Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: DR. HUE PHAM

Interviewer: Diana Lin

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Transcript

DL: This is Diana Lin with the Vietnamese Oral History Project. Today is Friday, February 22, 2013. I am interviewing Dr. Hue Pham. We are here in her office at Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa, California. I want to first start off with you stating what is your name, your date of birth, and place of birth?

HP: Okay, my name is Hue Pham. I was born in January 15, 1939 in Thai Binh, North Vietnam.

DL: May I ask what is your parents’ names?

HP: My father’s name is Pham Xuan Quy.

DL: How do you spell that?

HP: Do you want me to write it for you? I can go ahead…

DL: Okay.

[Paused for her to write down her father’s name]

HP: And my mother’s name is Pham Thi Suu, so they both have the same last name like mine, okay?

[Paused for her to write down her mother’s name]

DL: Okay, how would you describe your parents?
HP: Oh, they are both were born and raised in North Vietnam and escaped the Communist in North Vietnam in 1954. They were raised as Catholic people in farmland, our home village living and working in the farm.

DL: So you grew up working in the farm?

HP: Well that was when I was very young. I left North Vietnam when I was 5.

DL: Okay. I guess this goes on to the next question, where did you grow up?

HP: So when I left North Vietnam in 1954, I was 5 years old and when we came to the South, we ended up in the rubber plantation. There was no...there wasn’t any house or any kind it like refugee camp. But not even a camp because we landed in the rubber plantation and we had to make our own tent to live, we hiding, I remember we holding like a little camp from different drop of trees and that how we live.

DL: So was it like a field?

HP: It like a field with... like with the trees and that’s it.

DL: Ohh

HP: Mhm. And the government helping out by bringing the fresh water for us and then from there we start digging down...to make the wells?

DL: Mhm.

HP: And to build the house. That how we starting building a whole new life in South Vietnam.

DL: Are those the only two places that you’ve lived?

HP: No, we lived...my family and I lived in that area and that is now called Binh Duong. It about maybe 30 kilometer northwest of Saigon. So we lived there from 1954 to 1963. When the Communist kind of halfway controlled, the village. So we had to leave that village and that city
and go to another city. So we left again everything behind – housing, farmland, and everything. And just because it was under the war.

DL: Where else...where did you end up moving to?

HP: We ended up in another city called Bien Hoa. And Bien Hoa has more security. It is safer so we just left, you know, one city and go to the next city where we find that there will be no war or no control by the Communist at night.

DL: How many times did you end up having to move?

HP: So my family moved in 1963 and I think that’s it. And they lived there up until when the Communist took over the whole South Vietnam in 1975.

DL: So did your parents stay in Vietnam the whole time?

HP: My parents stayed in Vietnam all those times.

DL: Could you tell me about some of your childhood memories?

HP: When we lived all throughout my elementary school, we lived, again, in the refugee camp and then later on we come like a village, for many of us and there only one elementary school that all the children from four different villages to come to that school. We walked, I remember there was no transportation. We get up in the morning and maybe having a little bit of the fried rice and maybe a piece of corn. And I remember holding the piece of corn and walking from home to school and it take maybe about half an hour and the elementary school having from the first grade to the fifth grade and we take turn to clean the school, like you know, 8 teams, you know, have to clean the school. You know, we sweep the classroom, the floor, once a week. And we had the class only half of the day from 8-12. And remember at that time, we didn’t have any kind of electricity, there was no electricity. You know, at night, we only study under the candle or the oil lamp. And the whole village was dark. We get up in the morning and we chasing all those,
what do they call that…the…the fireflies, you know in the, in the morning, early in the morning.
So that just totally countryside and I even remember starting when I was 8 or 9, I started working
in the farmland with my grandfather in the afternoon and in the morning, I go to school.
DL: Was the elementary school before you moved?
HP: The elementary school was still there when I finished the 5th grade. There was no other
school, like even junior high, we don’t even have it. So, if…if I go into junior high, we had to
walk 6 kilometer to go to the next, you know, junior high school. So I was lucky to have my aunt
who was, she passed away now, but she, she at that time, she was a Dominican nun, so she was
able to help me, help go into the boarding school in another city. So I left, you know, that village
in 1961 to go to another school. You know, because without her help, you know, I would, you
know, ended up in the 5th grade like so many other girls.
DL: Could you describe some of the traditions of music or storytelling, dance or other cultural
forms that you encountered?
HP: At that time, I remember Tet…Tet, you know the Vietnamese New Year
DL: Oh, yeah.
HP: is very, very special
DL:Mhm
HP: So even that, we poor, but for at least for every new year, we’ll get new clothes and we can
not wait until that time, and you get a new ao dai or whatever and some, maybe some new
sandal. And then, on the first of the new year, we’ll get the new money for the new age for every
year from my grandfather and from…and then we are Catholics, we are also associated, you
know, with all of those Catholic celebrations like Easter and Christmas. But, it’s most likely in
the church. We don’t have the money for gifts or any kind of special celebration, you know, it
just like a lot of church music in the church together to celebration and that’s what we did. We
don’t have any kind of extra money to do any special food or special celebration at home.

