Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: ALEX THAI NGUYEN
Interviewer: SAMANTHA ERICA TAKAHASHI
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SET: Today is Sunday, February 10, 2013. This is Sami Takahashi with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project and I am interviewing Mr. Alex Thai Nguyen. We are at his home in Westminster, California. Could you state and spell your name for me, please?

ATN: Yes, my name is Alex Thai Nguyen. A-L-E-X Thai is T-H-A-I and last name is N-G-U-Y-E-N.

SET: Where and when were you born?

ATN: I was born in Bien Hoa, Vietnam. I was born on January 22, 1966. Pretty old.

SET: What are the names of your parents? And could you spell them out for me, please?

ATN: Sure. My mom’s name is Vu, Kinh Vu. First name is Kinh K-I-N-H last name is Vu, V-U. And, my father’s name is Tai Nguyen. First name is Tai, T-A-I and last name is Nguyen N-G-U-Y-E-N.

SET: Could you describe your parents to me?

ATN: How, like, in what details? What do you mean? Like…

SET: Like, how they appeared, what their occupations were in Vietnam, stuff like that.

ATN: My father, let’s start with my father. My father, my father passed away when he was 51. S that’s one of the things that I…the life stories I would like to focus on because it was very
traumatic how he passed away and how he arrived here. So he was back in Vietnam, he worked for the U.S. government. He worked as the Director of Rehab for Rehab Center. So he escaped to the U.S. in 1975, you know, to avoid possible imprisonment. Because it would not be too good if he stayed there. So he came here in 1975 and, settled here and then, do you want me to continue? Because it ties in with the story that I’m going to tell you later.

SET: Okay, I guess you stop there for now.

ATN: Okay.

SET: Can you tell me a little about your mother?

ATN: My mom is still alive. She is going to be 80 this year. It is…it’s a sad story because just a few days ago she had a stroke, so... But yeah, she is alive and she lives in…near here. She lives in an assisted living home. And she was, back in Vietnam, she was a businesswoman. She operated a business out of her home. And then she came here with us in 1982, and, and that’s it. She’s been living here for since 1982, and she is pretty much retired.

SET: Could you describe your hometown for me?

ATN: Hometown? It was a small town. Probably I would say 30 miles south of Saigon. So, a little town called Bien Hoa. From what I’ve heard it’s changed a lot now. So I haven’t been back to Vietnam, but, yeah, but I heard it changed. It was very, it was a very small town, and we lived right in the middle of a supermarket. Back in the day, back then, it was like the supermarket was nothing like here, it was open, more like a swap meet, you would say, kind of setting. So we lived like right in the middle. It was pretty noisy. Yeah. In 4 o clock in the morning, I would hear people getting ready for, you know, to open up the shop. But it was, I think, you know I liked it
because it was very real, you know, because back in the day I was growing up and no video
games or anything like that so I just hung out with my friends every day. Every day we’d just
hang out and you know, do things and just like kids would do. Anything that is outside, nothing
indoor like what the kids do now. It was really real, very real and raw, I’ll put it that way.

SET: Could you tell me some of your childhood memories?

ATN: Childhood memories… One memory that probably, let’s see, a couple that stood out a lot.
I used to like flying kites a lot, you know, when I was a little kid. And back then, kids would
have to make their own kites unless you’re rich. And then you could buy kites. You know, I
wasn’t. I wasn’t. Came from a poor family so I had to make all my own kites, and, and you have
to understand, when you make your own kites, it is not easy. And especially when you do, when
you, do the kind of kite that flies without the tails. So usually kites have tails, right? So the tails
balance the kite and makes the kite fly easier. But without the tails, it’s really hard to make it fly,
the kite fly. So I tried for a long time with without success because every time I would make a
tailless kite it would just dive right into the ground before it took off, so, but I persevered. And
then I remember one day, so I made this kite after many tries and then I went on the roof of my
house and it was like in the afternoon, it was I don’t know like 100 degrees [laughs] but I went
up onto the roof and I just let it go. And just I had this feeling that it was you know, going to fly, it
was going to make it. And it did! And I can’t tell you how excited I was. I was very excited,
yeah. And then I was so excited that I wanted to show off, [laughs] so I took the kite out and
took it downstairs and went to general area where all the kids would go in the afternoon and fly
kites, and I, you know, wanted to show off to everybody that I did it. Then it took off in the sky,
but unfortunately on the way down it got caught in one of those electrical wires. So, I lost that
kite, but regardless I made it, so I was happy. [laughs]
SET: Do you have any other memories of just living in the supermarket, or the marketplace?

