TVD: Hello my name is Thuy Vo Dang and I am here with Nguyen Do Phu to interview him for the Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation 500 Oral Histories Project on November 8, 2010.

TVD: First off can you please state your name and tell me where and you were born.

NDP: My name is Phu Do Nguyen. I was born in Vietnam in 1965 in Saigon. And that’s where I came from.

TVD: 1965 in Saigon?

NDP: Yes

TVD: Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood growing up in Saigon?

NDP: I grew up before the war, before 1975. My father was a, as I recall, he always wanted to be a professor teaching math but somehow the war drafted him into becoming a soldier. So he was playing his part in defending our country and I was a little boy growing up and I guess because of his education, even though he was a soldier in the Republic, South Vietnamese Republic Army, he always got a job tutoring sons and daughters of those generals and colonels in the army. I had a pretty childhood, always staying in Saigon, didn’t have to go much anywhere. My mom was a teacher. She teaches Kindergarten. She taught
Kindergarten when I was a little kid. And I had two brothers and one sister, so I had a very happy childhood before 1975, before my father died.

TVD: What happened?

NDP: My father died in 1974 as a soldier. In any way, casualty of war is a normal thing. But after he died, for one year our life was still okay. Drastic change took over in 1975 when the communist took over in Vietnam.

TVD: Okay, can I just go back just a little bit before 1975 and ask you, what it was like growing up. What was your community like? What was the neighborhood like?

NDP: I remember, I had a good time in my neighborhood. Went out playing with the kids. I went to a private school because I flunk out of public school. I wasn’t smart enough so I flunk out of public school when I took the test entering first grade. My father took me there and I remember the name of the school, still now in existence, is Le Quy Don. This very famous person in Vietnamese, used to be a public official back in the, I think maybe, in the 14th Century. I tried to enter into the school but I flunk out because I remember vividly there was a test of a two person, one riding a bike, one walking, the bike’s in front of the kid, which is the faster object and I marked the guy who walked so I flunked the test. So my intelligence was not up to that level. So I flunked so my father decided that I had to attend a school—there was a trend in Vietnam that if you had your son or daughter attend a somewhat private school learning about foreign culture, different cultures and make you a better person so I had to attend a somewhat French, French, you know, oriented school, but not exactly French. But I learned Vietnamese at the same time learning a foreign language. The name of the school is *Aurore*, which in English means sunrise but in Vietnamese means “Rang Dong”...
TVD: So what other languages do you know besides Vietnamese and English?

NDP: I understand a little bit of French. I probably understand more than I can speak because it’s been a long time and I haven’t used it. I’m pretty conversational in Spanish, so I can get by. I’m fluent in both English and Vietnamese.

TVD: Okay. In your family, do you know of anyone with special skills or trade of some kind? You mentioned that your father was a soldier and your mother was a teacher, but among your relatives, your kin?

NDP: My brother and sister except that I recall that my brother was pretty hyper so went all around the neighbor and try to play around a lot and my father use to scold him so many times. My little sister, she’s pretty sweet, so we didn’t have any particular skill. Not much, we were pretty obedient kids. Didn’t get involve in a lot of fights. When I was a little kid, I got pushed around, but didn’t get into fights. Besides that, we didn’t have any particular skill. We’re just normal kids growing up in the country, even war torn, but we had a pretty happy childhood.

TVD: What was your house like in Saigon?

NDP: My house in Saigon was like, maybe three rooms, a kitchen. We got a bedroom upstairs where everyone sleeps together, and we had a maid. I was happy playing around. The maid cleaned up after us, looked after us. Your parents just go to work, and then you go to school, and then you get back home and you play and you go out into the neighborhood and you have fun with the kids in your neighborhood. As long as you study, and you don’t make a lot of trouble, you’ll be fine.

TVD: Would you describe your family in Vietnam as Middle Class?
NDP: I would say so; I would say its Middle Class. We were not very rich, but are Middle
Class, and we interact with people. We went out to eat at night, on the weekends, and my
father would take all of us, three kids, and a little girl and my mom on his Vespa, around
Saigon.

TVD: So you had a Vespa?

NDP: Yeah, my dad had a Vespa. I was standing in the front with my two little brothers and
little sisters, sitting right in between my mom and dad.

TVD: What would you say, besides the kind of class status in your family, what’s the overall
education level?

NDP: I would say college, somewhat college. My father was a college student at the time
when he married my mom, and my mom, I think, has a two-year degree, that’s how she gets
involved in teaching kindergarten, so that’s some college.

TVD: Are they both from Saigon?

NDP: No, originally my dad came from Phu Tho, which is the northern region, north of
Hanoi. My mom originally came from Hung Yen, which is a northern part of Hanoi. I think
they both grew up in Hanoi, which is the capital of Vietnam as of now.

TVD: And how did they end up in Saigon?

NDP: When the communists took over in 1954, that’s when the mass exodus happened,
from people from the north come to the south because they’re afraid of the communists
after they had a revolution, like Mao Zedong tried to kill a lot of people. My family was
afraid, as intellectuals, that my grandpa will get killed or they would put us in people’s
court and kill them. So, that’s how they came to South Vietnam.
TVD: Okay. Is there anything distinctive about your family name? I'm curious because “Nguyen” is very common, of course; many Vietnamese people have that last name, but do you know any stories behind your name, either your first name or the naming of your family?