DL: Who, I guess…how did your family become Catholic?

HP: I think because back in North Vietnam, our home village was under influence by the French
and also by the Dominican missionary. And so, for a long time, I think my whole family became
Catholic. You know, must be maybe 2 or 3 generations, you know, before I was born.

DL: Did you go to church like often or was it like every week?

HP: Oh yeah, when we were young, we go to church every day.

DL: Ohh.

HP: We get out at 4:30 in the morning and we woke up the whole village. I remember my cousin
and my uncle, we woke up and we walked from an hour where we lived to the church and then
dog will barking all around and woke up the whole village when we go to church (laughs). Even
if it hot or cold or whatever, we had mass every—…we go to mass every morning, every morning
(laughs).

DL: Wow.

HP: (laughs).

DL: Do you have any other traditions, I guess, you wanna share?

HP: I think, you know, not very much. It’s most likely for the wedding or whatever. The
wedding, it’s usually, you know, with the people in the village and it’s just…they don’t have the
kind big wedding like now. It’s just between the families and like, you know, it inside the house,
it’s not big enough, you know, they will make the tent or whatever outside. And the food, you
know, either they kill the pig or chicken or whatever and that’s it. So it’s just between, you know,
the families people and maybe a few people in the village and they have it right at home.
DL: What were the main industries in your hometown, like was it like farming, or like manufacturing?
HP: Mostly farming.
DL: Mostly farming?
HP: Mostly farming. We cut down the trees and we make the land from the forest and then we work. It really completely depending on the rain, completely depending on the weather. Because there was no water system or anything. We just had the well and if we need to water the plant or whatever, it had to come directly from the well. So the life was really, really hard and if we do not have the rain, then we’ll lost, you know, all the crops. So that’s was a pretty tough life.
DL: What were some of the main crops that your family farmed?
HP: Rice, mostly rice. And then maybe some fruits like jackfruits and so forth, and bananas and other kind of vegetables and that’s it. But mainly rice.
DL: What were your neighbors like?
HP: Our neighbors pretty much like, you know, us, because I think that we, we ended up staying with pretty much the same people that we move from the North Vietnam together. And so, you know, so they, they are, they also raise in the farms like pigs and so forth and some families very lucky and you know own the pigs, doing well and they multiply, but you know my family does not have that – pig dies. (laughs) (laughingly) So my mother always says how come they doing so well and we don’t. (continues laughter)
DL: What kind of local gatherings and events were there in your village? Or hometown?
HP: Oh, we, we get together, see like, eat some…, let’s say like during the anniversary, you know, of someone who died. In Vietnam, when I grow up, in my own life, we do not celebrate birthday, but we celebrate death day, we celebrate the anniversary of the day that your
grandparents or your uncle died. So at the time, at that anniversary, we get together to pray – like we say rosaries if they Catholic and if they are Buddhist, they will get together and burn the incense in memory of the dead person and we’ll have some food to share together. So like during regular time, we eat regular rice. At the celebration, we’ll eat the sweet rice.

DL: Is it like the sticky rice?

HP: Sticky rice! That was special. (laughs) Very special.

DL: Was there any types of other food that you would always have to have during that time or the celebration?

HP: The sweet rice important and then also maybe some kind of beans and we make into like a sweet soup, you know Chè. Okay? Vietnamese we call that Chè.

DL: How did you celebrate Tet?

HP: Like I said, you know we probably have a few days off school, maybe 3 days off school. And the first day we’ll have the new clothes and visit the family and, which, you know, the elderly, the new year, they gave us some money. And then we also go to church, the special mass to celebrate the, the new year. And then we’ll, you know, sometime we visit people in other village. Now sometime people also travel to another town but when I grow up, we never had money, you know, to travel anywhere, so.