ATN: The marketplace? You know, it’s just very noisy, and, and in the morning, you know, at around 4 - 5 o’ clock people would get ready. And I used to go to church because the family is Catholic. Back then I was considered myself a Catholic. I was a little kid and in the morning I would go to church and I had to cross that supermarket, but it was pretty, at that time, only a few people were getting ready to open shop so… but I remember that supermarket was very noisy. It’s… I would hear arguing, people arguing all the time, and I remember this one time, the two people, the two women, they had their own like little space, and they sell chickens, live chickens, so but they were rivals and they both sell chickens, and one time, they got into an argument, it was so bad that they got into a fist fight. [laughs]

SET: [laughs]

ATN: Yeah, I saw it! I was a little kid and I was watching these two women were fist fighting. It was so funny. At that, actually, it’s kind of like it was almost typical, ‘cus right in front of me, in front of our house, that’s the two women, and then, to the, go down a little bit further left where the meat market is. The meat market, and then I saw another fight. [laughs] So oh yeah, they were really like, it’s like, it was kind of, I hate to say it, kind of fun to watch it when you were a little kid. But now I think about it was weird, you know, I see full grown people would fist fight over something like chickens, I guess. It was rambunctious, loud, noisy, but it was real. Again, it was very real. Your life as it was supposed to be back then.

SET: Do you have any siblings?

ATN: I have 7. So I have 3 brothers and 4 sisters. I am somewhat in the middle. So you can imagine, the 8 of us, plus my mom living in the house, yeah. A lot of drama. [laughs]
SET: Do you have of any stories about getting into…just any memories of your brothers and sisters in Vietnam?

ATN: Good ones or bad ones?

SET: Either.

ATN: Either? I remember this one pretty clear. So, 1975, the Fall of Saigon, we had moved from Bien Hoa to Saigon, where my uncle lived. And that day, that particular day, I…probably close to the last day, you know the last day of the Fall of Saigon, very disorganized. Everything was in chaos. So, you see, you see like, military equipment down the streets, even bodies down the streets. And everything was just disorganized. Gun fights, sirens going off all the time. So, my brother and I went to this place where the military was stationed. Then somehow we got inside the gate, right, and then we got kicked out. A bunch of people got kicked out. I was little in 1975. And then, we had to climb up the gate. Probably I don’t know how high it was, but for a little kid it was pretty high. So, had to climb up there, my brother climbed up and he jumped down to get outside. So he got away pretty good, but he was bigger than me, but me, I was so small. And then I climbed up and I jumped, but I hurt myself. So, I bit, I somehow landed and I you know, and I guess one of my legs hit my jaw here, and then somehow I bit my upper lips or lower lips, I can’t remember. I was bleeding pretty bad. So, uh, I still remember that, ‘cus I can kind of feel the pain back then now that I remember it. So that’s one of the memories. There are so many.

SET: Did you fight a lot with your brothers and sisters a lot? Or did you guys get along pretty well?

ATN: We fought a lot. We fought a lot. Unfortunately, yeah. And I have two older brothers, they fought a lot. And then me being younger, they’d pick on me. They picked on me. I was a rebel
back then. Really. I was unlike any other. So they didn’t like it too much. So I got beat up a lot.

[laughs]

SET: So, what do you remember the most about the time period during the Vietnam War?

ATN: Oh, wow. I remember this one time. It was just very unstable time and it was scary at times. Is it still recording? Because every so often you’d hear sirens going off, and that means the Communists would be bombing soon. So I remember, one time, very vividly, and I was very young too, I was, my mom was still carrying me. Then this one time, it was very late at night, I was sleeping and then we hear sirens going off. And had back then, usually houses have bunkers, so you can shelter, it’s like a shelter. Every house has a bunker. We’d go there, every time the sirens going off. I remember this one time the sirens went off and then my mom carried me to the bunker along with everybody else, all the siblings. But the reason I remember well because that bunker back then because the rain and it was filled with water up to like probably knee level. And my mom carried me. And everybody had to go in there. But it was like, there is...it was something you can sit on to avoid the water, but yeah, we were all sitting. And my mom was sitting and I’d be sitting in her lap, the water we were like wet from knee down. For a younger one, I would imagine, it probably, from the body down. So and we would stay there until the bombing stopped. It was like probably middle of the night or early morning. It was pretty bad. And that was often, that was like normal, but it just happened that one time there was water ourselves, I remember that.

SET: How did the war in Vietnam affect your family?