NDP: Yes, my father always liked poetry, especially Chinese poetry. I think he’s pretty much in love with poetry, so he named me after a very famous poet in Chinese named “Du Fu” that means “Do Phu” in Vietnamese. So many people think that I am a reborn poet, but I’m pretty bad at poetry. I can speak and write, but I can’t do much poetry. I don’t have the blood for it; you need to be a little more romantic. I think my father’s side . . . he’s a pretty romantic guy. That got killed when I became a lawyer, so if you want to kill your romantic side, be a lawyer.

TVD: So you were born in ’65, ten years later, Saigon fell. Where were you on April 30th, 1975?

NDP: I vividly remember as my uncle, my two aunts, and whole family was inside the family car, which belonged to my aunt, and trying to find a way to get to a boat on April 30th of 1975. We were looking around, trying everywhere to look for a boat and then we heard on the news that we gave up, we surrendered. My uncle and my aunt looked at me and said, “It’s over, but it’s alright, I guess,” that’s what she said. They steal Vietnamese, so we surrendered, we lost. And at that time, my father died already so she started comforting us, and would be like, “it will be okay,” so we went home and the neighbors start telling us that the communists will be rolling their tank into Saigon, and people told us that they would kill us and harass you if you don’t come out and salute them or give them a hug. So I came home, went out with people and try to get a bag of dried noodles, went out in the street—
remember the street—Le Ban Xuyen. Right now its “Cach mang thang tam,” which is “August Revolution” Road right in Saigon. In front of the school was the Virgin Mary, and I was standing outside and tried to see these tanks coming by and these communist troops coming into Saigon with their flags and people waving at them, kind of afraid of them, and tried to give them food, so I walked up and tried to give them food, too; the dried noodles, so that's what I did.

TVD: So can you tell me how you were feeling at the time? Do you remember what sort of emotions you had?

NDP: Mixed feelings. I didn't know what was going on. I knew there was going to be a big change coming over. I saw the communist soldiers; I'm not use to the way they dress and they just come in rolling into town and I was very nervous, coming home don't know what's going to happen to our family. That's all the feeling we had, and the streets were abandoned, people left the country, and all the houses were being loot by all the people, so it was kind of chaotic in Saigon. I'm lucky that I didn't live in the countryside, so I didn't have to escape, but our family before that prepared us for leaving town because my mom brought back waters and emergency food, shelters, and tried to buy a lot of things so that if the communists come over and kill us, we can start running away because that was the experience in 1954.

TVD: So in your family, and this is including your extended family, were there other casualties in the war besides your father?

NDP: On my mom's side, her brother got killed in the war. He was young, and stepped on a mine and got killed in the war, and that's on my mom's side. On my dad's side, my dad is the only man in the family, so he only got killed, so got two sisters left. That's about it.
TVD: Was he killed in combat?

NDP: I think he died from activity round, one exploding and fell inside.

TVD: So did life for you change after 1975?

NDP: Dramatically. I think after 1975, we grew up faster because money changed and I had to do little things to help out my family. I had to go on the streets and start selling things along with my brothers, and I was selling fans and my brother was selling the traditional Vietnamese hat for ladies, so we went around from market to market and tried to sell things.

TVD: Did they have to stop going to school to do this?

NDP: We wait for a while before everything resume normal, but I was attending school and selling things on the weekends at the same time. As the communists came over, I was in the middle of fifth grade and then starting sixth grade.

TVD: So was it just you and your brother, or did your sisters also . . .

NDP: My sisters, no. My sisters too young, my other brothers too young and my mom started teaching, and they started rationing all the food. So my mom would go to school and get some kind of soup every lunchtime because she is considered a worker for the government and I remember there was some kind of water base and one little piece that looks like meat and them some rice and we loved it. I mean, we didn’t have enough food and growing up as boys, we need food, and we didn’t have enough nutrition. So everything we can eat, we love it.

TVD: So did your mom—she was allowed to keep--

NDP: So, by the time I was 15, my mom thought that I would get drafted and I would get sent to Cambodia, and plus because of my background, I probably couldn't get to college,
and didn't have much direction in life at that time. Everyone was sort of... you saw their father went into the concentration camps, and the north coming over, and your life change. You know that you get poorer; you had to go to class and say things you don't like. So I started, sort of like, had feeling of not liking the communists already, even at that young age. I had to lie, I had to write a self proclamation story about people I didn't know about. So deep inside, subconsciously I didn't like the communists that much. I didn't know much about their theory, but I knew I had to lie somehow, so I didn't like it. And my mom told me that if I stay back in Vietnam, I probably would end up being casualty of war in Cambodia. Even my cousin's mom, the north coming over, saying that it's not a good place to live. So she saved up everything and tried to have the family escape on a boat going anywhere except staying over in Vietnam. And that's how it happened.

TVD: And when was this?