DL: When you travelled through the villages, was it mostly through walking?

HP: Yeah, mostly walking, or bicycle. Mhm. Yeah, one family, you know, one bicycle for family. So most likely they will go by bicycle. Mhm.

DL: What jobs did you have in Vietnam?

HP: Going to school.

DL: Going to school mostly?
HP: I left Vietnam right after high school, so most of the time when I was in Vietnam, I was a student.

DL: How would you describe your schooling in Vietnam?

HP: The school in Vietnam, after elementary school, is pretty much in the same classroom with the teacher and the one teacher for the whole room. And then when we go to the junior high, starting in the 6th grade, then we will have different subjects, you know, with different teacher. And but we remain in the same classroom and then you know from like 8-10, there’s math, and 10-12 maybe history or whatever. So the teacher will be moving around into different kind of school. In Vietnam, usually during that time, I go to school with boys and girls, but boys will sit in one side of the classroom, girls sit on another side. We never make, you know…

DL: Was that like something that the teacher wanted or did you just happen to?

HP: No, that is traditional. I think that we had a long table and long bench, so always boys in one side and girls in the other side. So in Vietnam, the school, you know in high school and junior, we studied pretty much all the subjects that the students studying here will also start learning one language besides Vietnamese.

DL: What language did you learn?

HP: So I took English, so we learned English like, you know, starting from the 6th grade, you know, all the way up to the 12th grade. But then, you know, after the 9th grade we going to 10th grade, we also pick up another language. So at that time, my other language was French.

DL: How many languages were offered at your school?

HP: Most likely, most of the junior high and high school will be English or French.

DL: Mkay. What were your teachers and peers like?
HP: They are in the authority. We do not – we do not have textbook, so every lesson, the teacher will have to write that, you know, on the blackboard and then we’ll have to copy it. Now that I think, how is it that we do it? And that’s what we did. We just had to copy out everything because there’s no textbook for high school. Yeah, yeah incredible, you know? So that’s a lot of…and then we’ll listen and we obey whatever the teacher tell us.

DL: How about your classmates?

HP: The classmates, they um…they pretty much, you know, doing the same thing. I was one of the top student in all of those year and so when ever the teacher had a question, you know, I always had the answer. I mean I know the an-, you know, because I study and so forth and then some of them said how come you know everything? (laughingly) And I said I don’t know everything, it’s just I listen well and we most likely just memorize, you know, a lot of memorize. You know, there are, there’re not really anything for us, you know, to be able to question or to challenge the teacher.

DL: Did you guys have ranking in your classes?

HP: Yeah, we rank by the exam and we rank by, you know, for example, the points will be from 0 to 10. 10 is the top and 0 is the lowest. And then the average maybe, depending on subject, maybe 6 or 7. So for example, if we have 10 point, that is really top. But no, but no, I think I remember from 0 to 20. I’m sorry, from 0 to 20, so 20 was the highest. And then, so like, if you get 15, then that’s about average, if not 10. You know. Maybe some of them maybe sometime 11. So that really 0 to, to, 20. But like the math, if you do the perfect math, then you will get 20. But for Vietnamese essay, you never get 20. Oh, for the Vietnamese essay, if you get 16 or 17 then that’s very high because the teacher said always you can not really write that well. And then, so that depending on some of the teacher, you know, they said that they will keep a few points for
themselves. (laughs). So they don’t let the students can get the perfect score. Only math! Because math that, there no denial. You know, let’s say you gave 10 problems and if you do all 10 perfect, then they will have to give you 20.