ATN: Oh…it affected it a lot. The war pretty much divided us because, because, in 1975, like I said, my father left because he had to, right? And then, from then on, let me back track a little
bit. Before the war, before 1975, we were doing very okay. My dad worked as the Director of the Rehab Center so he was making good money. And then my mom had her own business, so we were doing okay. But then all of a sudden, it is 1975 and the Communists took over. My dad is gone. So my mom has to take care of 8 kids. And the business just deteriorated. It just went down. And there was so much stress for my mom because she had to take care of all of us. And as a result, there was a lot of fighting in the family among siblings because I guess we didn’t have a father back then. And so things went out of control pretty quick. My, my, you know, we got into fights. Everybody, we just, just, we weren’t together, let’s put it that way. And for me, I was a good kid for a while. I was I think I did pretty well in school up to 5th, 6th grade, but after that, I just, I just, things went downhill because my father wasn’t around. I started to rebel. So I didn’t respect my brothers too much because I didn’t think, I had no father and they were not good father figure for me. I started hanging with bad crowds, and you know, started to do bad stuff. So as a result, I quit school at 8th grade. And my sisters, my older sisters, because my dad was gone, they didn’t have a chance to go to school because they all had to help my mom to make ends meet. So then I think my brothers, older brothers, quit school too. So it was not good at all. It was pretty bad. And that’s why my father sponsored us to come over here. It took 7 years from ‘75 to ’82 for us to get here. And that’s here the life stories that I told you that I was going to tell you about. You want me to go onto that? Okay. So, it’s getting cold in here, I don’t know why, I’ve got the heater on. So, from between ’75 to ’82, so, we survived on our own. I shouldn’t say that because my father was over here he was working two jobs, he’d just send whatever he made to us in Vietnam trying to support us. But, but, what I’m saying is from ’75 to ’82 we didn’t have, my father wasn’t back there. He sponsored us to come over here and it took 7 years, so finally he got the paperwork to go ’82, and I was absolutely thrilled to get to because
it was getting too bad over there. So, March 25, we left Vietnam. So, we left Vietnam and we arrived in Thailand in March 26. And then we were supposed to stay there for one week, and then from there, we would go to Hong Kong for one day and from Hong Kong to San Francisco. So it took about, I guess, 9-10 days in total to leave, to go from Vietnam to the U.S., right? Now, here’s the story, here is when it becomes dramatic. When we got to Thailand, March 26…

SET: It’s okay.

ATN: …we got there, March 26, my, my father passed away. Yeah, he passed away here…he passed away here and we had no idea ‘cus, my uncle, he, he didn’t want to tell us until we got to San Francisco. And we got into a van and we didn’t see our father. So obviously we wanted to…you know, we asked him where’s our father. Then uncle just that’s when he broke the news, and it just, I remember, my mom just collapsed. And I just feel like, I don’t know how I feel, it’s just, it’s just, everything just, just seems so I don’t know, it didn’t, nothing meant anything to me because my hopes and dreams was to come over here and meet my father. And then he’s gone, what am I supposed to do, you know. I had no, I had no friends, didn’t speak English, and total culture shock. But you know, they say time heals, and it did. It took me probably a good two years or so to get, to get to normal, I guess. But you know, on the flip side, you know, there was, it was what was supposed to be the happiest day of my life turned to be the saddest day of my life because we arrived here on April 2^nd^. But on the flip side it was like a blessing in disguise now that I look back because had we not left Vietnam or if my father died like a couple days before that, before we left Vietnam, we wouldn’t have had a chance to come here, and God knows what would, I would have ended up ‘cus I was really bad, I was, I was, on on on on the road to nowhere. Like I said, I started hanging out with a bad crowd, quit school, so, and I came over here and everything just changed. I went to school, I graduated from school, high school.
And it just affected me so much that I couldn’t, I couldn’t even imagine going back to the old way, back in Vietnam.

SET: What were some of your first impressions and earlier experiences in the U.S.?

ATN: I was, well, when I first landed, I didn’t care much because of what happened. After a while, I was very in awe of the U.S. because back when I was a kid, I used to look at magazines, U.S. magazines, I would be, I would, I would imagine myself living in the U.S. and I would look at pictures and see all the sky rises and say “Wow, I wanna see this.” In Vietnam, there’s nothing like that, back there. So when I got here, I look at all the buildings, just in awe. And uh, the cars, you know. It was like, so many cars. [laughs] But, it was, it was a culture shock for me because back in Vietnam, I, I, I had a lot of friends, you know, and it was fun because we would hang out every day and suddenly, I came over here, it was like, no friends, and in afternoon, in the evening, it’s nobody is hanging out in the street. Everybody just stay in inside, so it was really different from what I used to do.