NDP: Its 1979. My mom—our family—couldn't plan a boat for the whole family. So what happened is she planned for me to escape alone. So she bought a space for me on a boat. At that time, the Vietnamese, because they invade Cambodia, and had a war with China so they started deporting Chinese people outside of Vietnam, its called “Xi Mai” formalized escape from the Vietnamese government, so my mom had to buy me a fake passport, with a fake Chinese name. I recall it cost my family about a couple thousand dollars, I think. She put up a savings, maybe $3500, I think at that time.

TVD: Why you? Why you and not your siblings?

NDP: I was about to get drafted, so she would send the oldest kid away, and my cousin already in America, and they wrote back a letter saying to go to America. So my mom told me, “You got to escape.” So she sent me alone on a boat, my boat had more than thirty
something people, by myself and with a friend of hers—older friend—tried to escape. So, there we go. I got on a boat, stay at Rach Gia, which is the western part of Vietnam. For a while, a couple days, and before they hurdled us on a boat, and we got on a boat and tried to escape, get out of the sea.

TVD: So how long did it take?

NDP: Fourteen days on the sea, and I think it was too small of a boat. It’s about twenty-seven meters long, I think about four meters wide, thirty-seven or twenty-seven, I don’t remember exactly, but they try to put four hundred and twenty-five people in the boat and we sat all crammed down, sitting on the boat everywhere—inside, outside—they don’t have enough water. So I was sitting down in a cramming position, and we got out onto the sea. As you look at the boat, you didn’t appreciate the danger, but at such a young age, you don’t know much. The boat went on the sea. I think just a little storm would sink the boat and everyone would die, but fourteen days on the boat out there.

TVD: Where were you headed?

NDP: I didn’t know exactly where we were trying to head. Maybe Thailand, Malaysia, depends on the skipper of the boat. I knew about four or five days later out on the sea, we start getting the pirates hitting our boat. Get on board, and you start seeing the M-16 rifle shooting up and they start banging our boat, and trying to get our loot, our personal belongings, and I think they went away with our women, pretty sure.

TVD: Were there people that disappeared after?

NDP: I think they took a couple women on their boat—I don’t recall exactly—they took a couple, maybe they took a couple girls with them, maybe they did, maybe they didn’t. But as I got on shore later on, I knew all the women got raped; all the pretty girls got raped.
TVD: So where did you end up?

NDP: So after being brought by the pirates, I think, must be seventeen or eighteen times until they have nothing else to rob anymore, then we end up in Malaysia, in Terengganu. We got to the land of Malaysia, I remember it was at night, and the people on the boat say that we have to destroy the engine, otherwise they kick us out to the sea again. So we destroy the engine and we hurdled onto the boat like Normandy invasion, little people trying to get on the shore. I think a Malaysian cop saw that as a bunch of illegal aliens coming in, they start coming down to the sea and use a baton to try to get us back because it would be unorganized, so we were a bunch of illegal aliens coming on shore of Malaysia, and then they used a baton to strike us and get back to the boat, and so we got back on the boat and I remember I didn't have much to eat during the fourteen days on the sea but I had strength because they start hitting me, so I jumped on the boat, even though it was pretty high, I climbed up real fast, try to avoid them hitting me.

TVD: So you didn't get to stay in Malaysia, you had to leave?

NDP: No, we stayed there and in the morning they had us coming in; they welcomed us. They welcomed these illegal aliens coming in, so it was a relief.

TVD: Where did they take you?

NDP: They took us to Terengganu, we stay in the side of the shore for a while, and then they start taking us to Pulau Bidong But I was fourteen at that time, and between life and death, you start seeing the bad side and good side of people. You start seeing people because they see on the boat there is no water and, as they get unsure, you start seeing men and other people starting and trying to get water, and they're fighting for water, and the Malaysian cops over there just kind of laughing at us because we were hungry, and your civilize
manner start going away, and you feel your senses coming back, “Hey, stop doing this, they're going to laugh at us right here. Be yourself, be civilized.” I saw some of the men, trying to get the water away first for himself, or their family. That’s the bad side of human, when you see life and death. But after all, we're okay, and I think the Malaysian people are pretty good people, they welcome these illegal aliens.

TVD: Being that you were pretty young, and you were all by yourself, without your family, how were you feeling during the whole boat passage?

NDP: At the age of fourteen, you knew you were away from your family, and you were feeling alone, but growing up and life and death didn’t matter that much anymore at that time. And you feel sad being away from your family, but at the same time, you’re feeling excited because you have a journey ahead of you. You start missing your family, and you start looking after yourself because you know there’s no one taking care of you. So you look for friends, you try to look for food and try to fight for yourself for survival.

TVD: So what was life like in the refugee camp?

NDP: Actually thinking about it, I think it was pretty much a good camp, even though we didn’t have enough food, we didn’t have water, but I had a good time over there because there’s a couple guys like me, a friend of mine, and we escaped together. We met in Rach Gia at that time, and then we went to stay at Pulau Bidong together, and I make new friends. I took them to my house because then my mom’s friend, when we get back to Pulau Bidong, I would meet him again, he would take me under his wing, and then I had a place to live. I had a good time because my friend was like me; he was the same age. He’s a lieutenant at the L. A. Sherriff Department.
TVD: I imagined, being that you have this group of young men to hang out with, that you formed a pretty close bond.