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

HP: My grandmother died when we was in Vietnam the first months or so. She had some kind of disease that we don’t know. And I remember we was only at, to North Vietnam, to South Vietnam…very, very short, maybe not even – and because we don’t even any tomb, we bury her in the middle of the rubber plantation. And, and I remember after that when I was in elementary school anytime we go into the rubber plantation, you know, we’ll go and say a prayer for her. Now we come back, we could not find it. You know, we could not find her, you know, because things has been changing. I know that my aunts and my uncles, those who left in Vietnam, have tried many times, but they could not find her. And she, she died at a very young age, probably about, 50 or so. So my, my maternal grandmother died, you know, that my father’s mother died, you know at that age. And so my grandfather still had 4 of his children, like in the teenage, so he taking care of all of his children and we lived very close, next to each other. And my grandfather is a very, very hardworking man. Very, very dedicated, you know, family man. So he work in the farm, he raised the pigs, he plant a lot of jackfruit trees. And he’s a very Catholic person, you know. Again, you know, we go to church or we get up even before the church time to say a prayer with him. He’s a very dedicated Catholic man. My parents – my father was in the Vietnamese army when I were young for about 5 or 6 years and during the time that he was in the army, we stay home with my mother. My mother, again, work in the farm, raising vegetables and some chicken and the pig, you know, and it depending on the lucky time and so that how we make a living, so we just do whatever that…because they do not have the – there, there wasn’t
any job, you know, manu- any kind of industry or manufacturing jobs that they can do, so they all have to depending on the farmland.

DL: What did your father do when he came back?

HP: When he came back, he worked for the construction, you know, highway construction company for awhile and then in 1963, when they left that town because the Communist, you know, control it at night. There is no safety, so when he came to the next town and that was also when many of the American GI, you know, came in during the war. And that was men also out of private company that they come down, you know, to build the road and to build the army places, so my father working for one of the American company after that.

DL: Okay. What do you know about your family name, like are there any stories about its history or origins?

HP: Not really, I think Pham is a very, very common Vietnamese last name, so both my family, both my mother and my father had the same Pham, Pham they live in the same village, but my, my father’s side is Pham Sun and my mother’s side for the name is Pham Dinh, D-I-N-H. But for the women, it’s all a Thi, T-H-I, you know, so for the women, it doesn’t matter any difference. So when my father married my mother, you know, they have the same last name, and I just think that it’s a very common Vietnamese name in our village.

DL: For your mom’s name, you said that all the women had T-H-I, is that, what is that like uhh…?

HP: There’s a lot of explanation about T-H-I, you know, it just say that the women, kind of, the significant thing because they said Thi is…that a female. I think that all I can think of.

DL: Are there any traditional first names or nicknames in your family?
HP: My father somehow like the H. Yes, so all eight of my siblings start with the first name with the H. So, let me say it, like my name is Hue, okay? And then my sister’s name is Hoa, this also H-O-A. My other sister’s name is Hưê, H-U-E with a dot under the E, so that’s spelled exactly the same but that is H-U-E with the dot under the E, so that my other sister. And then my brother Ha, H-A. My other brother’s Hinh, H-I-N-H. And then another sister Huong, H-U-O-N-G. And my other brother’s H-U-N-G. And my youngest brother’s H-A-I. So when I say that all together, Hue, Hoa, Hưê, Ha, Hinh, Huong, Hung, Hai, the eight of us. (laughs). So, Hue means flower but my, and and that sound like Chinese, that they call Hue, but then Hoa, my other sister, is also means flower and Hưê means lily. Ha means the river. Hinh, you know, means something strong or that could be a mountain or something. And Huong, that also means strong. Hung means ____.

Hai means the ocean. So, you know, Vietnamese names have different meaning like that, but for some reason, I don’t know, my father’s name is not H, my mother’s not, but then I start with the – they name me Hue, and after that, all eight of us start with the H.

DL: Were you the oldest child then?

HP: Yes.

DL: Okay. What languages do you speak?

HP: Now, it’s English and Vietnamese. So Vietnamese, we spoke, you know, all our life. And then I learned English in Vietnam and then I came to America as a student, first I have to learn English as a second language for almost a year before I get in to the college courses. Yeah, so most – so I speak English and Vietnamese.

DL: Do you speak a different language in different settings, such as home, school, or work?

HP: Work mostly, you know, we have to speak English but then, you know, at work right now, if I have a Vietnamese student come in and especially if they are new, you know, in this country,
they still taking English as a second language and if they want to speak Vietnamese then I will counsel them in Vietnamese and I usually ask them what language would they prefer, you know, for me to speak. For those Vietnamese students who was born and raised, of course they would, you know, like to speak more in English. For parents, when they call in or for the older people who returning to school and most likely they would like for me to speak with them in Vietnamese so they would be able to understand. At home, when my children were young, you know, we learn- we try to talk with them in Vietnamese but when they start going to school then they learn more English, and then eventually they speak – they spend more time in school, they learn more English and it’s just easier for us to communicate or to explain to them in English, so we try to be bilingual, but I think when they grow up and so forth, it looks like more English than Vietnamese. When my children grew up, I also enlisted them – I take them to the Vietnamese language school for like six or seven years. So they learned how to write, to read, but for the speaking, especially among themselves, they would prefer to speak more English than Vietnamese.