SET: Can you talk about your education in the U.S.?

ATN: Sure. So I came here, 16, and went to high school. We arrived here in April, so I only went to freshman for a month and a half and then summer. But I did finish the next three years and graduate high school. And then after that, I went to community college for about a year and a half, but I didn’t know what I wanted to do back then. But I was, I wanted for sure, I was very interested in music. I love music. So I sign up for music classes and took all the classes in community college with no intention of getting any kind of degree. I just wanted to study music. And then, after that, I had to go, I had make a living, I had to go out in the real world and be on my own, so I quit community college and then went to work for a long time doing all kinds of
jobs and never really liked any of them. And then, one day, in 1999, I was just frustrated with all the work that I did and I didn’t like any of them. So I decided to go back to school. Summer of 1999 I took one class in English composition class and you know, this time it was totally different because I fell in love with academia. I really enjoyed studying this time, and I, you know, I didn’t mind studying in all the other classes, other than music. So I started to take school very seriously and, and I wanted to get a degree. It was my goal. I wanted a college degree, I didn’t care what it was. So I started with one class in the summer and then after that, the following semester, I took two, and then the following semester, I took three, and then I graduated. I took all the requirements to transfer. So I went to Goldenwest College from summer of 1999 to summer of 2001, it took two years, and then I applied to, to a four-year university, and I applied to UCI, UCLA, UC San Diego, UC Berkeley. And they all accepted me, but I chose Berkeley because I wanted to explore. So went to Berkeley in 2001, and this time, I, I had to choose a major, but I, I, you know, for the longest time, I had a really hard time choosing a major because nothing, you know, would resonate with me, but this time I had to choose a major, the closest major I could choose, closest to what I wanted to study was Cognitive Science in Berkeley, so that was my major in college, at Berkeley. So I went from 2001 to 2003 I graduated with a degree in cognitive science. And then after that, I was kind of, in limbo, too, because what I am going do with a Bachelor’s degree in Cognitive Science. Nothing really. You know, I could go on to study, to get to my Master’s or PhD, and you know, if I wanted to get into research, but I hate research, so, I don’t wanna do research. So I was in limbo, and then I asked myself what I wanted to do. And then I realized I really liked working with kids a lot because you know, I have a lot of nieces and nephews, and, and I think I get along with them pretty well. I didn’t mind working with kids. I, I thought maybe I’ll become a pediatrician or doctor ‘cus pediatrician
works with kids. So, after Berkeley, I decided to go to San Francisco State University to do, to take some pre-med classes. So I went to San Francisco State for one year to study pre-med, but after one year, I found out, maybe, it’s not for me, medicine’s not for me. I liked… I liked chemistry and physics, but I had a hard time with biology, but like I said, bottom line was, was just not right, so medicine was, I found out that medicine was not for me. So that’s when I moved back here, and then I started working again and became a real estate agent and worked for a year and a half, two years. After that, you know, I started thinking again about, what I thought about when I just graduated from Berkeley, that I’d like to work with kids, and then, my sister-in-law asked me to teach her daughter piano because she knew that I played piano. And for a long time, I was reluctant to, but finally I gave in and I said okay I wanna give it a try, I wanna teach piano, just to my niece. So I started teaching her, and then I realized that, you know, maybe it’s something I’m good at. And then I switched to a, I switched the method I was teaching and I found out it was a really good method and then I decided go for it, to teach more people. To make a living from teaching from niece, nephew, and then the word spread around and then I started teaching other people. I’ve been teaching since 2008. And I think, I’m beginning to realize that it all comes back to when back in the day, when I first graduated from high school, and now I know why you know when I went to college the first time, community college, and all I wanted to study was music because it was my, my passion. And it was something that I’m good at, it’s my strength, so I might as well make a living. So that’s about it. And I do enjoy teaching and also, I think another thing too, is that the reason I teach because I’m more like, I realize I’m more like an entrepreneur. I like to do things my own way. I like to, you know, if I fail it’s on my own, and instead of you know, if I work for corporate, and I’m tied to this schedule, 9 to 5, and, and I don’t have that much independence so I like to be independent and on my own ‘cus when I
was a kid, I was very independent. I remember this one time, I was, I was a little kid and I was a very active kid, I would be involved in anything, and one time the kids back in then, we loved firecrackers. And uh, yeah, I loved firecrackers. And then one day, you know, I started buying all these firecrackers and one day, I had an idea, why don’t I buy them wholesale and sell them back to the kids and make some money. [laughs] And that’s what I did, so I took a box and you know, and I would buy firecrackers wholesale in bulk and then I would sell them back to the kids and make, like double my money, I loved it. [laughs] So yeah, so that’s part of the reason why I’m teaching and why I own my own business now ‘cus I like to independent, call my own shots, and be responsible for totally, for totally what I do.