NDP: Just us guys at that time. They were strong, I was weak, and they’d always help me out. We had to go to a camp. We didn’t have enough fresh food, so always had to go up onto the mountains, trying to get vegetables, and you go out fishing, or you get wood, so you can get fire wood back to your camp, so you can have things to burn to cook with. So he’d always help me out, and we went to the mountains, and we went swimming, and at night he went to try to do illegal things because the Malaysian wouldn’t allow you to trade with a fisherman by the seas. So we had these young men trying to go out of the camp into the water try to trade with the local people and bring back local stuff to sell at the local market in Pulau Bidong. So my friend would be a transporter, to say it, he would carry it from the shore inside to the camp village, and he got caught by the cops and they beat him up and he got injured in the knee so end up staying in the hospital for a couple months, and I was visiting him everyday; kind of fun. I think it was fun. You’re by yourself and you always look for new people coming in—a new face. Any family member, any friends of yours and its crowded, there’s 43,000 people in one square kilometers, pretty chaotic, but I think we kept ourselves the regulations pretty good. All the men go to work and divide up the work over there pretty nice. And we went out into the ocean and you swim everyday. It’s a beautiful island, actually, just too many people and you try to keep people happy together. You have love stories, you have good friendship, you seen the good side and the bad side of people. For some people like me, it’s a learning experience of a lifetime.

TVD: How long were you there?
NDP: I was there for eight months, and I start receiving letters from my cousin in the U. S. and at that time, because I was under eighteen, the U. S. would accept me under priority 1-B. 1-B means you’re under eighteen and you got admitted to the country as a minor child. So me and my friend, we both got admitted under that program.

TVD: So your cousin’s family sponsored you?

NDP: Yes, my cousin sponsored me here to California, to Little Saigon. My friend didn’t get as lucky as me; he didn’t have anyone, so he got sent all the way to Illinois. They have a camp for the kids in Illinois under eighteen. They would scatter them around for foster parents. But we all, after we wait in Malaysia, in Pulau Bidong for a while, we would be transported to a transit camp in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. There, you wait for maybe a couple weeks before they process out-processing, then ship you on a plane and you get to San Francisco, for me and my friend; love it.

TVD: So from San Francisco, you were then flown down here?

NDP: I had flown down here to Santa Ana. As a young boy at that time, I’m almost fifteen—I was fifteen that time, when I got here—I went to San Francisco and stayed in the transit camp, in San Francisco. I remember the guy, I forgot his name, but he was working for VOA and said that California land was so good, you can grow an antennae into a tree. I remember that. I went to San Francisco and a lot of old people coming over and started giving us jackets, and passed out food and volunteers coming out, and that’s a beautiful side of America as I saw it. I saw that side, and I never forget it. I looked at the girls at that time, and said, “Jesus Christ, how come these girls so beautiful in America? There’s this teenager at the time that came out to help.” And I said to myself, “they got beautiful women here; beautiful girl here.”
TVD: So, did you know English at that time when you got here?

NDP: No, I didn’t know English. I knew a couple words like, “Thank you,” but that's about it. I didn’t learn English in Vietnam, so I didn’t know English.

TVD: And in camp, they didn’t teach you?

NDP: I learned a few words here and there, but mostly I study math because I stayed with a math professor, so he ended up teaching me math. And to me, language wasn’t a big deal because I took foreign language before, so I figured I’d catch up on it later, not a big deal. So I didn’t study English when I was in camp.

TVD: So besides your first impression of the kind people and pretty girls, what else did you think of America?

NDP: I thought America is a land of opportunity because I remember my mom told me that this is a land of opportunity, and my cousin told me the same way and I knew the only way to get ahead was to study. I knew that my family would come here someday, someway, somehow. But I knew it’s a land of opportunity. I learned it from all the people when I was in camp. I was fluent in Vietnamese, so I read a lot of magazine that got sent to America to the camp. So I knew pretty much about America, as much as I could in my imagination. And I learned about the Texas incident where the fisherman was being prejudice by the local fisherman. Everyone would love you, especially the ESL teachers. She would take me out to Disneyland, and she asked me about my family and I didn’t know what to say, but I always had a dictionary. So, whatever I don’t understand, I just pull out the dictionary and put all the words together. It’s pretty easy. You just have Vietnamese, look for the English word, and then you tell them in English, and the dictionary is right by your side. So I guess people understand you. That’s how I think you learn a new language, but I guess you’re at a young
age and if you have experience learning a foreign language already, you will have it all come
down eventually. That's what happened to me; it's not a big deal.

TVD: What were some of your favorite memories of high school?

NDP: Fun, because I went to high school, I had to walk because two years later my family
came over—my mom, brothers and sister also escaped—so we were new comers and we're
on welfare. So my high school, I remember as always get free food because of welfare, so
we got free food, a lot of free stuff—free lunch, everything. And then at school, I would
always look for friends that are like me, people who are minors. So I had a bunch of minor
friends in high school, too. That's how I met a very good friend of mine; his name is Truc Ho
Nam. He's a famous musician and we were buddies in high school, and he was a minor. And
during college time, I think, and it was tough to get a job. So we were trying everywhere,
trying to apply a job at McDonald's, Carl's Jr., everywhere, trying to make some money.
Head out with family, and use money for yourself, and we couldn't find a job. My friend
couldn't find a job. I found a later job at McDonalds, that's my first job, and I love it.