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

HP: I think it must be, you know, when the time when I left Vietnam, you know, I never forget the time when I left Vietnam to go to America to study and the whole family get together and have kind of like a farewell, time to say goodbye. And I remember my sister, the one who is next to me, she was saying that wow, you know, you should not go because, you know, maybe when you come back, and not many people will be around. So I don’t know why she said that, but then when I came here in August 1968, and in January 1969, I found out that – I was told – my father had a very serious illness, some kind of cancer, and then he passed away in June 1969. So that only about nine months after I came to America. And so he died at a very, very, very young age.
So that is a very memorial kind of thing that happened to me, only nine months after I came to America to study. So that – and I came to America to study because I got a scholarship, you know, through one of the American chaplain, you know who live in Vietnam, I mean who work with the U.S. army in Vietnam and he was able to get a scholarship for me to come here to study. But, because of that scholarship is, is very, very good and so when my father – all those time when my father was ill, he said no, do not go home because if you go home, you don’t have a chance to go back here to study. So I didn’t get a chance to see him and he died at the age of 42, very young.

DL: Yeah.

HP: Mhm.

DL: What kind of occupations did your family members hold in the past?

HP: I think just working in the farm. I think that, that what it is. There was not – because, you know, in the farm, it almost like, you know, it does not really require, you know, a lot of skills, so all you have to do is doing just…you know, just using your strength, you know, and to go through it.

DL: After you came here to the U.S., did your siblings also stay in Vietnam?


DL: Why is that?

HP: Because they just, they didn’t have a chance, you know, to get out. They didn’t have a opportunity to get out. And so in 1975, I’m the only one here and then after that, we was able to communicate with them and know that they are safe, you know. At least none of them get killed or anything, but they was just going through the whole life that very, very poor. And then, you
know, we start saving money and to send home, you know, the things that they need, you know, clothing and food and money and whatever. And also send them the money so that they can find a way to get out of Vietnam. So all, all those times, you know, we work, save the money, send home the money for them to get out.

DL: Did any of your siblings immigrate here?

HP: Yeah. So I got four of my younger brothers, you know, get out of Vietnam, as a boat people.

Yeah. Mhm.

DL: Did, so did your other siblings stay in – are they still in Vietnam?

HP: Yeah. And I still have, you know, the other three sisters in Vietnam and they stay back there with my mother and then later on, they got married and so they still remain in Vietnam.

DL: So there’s four girls and four boys in your family?

HP: Right. Yeah. Mhm.

DL: Okay. How much education has your family had in the different generations?

HP: My, my brothers, who get here, they getting well. You know, one of them get to be a dentist. My other brother get a degree in engineer. And the other two brothers, they going to some community college and, and get to be working in the, like, aviation company or electronic technology. Yeah, so when they get out here, they doing well. My other sisters in Vietnam, they get through the high school and that’s it.

DL: How about your parents and grandparents? Did they have any type of education?

HP: My father maybe going through, I would think, maybe eighth or ninth grade. And then my mother maybe finish just the fifth grade.

DL: How did your parents, grandparents, and other relatives come to meet and marry? So how did your parents –
HP: I’m sorry?

DL: How did your parents meet each other and then get married?

HP: I think it because maybe it’s by, because they live in the same village. And they are so close. And there could be like sometime they have a matching, you know, kind of…

DL: Matchmaker?

HP: Matchmaker, yeah. But I it’s most likely through the family meeting and relatives introduction to each other, introduction to each other.

DL: How about your grandparents? Do you know? Do you know how your grandparents met?

HP: No.

DL: Okay.

HP: No, I- yeah. No I know about my parents but I don’t know most about how my grandparents met.

DL: Okay. In Vietnam, or America, does your family hold reunions or annual gatherings? So, I guess, since your brothers are here…?

HP: We…not the reunion as such, but like anytime there’s the wedding, that we always get together. You know, so sometimes, people’s graduation, you know, like the children graduate from college or something and there’s also some gathering. My husband’s family, we getting together more often because they only live here in Riverside. So during the anniversary of the grandparents or during the Tet or so forth, we, we get together.

DL: How about…where do your brothers live? Are they in California?