SET: Do you keep in touch with family or relatives in Vietnam?

ATN: My family is here, so, and relatives are here too. So, in Vietnam, I haven’t been back there, but I’d like to go back, not for, not, to visit, I had old friends, way back then, jeez, 30 years, and I lost touch with some of my friends, way back then, so I would still would love to meet them when I get back, but yeah, family and relatives are all here.

SET: What do you see in future for your business?

ATN: I see us, I don’t know if I told you this, we just opened a studio in Irvine. And, and I partnered up with two other teachers, and we’re very excited about it because I see us bringing something new, fresh, to the city of Irvine because the method that we teach is very different from everyone else. So I see us bringing a new alternative way of learning how to play the piano and really, it’s just a new way of learning and how to, it just happens to be that we just use piano as a way. We’re, I think we’re excited about that. And I see us expanding, not only in the city of Irvine and other cities as well.
SET: Have you ever encountered racism in America?

ATN: Oh yeah. Absolutely, yeah. The high school that I went to, I remember this one time, this coach my P.E. coach, very racist. He didn’t like minorities. And he would give us really that kind of look, looked down on us. And would treat us like second-class citizens, really. And then another time, I saw a bunch of white kids beating up an Asian kid. I think he was Thailand, Thai. There was nothing to be done, they didn’t do anything about it. All the other white kids would cheer them on, beating this guy up. Yeah, oh yeah, racism. Absolutely.

SET: Do you visit Little Saigon?

ATN: Over here?

SET: Mhm.

ATN: Yeah. Yeah. I go over there sometimes. I love Vietnamese food, I do. Actually I love food period. But you know, I go there because of food, it was pretty much close to what you can get in Vietnam. It is authentic and some Vietnamese food. I guess I’m an easy eater, I can eat almost anything, but being born and raised in Vietnam so I’m used to Vietnamese food. But I also like sushi, Mexican food, Italian. [laughs]

SET: Did your mother ever teach you how to cook Vietnamese food?

ATN: Not me. Because my sisters, usually in Vietnam, women are more known to be in the kitchen and doing all the cooking and stuff. No, I wish, I wish I had learned something from my mom. [laughs] She’s a really good cook, yeah. I love the way she makes pho. And it’s probably my favorite, pho.

SET: Are there songs, images, or just artifacts that you remind you of Vietnam?
ATN: Songs, artifacts, images… I would say song, there is this one song, that’s going back to when I told you about the bombing, so when I was a little kid, this one song, it was played a lot and it was like, very poignant song, the lyrics are so poignant, it’s about little kids, you know, growing up in the wartime. And I still remember some of the words, yeah. So yeah, whenever I listen to that song, it brings back memories.

SET: What song? What’s the title of the song?

ATN: I think that it’s called “Hay be tho oi” translating it means “Hey Little Kids,” I guess.

SET: Could you spell the Vietnamese name for me?

ATN: Yeah, sure. Hay H-A-Y. Be is B-E. Tho is T-H-O. Oi is O-I. Hay be… tho oi means kids or infants or young kids. So I…

SET: Could you sing a part of it?

ATN: [laughs] You’re asking someone who can sing really bad to sing to you?

SET: [laughs]

ATN: [hums to the tune of Hay Be Tho Oi] So with the lyrics [sings and continues to hum the tune of Hay Be Tho Oi] I don’t remember much about the lyrics, but the music is so poignant, but what you can, when you combine the song and the lyrics, it’s like a very sad song, very sad song, and it fits perfectly with what went on back then because you know, I was a little kid, and I had hide in the bunker due to the bombing. So that’s how kids grew up back then, little kids in the wartime.

SET: Back in Vietnam, did your family celebrate Tet? Or like…
ATN: Oh yeah, big time.

SET: How did you guys celebrate it?

ATN: How?

SET: Mhm.