TVD: McDonald's—I worked at Carl's Jr.

NDP: I think McDonald's is worse. My brother worked at Carl's Jr., but it was fun. You're
working over there, you always come home smell hamburgers and then at least you had a
job and get some money to use and help out your family and I brought some of my friends
to live together with me, the minor child. My mom asked them if they wanted to stay with
us, so they stayed with us and we're a big family. My room had like eight guys staying in it
with my brothers; kind of fun.

TVD: How did the rest of your family get here?
NDP: They escape by boat. My mom and my two brothers and sister came by boat, too. I think they had to drink my mom's urine in order to satisfy their thirst because her boat people died from lack of water, dehydration. So she urinated into cups and passed it out to people who want to drink and then she put sugar in it, and I think my two brothers tasted it and my sister, but she didn't remember it, but they talk about it in the family.

TVD: Wow. Did they end up in refugee camp as well?

NDP: Yes, they did. They did end up in refugee camp, same refugee camp that I stayed in, Pulau Bidong. What a miracle. And they stay over there with my uncle, and for eight months later, they came to the U.S., same way I did.

TVD: Through family sponsorship?

NDP: Yeah, through family sponsorship. So it was great that we reunited. I was lucky, I was lucky. So my family came over and I had a great time in high school. My friends and I went to high school for the full four years. We did all kinds of odd jobs. Me and my friends, we were cleaning up toilets, work McDonalds, work at theaters, playing in a band—music man—just to make money, and I think it was fun but one thing vividly I remember was not much girls at that time because you know boys growing up, they always want girls. And there was a difference between the girls who came in 1975 and the boys who came afterwards, like us. So they got a little bit prejudice, they called us “F. O. B.”: fresh off boat. The other girls and the other guys speak better English than us, so we were sort of castigated, one group to another. And we looked at the girls and said, “Geez, how could I have a girlfriend like that” because they came in 1975 and these boys came later so we didn't actually communicate. Only five years apart, so it's kind of funny at that time. We get into fights all the time, just racial slur because we didn't understand English, and anyone
who provoke you with anything at all, these guys would fight. And I would help my friends out in the fight, because you didn't speak much English. So what happened is that you get into a racial slur, because you don't understand English, miscommunication, and you start getting into fights with the Caucasian people, all the time with the football players. So in Fountain Valley High School, I remember that time, get into fights all the time.

TVD: What was the demographics like? I mean, at Fountain Valley High, were there mostly white students?

NDP: Yeah, mostly white, mostly Caucasians. I would say 98-99%. Maybe about 20, 30 or 40 Asians, and we stick together in ESL class. I didn't attend ESL class, but I hang out with those friends that come later with me, same experience. So we can talk about the past, the communists and so forth. So we were sticking out and trying to find a job together. So there's two distinct group: one before '75 that's all melting in, they know what they do and better style of living and then there's the group like me, who didn't get in with the other group, so we hang out separately. We play soccer and we had fun and we get in fight. And any of our friends who got in fight because of miscommunication, got into a fight and I support them—got in the fight too. It was kind of fun.

TVD: So what did you do after high school?

NDP: After high school, I went to Cal State Pomona. I was pretty good in high school, I mean, I think high school was pretty easy. All you need to do is study hard, do what you're doing, and took a couple AP classes, and your grade point average shoot up a little bit, and just pay attention and do all your homework, then you'll be fine. You can get into any school you want to. I was accepted into UCLA, Cal Poly Pomona, and a couple of other schools. I don't remember now, but it's pretty easy to get a high grade in high school at that time.
TVD: Why did you pick Pomona?

NDP: I saw the movie Star Wars and I thought of being a gyro design, or a spaceship would be cool so I pick aerospace engineering. And Cal Poly Pomona was the only school that had an impacted program at that time; pretty tough to get into Cal State Pomona. So I think that school was closer to where I lived, and then they gave me more money. UCLA gave me less money because after the calculations I did, I would end up having more money if I go to Cal Poly Pomona. I didn’t care much about whether UC or Cal State, I count the money that the government gave me through the grant program. With Cal State Pomona, I get more money, so I figured, “Hey, let’s go to Cal Poly Pomona.” I didn’t think much about the school at that time. And there was no one to guide you, actually. So as long as you got into college, your family will be fine. Engineering was a pretty popular program at that time. All the guys graduate from Cal State or school as an engineer got a job right away.

TVD: Were you living at home and going to college?

NDP: No, I was living at the dorm. And then I was renting out apartments, try to share the money together with a couple guys.

TVD: So did you earn your Bachelors at Cal Poly?

NDP: Yes, I earned my Bachelors at Cal State Pomona, but I changed my major, I didn't stay as an engineer. I was bad; I was not very good. I was good in math and physics in high school, but when you go to college, you start comparing yourself, you’re growing up, you start figuring out you got to do what you like, and you start comparing yourself with your friend. People was really smart; they studied more than what the instructor teach you in class, and you start comparing yourself and you start seeing that you can’t be good. You got to be good at what you’re doing; you don’t love it. If you love it, you probably do more than
what the instructor asks you. You would be passionate about that in life, right? So I figured out I wasn't good at engineering at all because I didn't have aspiration for it. Plus, I like management more. I got a self-confidence booster from my cadre.

