TN: We paid them money, I ought to have been on a bigger ship instead of the smaller boat that we ended up going on.

MN: Doctors…

TN: When we got to Bidong island, the doctors there were ready to provide us with the proper treatment. I was on boat 591.

MN: Was that the big ship?
TN: No. Usually in order to get on the island of Bidong each boat was given a number— for example 590, 591, 592, 593, etc. I felt so sorry for what happened to boat 602, there were many people on that boat who were raped, beheaded, or lost at sea.

MN: Did you see it or just hear about it?

TN: I saw them when they first arrived, many were writhing and crying in anguish after having been raped, I saw them with my own eyes. They described how the husbands had been hacked to death and their wives raped, and any husband who resisted would have their wife beheaded as well. That was on boat 602. I don’t know how many of them escaped being hacked to death, but I heard that that ship was quite crowded yet maybe only a third or a quarter of them survived. Those people are still living here now, in California. Sometimes I see them down at Phuoc Loc Tho (Asian Garden Mall).

MN: Do you know why they were raped and beheaded?

TN: Pirates of course. Those pirates were intensely cruel. Back when I first fainted and came to again I saw them foaming at the mouths, looking extremely vicious. It was horrific. The pirates…

MN: What nationality were they?

TN: They were Thai.

MN: Who were the people that ended up sponsoring you?

TN: I remember that there was nobody to sponsor us while we were there. Our only hope came from the high commissioner (for refugees), United Nations, and Ms. Mary who was very compassionate towards the Vietnamese. The high commissioner and Malaysia were also quite kind to us. Later the high commissioner called for us to return to Vietnam, and we never expected that as refugees we would be so maltreated after that. The abuse included cutting the wires and not letting us sleep, and we would be left outside to lay on our cots in rainy weather as well as the scorching sun. Later we made it worse by throwing objects at them, and after hitting them in the head with rocks, they started using tear gas and grenades against us, leading to several deaths and suicides.
MN: How long were you on that island?

TN: On that island, well let me see, I arrived in 1990. I’m not sure what year I was moved to Santa Bici, altogether I was there six months. I arrived in February 1990, but unfortunately I was forced to return to Vietnam in June of 1996.

MN: Why did you have to go back to Vietnam?

TN: Repatriation.

MN: Repatriation means that you were sent back, right?

TN: They sent me back. After having made the trip by sea, and getting to Bidong island, then spending several years stuck there, I ended up back in Vietnam. When I got sent back to Vietnam it was within… I forget now what year it was that I had my interview. At that time I had to stay, at first I stayed in Ca Mau then went to live at a friend’s house in Saigon for two years, by the old place on Pasteur where they interviewed me. In the morning my friend would take me there, and I remember spending a thousand dong every morning to buy peanuts along with a bottle of soda and not eating again until the evening, when my friend would pick me up after she got off work and we would return home for dinner. Then early the next morning she would take me there again, and that’s how it went for two years, trying to get the background check and all that done and having to rely on the assistance from the American delegation, as well as one man in particular, who name just slipped my mind. When I showed my repatriation papers to him, he said that my paperwork should have been processed by 1998 but the Vietnamese kept the file suppressed, so I had to file a complaint. That’s when I had to go in through a gate then had to pay some money to be allowed to sneak into the back to meet the man who would help me, though I forget the name. So that was it, once the paperwork was done, I returned home to Ca Mau where I submitted my interview paperwork. As I was filling them out I had trouble getting it all certified, and I wasn’t allowed to simply confirm anything on my own behalf. At the time all those papers had to be bought, and since I didn’t have any money I had to borrow it from others. Then I tried to buy the papers, but in the end that didn’t work, so I finally asked the lady to please help me and after giving her a sum of money they completed them for me and I just had to sign my name.
MN: What questions did they ask at your interview?

TN: They asked so many questions, the American official interviewed me for around 45, or perhaps 1 hour 45 minutes, that lady would usually fail people, for 1 hour and 45 minutes I had to talk about everything from my childhood to the present, about when I worked, my time as a nurse, and even about my parents. I don’t know why I could remember all that back then while now I keep forgetting. It’s probably because of all the time that has passed and all the crises in my life like when I was sick with malaria on the island, and even after coming here I have frequently had to visit the neuropathology clinic, so I only have a rough memory regarding many specific events.