ATN: The New Year’s Eve, we would clean everything. I think it was like a ritual. You want to make your house clean so you don’t have to work on New Year’s. So New Year’s Eve it was cleaning time, and then New Year’s Day everything, no, no business. So all the supermarket outside, that’s a like a change, so, from very noisy to being quiet. And then I would, all the kids would dress up for the day, New Year’s Day. And my uncle and his family would come down from Saigon, New Year’s Day. And I looked forward to it every year, because it’s not like here, if you need to see your cousins, we’ll drive you. Back then, it’s not, there’s no option. If you wanna go from Saigon to Bien Hoa, it’s a pain, take the bus or whatever, so I didn’t get to see my cousins until it was just once a year, New Year’s, New Year’s Day. I really looked forward to seeing them, so my uncle and family would come down and we would celebrate at my house and, and you know, the tradition is kids would get money is called -, so money in a red envelope. So that’s one of the parts, one of the things about all kids ‘cus we get money. We would stand in line and get these from the adults and it was fun, really fun, and my parents would, we would all have lunch or dinner together. I was really excited to see cousins and then, oh yeah, then, firecrackers, of course. I loved firecrackers. I lit so much at one time, I hurt my hand trying to fire up a firecracker. Yeah, firecrackers in the morning, New Year’s Day or even New Year’s Eve at midnight. So it was very, very different from here.

SET: How did you and your family celebrate Tet here in America?
ATN: We get together and just have lunch or dinner. I think one time, we had firecrackers. Yeah. But here, it just get together and have lunch or dinner. I still, the adults still give the kids money. Just like the other day, I gave my nieces and nephews money, that still carries on.

SET: Do you have memorable stories that your parents have told you about their past or stories of your childhood that you don’t remember?

ATN: Oh, interesting that you ask that. My mom used to tell me the story, that when she was pregnant with me and she would see a, what do you call it, a fortune teller or psychic or whatever. [laughs] And that person would tell my mom that whoever is in your womb right now is going to become a famous person. [laughs] Famous doctor or whatever. [laughs] Apparently I’m still waiting for that. [laughs] But I thought it was interesting because she told me that.

SET: So after you came to America, where did you first settle?

ATN: Here?

SET: Westminster.

ATN: Yeah. This is more interesting. So my uncle had to take care of us, he had to arrange everything, my dad passed away. So uh, he rented a two-bedroom apartment in Westminster near Westminster High School so two room apartment for nine of us. I slept on the couch, for about, let’s say, a year and a half, two years, two years, and then 1984, my mom bought this house here. This house belongs to my mom. We bought this house, we all move in here, and then one by one everybody got married, moved out, I went to school, I moved out on my own, so my mom was the only one left that had been here. She got pretty scared, the house too big for her, so she rented it out, she moved out to assisted living because her friends were there and she liked to live
there. She rented out to a family, but they totally trashed this house, yeah, they trashed this house pretty bad. That’s when she called me to go home and take care. I was reluctant at first, but I agreed and came back here, I’ve been living here since 2007, 2008. Yeah, to take care of it.

SET: Where was your favorite place to live…out of all the places that you lived?

ATN: Favorite? Let’s see. I don’t think I have a favorite. I would say that I think Berkeley was interesting. I wouldn’t say it was favorite, but it was definitely interesting. Here, I, sometimes find Orange County to be a little bit boring, but I like the weather here, so…

SET: What were some of your memorable experiences while attending UC Berkeley?

ATN: Oh, jeez. Don’t get me started. [laughs] Okay, so you have to understand, it’s 2001, I was 33 or so, I think, right? 33 years old, so the first day I move over there and I rented a truck and put my stuff in there. They put me in dorm with a triple dorm, so with two other guys. One is a 19 years old and the other is 21. So it was the first day I, I went there, and I got, I remember I got into an elevator and this one kid, this one guy, he made this comment, he asked me a question, and I’ll never forget this. He, he said [laughs]…this is funny, he said “Are you one of the parents?” [laughs] I looked at him and said oh my god. I said, “No, I’m a student here.” So yeah, when I moved into this dorm room with these two guys, obviously they started asking me questions because I was older. They thought I was younger, but it was very interesting because, just, not used to sharing a room with two guys, let alone, much younger guys, in a little square room, it is so limited, so restricted and these two guys are like, they ‘re just kids, 19, 21, not saying all of you guys are like that. So but, these two guys one is only 19 and the other 21, the 19 year old was very acting his age and the other 21 years old was a party animal, he partied all the time. [laughs] I would smell liquor from his, from like a few feet away, so one time he came up
to me, he, he, would bragged, “Hey Alex, guess what? I’ve been drinking three times in one
day.” And I could tell because I could smell the liquor on him, but somehow they got by, they,
you know… [laughs] But I was serious, I didn’t care, I didn’t let any others bother me, to me, I
going there and I study and get my degree and I’m done. So I put up with them for one year, then I
moved out to Oakland. And yeah, studied another year, and then I was done. It was pretty quick.
But it was interesting to live with, to live in a dorm. [laughs] Saw all kinds of things.