HP: My…I have my…two of them live Dallas and two of them live in Houston. Yeah, because when I lived in Houston, I sponsored them. After they get out of Vietnam as the boat people, so
when I lived in Houston, I sponsored them and they lived there, so, so they are well-established, you know, with their family over there. I left Houston in 1985 to come over here.

DL: I guess, how was the process of sponsoring them and having them come as boat people?

HP: It was very tough. They sent us…you know, we going through, you know, letter and so forth. And maybe they will say that so and so have a boat and that’s a possibility that it require like how many piece of gold and equivalent to how much of the U.S. dollars. And at that time, there could be like two thousand dollars, you know, a person. So we…well and then they, let’s say they said they have a relative, you know, in U.S. or even in Australia or whatever. And so we make the contact and we send the money to them and that how we make the connection for them to get out of Vietnam. And back in, you know, late 70-early 80, I lost almost ten thousand dollars by doing that because, you know, you trust people and you feel so badly for your family, you want your family come over here, so that they tell you that you can do it. And it because you trust people or because you feel guilty if you don’t do it, so my husband and I, between the two of us, we lost almost ten thousand dollars, in the matter of a couple years. But, but we just feel like we have to do it. So, whatever saving that we have, it’s gone.

DL: Was the boat that they came through just people from Vietnam or was it by the government?

HP: No, just people from Vietnam. And they most likely own, you know, privately, and so my two younger brothers, when we ______, and they ended up in Thailand and another two went later and they ended up in the Philippines. And that was in 1981 when we sponsored them to come to America.

DL: Okay, so I’m going to ask you – do you have a spouse?

HP: A what?

HP: Yeah. Mhm. We married. Mhm. I’m married.

DL: How did you and your husband meet?

HP: We met because when I was in school in Michigan, and he went to school in Missouri, but he also worked in Chicago. And that, there was a union of the Vietnamese Catholic students in America. That was before 1975. And they had a conference, a convention during the Christmas time and also in the summer time. So we met at one of those conferences.

DL: Since he was in…Missouri?

HP: Mhm.

DL: And you were in…

HP: Michigan.

DL: Michigan. How did you…how did that work?

HP: In the conference in Chicago. So we ended up, you know, in Chicago, and we met at those conferences.

DL: How did you two keep in contact afterwards?

HP: By mail, and then in 1974, when I was down in…I start my school, my doctorate degree at University of Houston in Texas, and by business, he also ended up in Houston. And so then he looked for me. (laughs). And that how we ended up (laughs) seeing each other. Mhm.

DL: How did you two ended up…or like when did you two ended up getting married?

HP: Married in June. We started seeing each other and one of my professors at University of Houston is a very nice lady and then she – her husband is a lawyer and she usually invite us to their house and then very funny, one of the time, her husband said to my husband, hey you better go after her. (laughs). So. (laughs). So that’s how we started, yeah, and also because at that time,
at University of Houston, we also had a Vietnamese Student Association and we keep in touch with each other, so that how we met. That how we continue the relationship.

DL: How many children do you have?

HP: We have three.

DL: Three. What do they do?

HP: My oldest son Dominic, is working now. He was with the – his picture is right here.

DL: Okay. The one in the suit?

HP: He was working with a congressman, Patrick Kennedy, for a while. For five years and then, actually, he went back to University of Houston, getting a degree in History. And working at the Congress, you know, with Patrick Kennedy for five years. And then he go back to school and he get a Master’s degree at John Hopkins University in International Relations. And then he work. He get a Richards scholarship, a fellowship in University of Hanoi. So he went back to Vietnam, teaching English and doing research there. And he plan to go back to work in the U.S. And my daughter Michelle, is an attorney right now, so she doing law, practice law in Orange County.

And my youngest daughter Andrea Nguyen, who has Down’s Syndrome, but she doing well. She’s 29 years old now, so she working with the Goodwill industry.

DL: With the?

HP: Goodwill.

DL: Goodwill. Okay.

HP: And she also taking some classes, so she’s still with us.

DL: That’s good.

HP: Mhm.

DL: Were all your children born – was that…are they born in..?
HP: They was all born in Texas.

DL: Texas. Okay.

HP: Mhm.

DL: And then you moved here?

HP: And then we moved here when they was very young.

DL: Do you talk to them about your history, like your life?