MN: When you came over here, did you go through El Toro Marine Corps Air Station or Camp Pendleton?

TN: No.

MN: What were your initial feelings and experiences like during those first few days when you arrived in the United States?

TN: When I came here I thought the climate was pleasant but there was so much paperwork and documents that I needed to have like a green card. Yet when I went to work they said I was using someone else’s name, and that person’s parents even had the same names as mine did, nobody even knew what the heck was going on. So I asked my sponsor to drive me to Santa Ana from Long Beach, and went up to the social security office to see if they could help me. Finally I had to go back to Long Beach so that I could fill out the paperwork correctly in order to get my green card. When I tried getting my social security card they still asked if I had all my documents so I showed them my entry permit from the airport. Then I had to do my fingerprints several times before I could receive social security, so many complications....

MN: Where was the first place that you lived?

TN: Long Beach.

MN: What did you do to earn a living?
TN: When I first came here I didn’t have a job, so I studied nails after which I began learning to drive but then fell ill. During my illness, I couldn’t stop thinking about events from my past. So I had to enter the hospital for anxiety. And then there were many times when I felt I couldn’t breathe so I was also admitted for a nervous disorder.

MN: Did any church help sponsor you to come to the United States?

TN: I was sponsored by the evangelical church in Long Beach. Back then it was Mr. Chung Tu Long, the person who sponsored me was HTTL.

MN: Who greeted you at the airport when you first arrived in this country?

TN: The church, and Mr. Chung Tu Long were there to meet me. They also took care of all my food.

MN: What about a place to live?

TN: Afterward I received money from the government for housing, at first my sponsor took care of me then later on after I eventually got my paperwork in order I received food stamps and money from the government.

MN: Did you stay at the church your first day?

TN: Mr. Tu Long found a place for me to stay down in Long Beach.

MN: In your opinion what is the greatest difficulty in starting a new life in the U.S.?

TN: When I was going to school, my food expenses were covered by the government, yet when I was going to school I didn’t have a car to drive, and I got sick as well due to the unfamiliar cold weather which caused my body to ache.

MN: After studying how did you find work?

TN: I took the bus to Hang Nga nail school. Then I also tried my best to work as a seamstress since I was used to doing that.

MN: Did you work at a company?
TN: No, I didn’t work for a company because I didn’t yet know any English at that time. After studying nails I went looking for jobs at many different places before settling down to one place where I could work until I got old.

MN: What transportation did you use when you went to study nails?

TN: I went by bus.

MN: From Long Beach…

TN: Each morning I would get on the bus in Long Beach and then travel down 7th Street which ran directly to Hang Nga.

MN: Considering that you couldn’t speak English back then, how did you know where to get off?

TN: It was difficult but I met some Vietnamese school children who helped me so I was able to gradually figure it out.

MN: How long did you study nails before you were finished?

TN: Two and a half months, then I passed the test. After that I started doing facials and I studied 360 hours before quitting, I got sick half way through and had to lay in the hospital so I decided to quit.

MN: Where was the first place that you worked?

TN: I walked into a shop that had just opened for business and worked there for awhile but later quit when I wasn’t making any money. Life was hard, and then I fell ill and stopped working after only 4 or 5 years.

MN: Did you make any friends while you worked there?

TN: Here making friends depends on the person and situation. I’ll talk with whoever seems happy but not if they are too stern. In short, I prefer to socialize with whoever I feel comfortable with.

MN: Do you have any friends in Vietnam that you keep in contact with?
TN: Only occasionally, I still have several friends in Vietnam who are earning a good living, although a few of my friends there are very poor.

MN: How do you communicate with them?

TN: I call them by phone to see how they are doing.

MN: Did you have any contact with your friends while you were in the refugee camp?

TN: No, I didn’t have any communication with anyone (over there), my parents couldn’t even send me any correspondence. They thought I was dead already. When I was repatriated and saw my parents again for the first time they were as skinny as tree branches, and when they saw me they cried out of happiness.