SET: Could you tell me about how it was learning English?

ATN: You know when I learned English when I was in Vietnam. I learned a few months before
we, we left Vietnam. I think I learned pretty well, grammar wise. I was pretty good at grammar,
but speaking it was a totally different thing because you know, I, I, I guess I learned from this
woman and she, she, probably had an accent and didn’t sound, so… When I got here, the
American people talked like, it didn’t sound anything like, I, I, learned. So I had no idea. So, I
was very scared, I was like, I was scared. So I remember the first day I went to high school, this
girl, the receptionist, at the reception, she asked me, “Do you speak English?” and I remember
back then, when I learned in Vietnam, one of the sentences I learned was, “I can speak English
very badly.” So that’s what I said. [laughs] And I was scared, she saw, she recognized that I was
scared. She went to get help, she went to get an interpreter for me, but I was like really scared.
Completely out of my territory. But then, I started to adapt, I took ESL, they put me in ESL
classes, and I did pretty well in those classes, and then by, Junior year, I, I enrolled in regular
English class. And it was another scary experience because I went from ESL, which was all
immigrants or Asians, and then certainly they put me in this class with all whites, they all speak
English so well, I was like oh my god. But I, there was no choice for me, I had to do what I had
to do, so it took a while, but I think I adapted.
SET: Do you still use Vietnamese a lot?

ATN: When I have to, yeah. When I talk to older people, they speak Vietnamese. My uncle, my mom, my aunt.

SET: But the majority of the time, you use English.

ATN: Most of the time, yes. My friends speak English.

SET: Do you think you’re losing some of your Vietnamese just because…

ATN: Oh yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I think my Vietnamese back then was way better when I first got to U.S., but yeah. The longer I live here, the worse it gets. Unfortunately.

SET: [laughs] Ever since you came to America, have you tried to preserve any traditions or customs from Vietnam?

ATN: Preserve customs from Vietnam…Hm…Can’t think of any.

SET: Like celebrating Tet or…

ATN: Celebrating Tet. Not much. I’m sure there’s something, I can’t think of any right now. You know in Vietnam, one thing that I, I like a lot is that’s different from the U.S. is that the kids really respect the elders. So I think that’s something I would love to reserve, preserve over here you see to kids talking back to parents, they fight and call parents names, that’s like, that’s, that’s really disrespectful. In Vietnam, you don’t see that kind of stuff, not back then. Yeah, the kids respect the elders, never, you know, you can never raise a voice and you had to show respect.

SET: Could you talk more about, like, similarities or differences you see between America, or living in America and living in Vietnam?
ATN: Similarities and differences? There’s not much similar, I guess. So different. Totally different environment. In Vietnam, it’s very, the streets are dirty, the streets are not like here, we have pavement and all that. Back then, it was dirty. And it’s not, everything was not in order. And not strict…policies, you know. You would see walk in the street, they’d throw trash anywhere, there’s trash everywhere, and there’s no public restrooms. So people would just help themselves and find a corner and just do it. So yeah, big difference. Again back to the when I was a kid, kids, you know back then, we just go out every night and hang out and do things together. So, right there, the big difference from here. Here, kids stay inside and play video games and what not. So I say the biggest difference I’ve seen, back then, as a child, I was, it was raw, but real. And here it’s not. Here it’s just, everybody is just inside. Yeah, so very different.

SET: So do you see yourself living in the U.S. for the rest of your life?

ATN: I think so, yeah. But I still love to visit Vietnam. Just to visit, but I don’t have any desire to live there.

SET: What would you say your fondest memory of Vietnam?

ATN: Fondest memories? This goes back, being a kid again, so, you know, even though I didn’t have I guess what you would say an ideal childhood, everything was perfect. I didn’t have that, but then again, it was very real and I don’t think you can, I don’t think want to trade it for anything else. You know. I enjoy being, being free, being able to do what I, what I saw in my mind to do, for example, the kite thing. So over here, if I was growing up here, I would be if I want a kite, I would ask the parents, and then you know, go to the store and buy a kite. I would lose that creativity, you see. Back in Vietnam, because of that, because we didn’t have that, I had
to use our own resources. I had to come up with my own creativity, and it’s something that’s priceless. You can’t put a price on that.

SET: What would you say your fondest memory of your father?

ATN: When I remember he he worked at the Rehab Center, and every day, he would drive home, he he he used to have a moped. Not a moped, but a Honda motorcycle, but it was a Honda. And as I playing with the kids outside, you know, few houses down, and every time I see him driving home from, with his Honda, I would just like run to him. And he would pick me up and put me in the front and ride me, ride me home from there, it was only a few houses, but it was fun. I loved it. [laughs]

SET: What exactly did you father do at the…as the director of Rehab?