TVD: Can you explain?

NDP: Oh, cadre. As I entered college after 1975, I started reading books on the Vietnam War, especially an author named Pham Nhat Nam, a very famous Vietnamese writer. He was sort of like a war writer, and I started reading about the Vietnam War. Picked up a couple books and started reading about the Vietnam War because I was so pissed off as why we lost Vietnam. So, I had to study about it because I hear stories from my friends who's telling us we have a lot of ammo left, why we lost Vietnam, we have a huge army. So as I get older, I got to figure out why we lost Vietnam, so I start digging into reading information. I start reading Vietnamese book, English books. So the first book I picked up about Vietnam War was from Richard Nixon, called *No More Vietnam*. Picked up that book and then I started having an understanding at how it goes, why we lost, why America gave up Vietnam from that book, and I started getting sad from that book because during the whole book, President Nixon, at that time, he would brag about how he became successful in dealing with North Vietnamese having a peace accord with the South in 1973, and he would send Kissinger out to deal with the China, communists. And during the whole book, he mentioned nothing about consulting with South Vietnam, nothing at all. We've been a country, and his ally; he didn't even consult with us before he made the peace accord. And that upset me a little bit, but then I understood why we lost, because of the money. They stopped supporting us. They sold it out to China so they could win again to Soviet Union, and then I started feeling sorry for the Southern Vietnamese soldiers and thus, respecting
them. So as I got into college in ’85, I enrolled in ROTC program, Reserved Officer Training Core, the military program. So, that’s my cadre, he’s my mentor, U. S. Army Captain. So I went through the whole four years program of ROTC.

TVD: And they helped fund some of your college?

NDP: No; the first two years, you get in, get out anytime you like. After your sophomore year in college, junior year you sign the contract with the army. You’re going to become an officer, because if you get your Bachelors, you’re going to become an officer. They don’t fund your school—they give you stipend money, like one hundred bucks a month to buy clothes, and spend some money on food, but they don’t spare you scholarship. It’s a volunteer army. So you come in and you’re proud that you will become an officer. My cadre told me that, and they showed us statistically that any guy, any male or female who graduate from officer-ship camp would end up: number one, being an executive. That’s how it get me an executive intern with the Chamber of Commerce and some other company. You likely more to become leader. You get leadership experience in the civilian ward. So he taught me don’t change my name to, because I was signing the contract with the army, and my captain, my cadre, his name was Captain Stitman, and he mentioned some story about a guy who refused to change his name when he want to become a famous actor. And he told me, “Son, you’re going to be proud of your heritage, because if you’re not proud of your heritage, and don’t know who you are, you will not be a good American. America is all about diversity, and if you keep your heritage, you’re going to be an excellent American. And he told me this story about ______. “So son, why do you need to change your name? If you’re good at something, people will recognize it and they have to pronounce your name right, because you’re good at it. If you’re bad, doesn’t matter, you change your name to
something easy, they don’t even recognize you. So you have to earn it, and if you’re good, people will have to learn how to pronounce your name. And that’s what happened to me; I didn’t change my name. So I made my some of my troops do pushups when they couldn’t pronounce my name right.

TVD: So it sounds like you were pretty self-taught about the Vietnam War and its consequences, right?

NDP: Yes, doing some research, talked to people, talk to friends, and doing research and then you verify the facts from other people you talk with so then you knew about the consequence. And I have a different view about the Vietnam War than other people. I think we won the Vietnam War as an American because we gave up South Vietnam to the Chinese so that way we could win the Cold War, because I kept on reading Nixon’s book later on, “Victory Without War”. He wrote that book in 1987, that the Soviet Union will collapse, because of his strategy. And the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990, but he wrote that book in 1987. He predict that because his act with the Chinese, then the Soviet Union will collapse, and it did collapse. So, his prediction was right. I believe that Nixon was the one who sold our country, Vietnam, out, but in terms of America, I think we won the war because we won the Cold War.

TVD: So you ended up studying management, you said, at Cal Poly?

NDP: Yeah, I changed my major later from being and engineering major to management major because I think the army did good things to me and they gave me confidence. So I changed from...

TVD:
NDP: Knowing where your parents came from, how they had to struggle, how they escaped from Vietnam, how they had avoided the communists, and don’t make the same mistake they did, and embracing your own culture, and knowing your own culture, and then you start comparing with the values that you got here. Seize what is good, deny what is bad, and that’s what makes you become American. That’s one thing great about this country. I think that’s one thing I regret about our culture, Vietnamese, is that we didn’t get to learn the old language. I think the French, when they took over our country in Vietnam in the early 19th century; they eradicate any tide with us with the language. That’s how now you read things in Vietnam, you can’t understand, and large part of all the countries I see like Japan, China, South Korea, who were able to keep their own writing be better country. Anyone who forgets your own group cannot be more advanced. If you start comparing, the majority of those countries are like that. Japan is surpassing, that’s one stronger country. China, now’s a stronger country; Hong Kong is a strong country, Malaysia, Thailand, all better than Vietnam; they have their own writing.