MN: After that did your friends come over to visit you?

TN: When my friends came over to see me all they could do was cry.

MN: When you were on the island did you have many friends?

TN: On the island we formed our own community, I earned a living sewing and selling items.

MN: Can you describe your journey to the United States?

TN: The interview was in Saigon. But on my first attempt to flee the country I was with my friends. We pooled the money we had saved so that we could go together. But we were tricked, I remember that time I nearly got caught by the police while getting on the boat with the others. I told the police I was there to watch the boats that night, and planned to go down river to visit my aunt in the morning, so they eventually let me go. But after a period of time the police suddenly showed up to arrest me while I was working at my shop in Ca Mau. They imprisoned me for treason for 6 and-a-half months straight before releasing me.

MN: That was the first time?
TN: No, I tried many times. I would hide out in the bomb shelter at Bien Hoa, my friends would meet me up there, and we planned to escape via Vung Tau but our plan was revealed after several of them got caught so I had to take the bus back home.

MN: What are some of the differences between living in Vietnam and the Vietnamese community here?

TN: Things have changed a lot for me. Moreover, the people in Vietnam generally care about each other more, while over here people live for themselves. But actually it’s already that way in Vietnam because everyone is so miserable these days. People are striving so hard to make a living that they cannot raise their children in the same way they once did. For example in the countryside we used to hold such big dinners and prepare the meals, but on my recent trip to Vietnam I found it impossible to get by, since everyone just wanted to get together to eat at restaurants all the time, or would order out instead of cooking at home.

MN: Have you become an American citizen yet?

TN: Yes, I have American citizenship already.

MN: Why did you decide to become an American citizen?

TN: Since I’m living in the U.S. I have to follow American laws.

MN: Can you talk a bit about your experience in becoming an American citizen? Did you study in Vietnamese or English?

TN: I try my best with whatever subject I need to learn, and I approached studying for my American citizenship test the same way. After getting off work I would take a short nap, and get up again after 1 or 2 hours. I would then sit at the table and practice writing down answers over and over again until morning since my English wasn’t that good.

MN: Where did you find the time to study?
TN: I would only go to sleep for one or two hours a night, then I would get up and grab the flashlight off the floor to go study but sometimes I was so worn out that I would fall and go to sleep on the floor until morning came.

MN: When you took you test, did they make it difficult for you?

TN: They asked me a lot of questions during the test, but I was able to remember the answers.

MN: Were they in English or Vietnamese?

TN: They spoke to me in English but I had an interpreter there that day.

MN: Do you remember which questions you had to write down answers to?

TN: No, they didn’t ask me to write anything, because they saw the picture on my refugee card, along with my repatriation paper, and could tell that my memory wasn’t that sharp, and that my mind had been traumatized by all the tear gas, grenades, and death back then.

MN: Did you vote in the last election?

TN: Yes, I vote in every election.

MN: Why do you go to vote?

TN: Coming here, the United States has given me freedom, and everything else this country has to offer so I feel like I must do something to show my faith in this country.

MN: After coming here did you keep in contact with your family and relatives?

TN: Yes, I still do. Before calling cards were too expensive but not anymore. I call them all the time now.

MN: Who do you usually call?

TN: My parents.

MN: Do you go back to Vietnam to visit?
TN: Yes, I go back to see my parents. They are old now so they are always asking me to return.

MN: How old are they?

TN: My father is 85 or 86, and my mother is eighty-some.

MN: Do you ever want to stay with them permanently instead of returning to the United States?

TN: Of course, often I think about living over there and spending more time to be close with my parents, but then I think about my limited economic situation and realize I need to work here in order to take care of both my parents and myself.

MN: Whenever you go back to visit, do you think about helping improve the country?

TN: If I have enough money, I will use some of it to help the poor over there, I sometimes regret the fact that whenever I go back and buy rice for the poor, children, etc. I cannot offer as much as the other people can but I have a heart and give what I can to help those poor communities.

MN: While living in the U.S., do you hear or see anything on a daily basis that makes you miss Vietnam?

TN: Sometimes I’m out busy all day, but I will call to Vietnam. Sometimes I remember back to when I little, but many times I think about the war and it’s terror and devastation even though I wish I could forget those things, since all that does is make my mind uneasy.