ATN: He so he would capture the, they would capture Communists, right, during the war, between North and South. So the Communists that got captured would be transfer over to this Rehab, where my father was a Director. He would try, he would, what do you call it, instigate?

SET: Interrogate?

ATN: Interrogate! He would interrogate them. And, and he would apply punishment if they didn’t comply. So that’s why he had to escape because if he stayed, he would really be in big trouble, so yeah, I remember when I came to work, he took me to work one time. One time, I saw, he was really, he was a very authoritative position because he was Director. So he would have people bring the Communists to him, and he would have them in front of him, and then interrogate them. And depends on what they say and what they are not willing to say, he would,
he would apply punishment. So it was, he was a powerful guy. It’s a lot of power. He was a very stern man. Very strict.

SET: So he was stern and strict even at home?

ATN: Yes. Yes. So the way you see him at work is the exactly the way you see him at home.

SET: What kind of work did he do when he came to the U.S.?

ATN: Oh, I’m, I’m not sure, but I think he was just like an assembler. Electrical…I don’t know, general stuff. But when he came here, I think he became a different person. From what I heard, he became very calm, calmer, and very religious. He was a Eucharistic minister at church, and he worked really hard, so he worked two jobs and all of the money that he had he saved and sent back to us, so yeah.

SET: So your father was a minister back in Vietnam?

ATN: No.

SET: Oh, so when he came here, he became a minister?

ATN: Eucharistic minister, he just, I don’t know if you’re Catholic or not. In Catholic, in a Catholic church, the Eucharistic minister, his job is to give the communion to the people. It’s not as fancy as it sounds. I was an alter boy when I was a kid back in Vietnam. So yeah, he’s, he, very, you know in a lot of ways, somehow, America changed a lot for all of us. So, it was like, totally opposite from what we can from. For me personally. It was, it was a complete change.

SET: Did you see any…I’m sorry, continue.

ATN: Oh, no, that’s it.
SET: Did you see any changes in your mother or your siblings after you guys came to America?

ATN: Oh yeah, because of what happened, it was just…everybody changed. My mom was very, was very sad. And she for a while, she, you know, she had a hard time dealing with it. After a while, she started accepting it. And she was even more religious after that. And my mom has always been religious. What happened was she became even more religious. Very devout.

SET: How important has religion been to you throughout your life?

ATN: You know it was important for me when I was younger. Because you know my parents were religious and Catholic, I became religious. My view has changed a lot. I would say, probably, 10 years ago, yeah.

SET: What made your views change on religion?

ATN: I just, from observation. And from reading, research, and mostly, I mean, just looking at things around me. And partly, you get older, and you, you start to stand back and and look at things from a different perspective, from a more mature perspective. And you see things that you would not see when you were younger.

SET: How do you think coming to America has changed you as a person?

ATN: It made me a really self-introspective person, I think. I became, back in Vietnam, I was a kid, I was, I think I was, you know, I wouldn’t consider myself an extrovert, but back then, I had a lot of friends and you know, I was known as a person who, excelled at things. I’m, I was very competitive when I was a kid and whatever games we played, I would try to beat them. And I did. So when I got here, when I first got here, the event with what happened with my father, I became very introspective, I became introverted. Very withdrawn. Shy. Timid. So that changed
me. But then, as time went on, I, you know, I became more open and a little bit more outgoing.
So, yeah. But I’m still very, very introspective. I mean, I, like to, to, you know, sit down and
look at myself internally and look at other people, and kind of try to analyze. And I also you
know, another thing that changed me a lot too was I, I think I used to be very self-absorbed too
and I didn’t think about other, other peoples too much, but as I got older, again, I started to look
at people from their perspective, to put myself in their shoes, or so to speak. So I think I became
more compassionate and more compassionate person, and more giving.

SET: Would do you think life would have been like if you stayed in Vietnam?
ATN: Oh, jeez. I would have no idea. I would have no idea because…because I was, was, was
on the way to really in a bad direction, so I probably, I quit school, and I run away from home,
starting to do bad stuff, starting to smoking, so my life would have been, would have been chaos.

SET: Is there anything that I have no asked you that you feel is important to add at this time?
Any extra stories you want to talk about, any family members or friends who have an impact on
your life, or just any life events.

ATN: Mmm…no, I think I, you know, pretty much all the important stuff.

SET: Okay, thank you.

ATN: You’re welcome.