TVD: But we were colonized for a long time by …

NDP: … By the French, and the French eradicate the Vietnamese language. So now you read a writing that was a thousand years ago, you couldn’t understand it. And if you don’t have an understanding, you start forgetting your root easier, eradicated. And if you’re having a less understanding of your old culture, you become a weaker person, and you can’t advance, and be more civilize. That’s the way I see it; that’s my perception.

TVD: It sounds like you’ve had a really rich life, in terms of the experiences that you’ve had, Vietnam to the United States. If you look back at your life, what do you think is the most important life experience that you’d like to tell people about?
NDP: The refugee camp and the staying back with the communists for five years; I would not trade anything for that. I get to understand the communists and get to understand the system, I get to understand how bad it could become if people become uneducated and try to rule the country. I think I wouldn’t trade anything for that, even though those four years with the communists not very good life, in terms of material, but I was fine. I wouldn’t trade with the life I had in the U. S.: struggling in high school, in college with my friends; being together, trying to get jobs and learning the values of this country. I think those are valuable experience I wouldn’t trade off. I think in terms of teaching your kids, you need to raise them up in a way that you start to stimulate those experiences, the same way you had. Let them struggle a little bit. I think now parents become more protective of their children, like I become protective of my kids, my wife, but I try on one had to stimulate the experience that I had so that they can explore, and give them a little harder concept in life. At the same time, try to keep them safe so I think you need to be a little more open in terms of raising up your kids, and teaching them. Especially, keep them having their own culture. Get into Vietnamese school, learning their language. That would enhance their character as they grow older, and become productive citizens of this country; become better American, become more patriotic. As I learn more about my culture, somewhat, I become more patriotic.

TVD: So you mention your wife just now. How did you meet her?

NDP: Oh, my wife, I met her through my law school year. I attended some of the party and then I met her, and we just started hanging out together. I was a law student. And then we hang out and we stayed together until I get out of law school for a couple years practicing and I married; I married pretty late.
TVD: So what does she do?

NDP: She’s an accountant, she’s a big counter, so she counts other people’s money. And I told her to become an accountant because I think it would be pretty stable. So she went out and studied accounting from Long Beach, and I think she just got a Master’s about a couple months ago . . . a couple years ago, last year. I told her that when she finish college, she was very young, she wasn’t even married, didn’t have any kids. Finished her Master’s then, and she was very young at that time, she was busy, chasing after me, make sure I didn’t have any other girlfriend and didn’t even go to school and finish her Master’s. She waiting until she had three kids then she’s coming back to college to finish her Master’s.

TVD: Well, it’s never too late.

NDP: I know, but she should have done it. I told her many times, “Finish your Master’s when you didn’t have kids,” but she was just afraid I would go off with some other woman, so keep on chasing me.

TVD: So you have three children, then?

NDP: I have three kids now.

TVD: Boys, girls?

NDP: One boy, two girls.

TVD: Congratulations! How old are they?

NDP: Oldest one is ten years old, and I got two daughters, and they’re twins, fraternal twins; very cute. I’m lucky; I guess I had a good life. The bad part is my dad passed away, I had good friends, even the bad experience in my life can turn out to be good experiences. I think life goes on as Ying and Yang. Sometimes you can be bad, but you can make the worst
situations become the better situation. And try to be optimistic. Even when you’re down, when you or your situation become very bad, just keep your hope up, and you’ll be fine.

TVD: So you went to law school, and can you tell me what you do now?

NDP: I’m a lawyer now. I do criminal defense, I do civilization, I do personal injuries. And on the side, on the weekends, I pay some dues to my country so serve in the U. S.; I’m a reserved still, as a jack officer. My contract is about to expire soon, so I’ll probably get out soon. I’ve spent all together about twelve years in the army. My contract is about to expire probably next year, and I’m getting out. That’s what I do. I’m a jack officer in the U. S. Army and I’m a Harley rider. Yes, I ride a Harley; true American—red blood American ride Harleys.

TVD: But you live in Little Saigon, don’t you? Or do you just practice?

NDP: I practice in Little Saigon, I figured out: either I could go to the Army, and become a full time jack officer, or work for some other law firm. But I figured out, statistically, I speak the language, I have a skill that other lawyers do not have, because I speak Vietnamese fluently. Why not engage in your community and you represent your people interest—same language, same skill—bring that and represent it in court, because in court, you got a diverse number of people, who do not share your culture, who do not understand Vietnamese, bring that into the American culture system and write it out, show it to them what it means. And represent people mean that you understand the culture, because every time you go to court, in front of a jury, I always bring up my background as a refugee, as a U. S. Army officer, how I observe, how we fight and protect our constitution, how we teach other people about our values, but then at the same time, we didn’t have the right we had in Vietnam, like freedom of speech, freedom of religion. When I represent a particular
defendant, I would tell them all about my story and ask them today to judge people based on what I just told them, especially when my client is a Vietnamese-American. So I ask them to judge it because most American take their freedom for granted. They don’t understand that we have a Fourth, First amendment, or Fifth Amendment for granted. So you got to remind them, and the only way to affectively remind them is to tell them about your story, how you escaped over here, why you didn’t have the Fourth or Fifth Amendment in Vietnam. And if you speak the same language, as your client, you can bring that up and start showing people that this is a human being that they are judging. So I think it helps; that’s why I would love to represent the Vietnamese-American community, especially the people who I share the same culture, speak the same language, and yet, with my peers, my American people that I work with, that I’m a part of, that I try to melt them together; just cook them, basically.