MN: What traditions or customs do you think are worth making the effort to preserve?

TN: Traditions are one thing that, if I had young children to take care of here then they would have to be good speakers of both Vietnamese and English. We must preserve the Vietnamese language, as well as showing courtesy and respect towards elders, the only way is for children to take classes at the church, so that the older people there can teach them Vietnamese and everything else. That way our cultural traditions will never be lost.
MN: What things do you feel are hardest to preserve?

TN: The old customs are gone, except for Sunday. Even though that’s a day of rest we make sure to get together for breakfast, then spend the rest of the day going to church and doing other activities.

MN: Do you think those are changes that need to be made here in the U.S.?

TN: Correct.

MN: What about preserving customs related to the lunar new year, or food?

TN: Of course, even though I don’t have anyone here I will still occasionally follow Vietnamese traditions such as cooking food for the Tet new year, even though I won’t make as much as in Vietnam. During Tet in Vietnam I would make rice cakes (goi banh), although here people usually just go buy one or two. There would also be caramelized pork (thit kho) and all kinds of dishes, and many guests would come over, while over here there are fewer people to cook for. Everyone else has family to take care, or relatives to get together with; while I have nobody- just whoever is free to come over. And sometimes if my friends are busy than they won’t come over at all.

MN: It’s so easy to buy those foods out in the street that nobody wants to cook, right?

TN: There’s no reason why anyone should waste time cooking only 1 or 2 Tet rice cakes when it’s so much easier to go buy them.

MN: Do you participate in any community activities?

TN: I just go to church. The church is my place of solace and learning about God brings me peace of mind. God is our salvation. Knowing that causes me to always think of God.

MN: That’s every Sunday right?

TN: I go every Sunday. But we sometimes have church activities on Tuesday, Friday, or Saturday as well. I go whenever I’m free since it helps me to relax. If all I did was go to work and come home again I’d go crazy.
MN: Do you ever go down to Little Saigon on Bolsa (street)?

TN: I’ll go there to shop, but rarely go there for fun. I never, ever, stay simply to hang out. I just hurry in if I need to buy something then leave. I don’t like crowded places.

MN: What do you think of Little Saigon?

TN: It’s just because I don’t have free time to sit around for fun. Whenever I feel like getting something to eat or buying something inside like clothes, I’ll take a brief walk around to window shop before leaving. But I never stay for long. Generally speaking I don’t have the time. I have to go to church twice a day. In the morning I spend a little time to clean up my house. At eleven o’clock I go to meet up with my church group until 2:30. Then I go home for short while. Then we meet from 3:30 to 5:30 over at the church and then eat dinner. I go home at 7 or 8 o’clock.

MN: In your opinion what will become of Vietnamese culture in America?

TN: Even though the Vietnamese culture here may remain, there are many people who don’t follow God. And if people don’t go to church so that their children can learn Vietnamese then they will lose contact with their roots. If they go out for fun all the time then they will never learn Vietnamese. That’s one reason why in all this time I haven’t met those type of friends while the people at my church still retain their traditional Vietnamese roots.

MN: Do you have any other special memories or experiences that you would like to share with me?

TN: I just want to share my wish that first of all my parents will come here to see the United States. That’s because a long time ago my father told me he wanted to come here before he died, but later was hit by a car and then was sick for a period of time. He kept it hidden by saying he was healthy even though he was quite weak. Recently I sponsored them but I don’t know anything yet. I pray that God will bring them over here to visit so that my wish will come true. I’ve also prayed for quite some time that God will continue to build up our church in Vietnam. It used to have a large congregation but in the last few weeks I keep hearing that it is shrinking which makes me sad.
MN: For your closing words, would you like to leave any impression or experience as a refugee living in the United States, or leave any final words that may influence future generations?

TN: I think that as Vietnamese, whether we are young or old, we should never abandon our roots. No matter what country we live in, where we go, or what we do, we should always remember where we came from- the Vietnamese roots which were handed down to us by our ancestors. I hope God will bless us even more, and that we make sure to always hold on to our roots. Thank you!

MN: Thank you.