TVD: Sorry, is your clientele mostly Vietnamese?

NDP: Ninety-nine percent of them Vietnamese, except when I’m in the army, I can’t refuse who I’m taking into.

TVD: Are there any challenges taking in Vietnamese-Americans?

NDP: Yes, because of the culture. One is that the Vietnamese people are less expressive than other race, and they tend to not look at you directly because the way they’re taught. So especially when you go to court, and you look down, or you look shifty, and people judge you by the way you look, sometimes by the way you speak the language. So that’s a difficulty of representing them, especially in court.

TVD: So does some of your job involve having to coach them to behave a certain way?
NDP: Yes, I have to tell them how to behave in court, how to look at people when they go into court, and part of my job is how to project the Vietnamese culture when I deal on a case with a judge or a particular opposing party about the Vietnamese culture. Why this difference, why should you grant emotion this way or the court order this way, because of this particular circumstance of this particular client. So, that’s the challenge, especially people who don’t understand.

TVD: It sounds like for you, practicing law is like brokering, explaining Vietnamese people to the Americans, and explaining the American legal system to the Vietnamese people.

NDP: Yes, that’s what you have to do. So you got to be both. So I’m sort of like a hybrid, in between the two generations. I’m an extreme American, patriotic in another way, one hundred and fifty percent willing to die for my country, riding my Harleys. On the other side, I’m Vietnamese oriented culture person, so I think it’s good. It’s good that you have two extremes.

TVD: So a couple more questions, and I think we’re almost done. What do you think about the way that our history, South Vietnamese history, is taught here in the United States? Do you think it’s being taught?

NDP: I think it’s not being appropriately. I think because a lot of viewpoint perspective is not being taught right, based from the fact that American is not willing to say that we won the Cold War because we sold out Vietnam. They all say that we got defeated in the Vietnam War; no, they won the Vietnam War in terms of taking over the Soviet Union. The whole eastern block has fallen apart because American was able to shake hands with China, unite with China and fight against eastern communist block. And how they do that? They gave up Vietnam. So actually, we won, so on that preconceived notion, you got to change that first,
and then I think the history will be taught appropriately. I don't think it's being taught appropriately in school nowadays.

TVD: Do you think your children will be able to access that history when they're old enough?

NDP: Yes, I think they would. And I would guide them, the same way I found out, and tell them about the same way. And hopefully, if I'm not able to change it, then they would. Tell Americans that they actually didn't lose the war. So people who died in the Vietnam War, died for a noble cause. But at the same way, when you sacrifice a country for a greater cause, because America has won, they got to be responsible and take in the Vietnamese too, as well. It’s not that I don’t thank America for taking the Vietnamese people in, but they are partly responsible for it because they sacrificed Vietnam to the Chinese so that they won the Cold War. So, everyone prospered, but that's one way of looking at it. There’s less guilt about being accepted into America.

TVD: Finally, last question. Was there anything that you want to share that we haven’t been able to discuss so far in the interview?

NDP: Do what you love. Never do it for the money. Younger, I entered in Engineering because I thought it was a stable career. Later on I changed because I figured out that if you do something you love, and you’re passionate about it, you’ll be successful. And if you’re passionate about it, and you’re good at it, and the money will come. Because you’re so good at it, people will request you to do it. So, do what you love. And the younger generation, especially, you got more opportunity than the older generation because you now have an opportunity to do what you love. The older generation, like myself, sometimes don’t have and didn’t have the opportunity, or your parents didn’t have the opportunities. They had to
what they had to survive in order to give you the opportunities to do what you love to do, and you should treasure that.

TVD: Oh, I did forget to ask a couple of things about your life here in the U. S. Have you been back to Vietnam?

NDP: Yes, many times.

TVD: For what reasons?

NDP: I came there to visit people. I went there for business purpose, sometimes.

TVD:

NDP: … That’s what happened to people; they’re just scared for themselves, surviving. That’s where I see Vietnam now is heading, even though you see a lot of new things, new buildings in Vietnam, new roads in Vietnam—doesn’t mean the country’s getting better. And you start comparing, talking to people, Hong Kong, Thailand, other countries, you see that we didn’t get anywhere.

TVD: Which parts of Vietnam have you visited?

NDP: Both. North, South, Middle part, everywhere.

TVD: Have you taken your children as well?

NDP: Yes, my kids have been there. So my son’s been there.

TVD: What kind of impression do they have?

NDP: It’s a poor country and they start asking me questions on why I escaped, why I left the country. And they knew their culture, where their dad is coming from. So they had a good impression on the country, but I guess they’re too young to understand what’s going on because they were under our shelter. But I guess as they get older, they would explore Vietnam and have their own perception.
TVD: Well, I thank you very much for your time and it’s been great.