HP: Oh yeah. We talk a lot about it and I think in 19- no, in 2003, my daughter was a student at Wellesley College in 2003. When she was a junior, she said that she want to go to Vietnam to study. So they had a study abroad program and Vietnam was one of the countries that a student can go. So she joined that, and so she returned to Vietnam in 2003 as an exchange student at University of Saigon. And that was really the beginning of, you know, all those time in the 90s, and even 2000, I never thought about going back to Vietnam. But when my daughter, you know, going back to Vietnam to study and learning about it and so that – you know, the first time I returned to Vietnam was 2006, the end of 2006. So like 39 years after I came to America. And it because my daughter go back there and she learning a lot and because we talk about that all the time. And when she get there and she wrote back and she said I didn’t realize that it had that much impact on me and she said I’m so glad that I learned the Vietnamese language when I were young because now I was able to read and to write and, you know, study at the University of Saigon. And then so, and in 2006, that’s when I took my son back to Vietnam along with my daughter. And my son was really learning a lot ‘cause he loves, he likes history. He read a lot about different history, world history and the history of Vietnam, the history of America. So that was something he really like. So when he get there – so then, you know, when he go back to
John Hopkins and study and he find a way to get a scholarship to go back to Vietnam to do the research and teach English.

DL: When you went with your daughter and your son, did your husband go as well?

HP: No, my husband was stay home, back here with my youngest daughter Andrea. So the three of us went.

DL: Has your husband ever gone back?

HP: Yeah. And then after that, you know, in 2009, we come back together.

DL: As a whole family. Okay.

HP: Mhm.

DL: What do you tell them about your history? I guess, like just your whole life story?

HP: Yeah, yeah. We told them about our whole lives. When I was – when they were young, I gave a lot of lecture, you know, for about the Vietnamese culture, you know, for the…either in the church or in the school so forth. I remember when my – and usually when I give the lecture or like that, my husband and children always come along. And I remember one time, I talk to them about the boat people and how people get out and I had a friend who came here to study with me in the 60s, but then she got sick and she was very lonesome, very homesick, so she went home. And then she tried to escape from Vietnam in the late 70s, she got killed in sea. You know, so that my own friend so I told the story and after that my – all my children said oh God, mom, I didn’t know that you had friend who died like that. And so they was very touching, you know, with how people had to leave Vietnam to come to America or just to get out of Vietnam. So and then, and we told them about the differences, you know, that how to live in Vietnam and also the kind of relationship, the kind of education, the kind of, you know, how to respect the elderly people and so forth. So yeah, so they got the ideas.
DL: Does your family have any special sayings or expressions?

HP: Give me an example, like what? I’m not sure.

DL: I guess something that your family always says.

HP: I don’t think. There’s nothing that in particular.

DL: Are there any special family traditions or customs, songs or food that you have in your family? Or did your family, like, create their own traditions? And celebrations?

HP: You know, nothing really special, you know, in our own family, we all, you know, pretty much keeping with the customs, you know, in general. And then the, for the Catholic, you know, my children was raised as a Catholic. My husband is Buddhist, but we agreed to raise the children as Catholic, so we kept very much, you know, the tradition, you know, going to church on Sundays and so forth. And I still like to keep that. Now that they grow older and they’re on their own, so they have their own choice, you know, but I think as, you know, when they were still in the family, we very much keeping it.

DL: Does your family keep an altar for your ancestors?

HP: Yes. Yeah we do have the altar in our house and then we also have the altar of, for our parents, now that they are both passed away. My husband’s parents also passed away, but then we also have the statue of Jesus and we also have a statue of Buddha. So like when they come to, family, I always said, yeah Jesus and Buddha shake hands in my family. (laughs). Yes. So…and my kids know that and, you know, my husband is very traditional and devoted Buddhist. I’m very devoted Catholic but we get along well. Yeah.

DL: That’s good.

HP: Mhm. We respect each other’s religions, so…

DL: What kind of traditions or celebrations do you maintain for your ancestors?
HP: Yeah. The anniversary, you know, of the dead, you know, my husband kept it very, very closely and so either we make some type of, some kind – Buddhist, yeah, they said you’re suppose to have the food, you know, and my husband’s father is a vegetarian and so was his grandfather. Like during that day, my husband try to be a, you know, to maintain as a vegetarian during those days.

DL: I guess, how has your traditions changed after coming to America? Or are they more or less the same?

HP: I think we try to keep it as much as possible, you know, but, but because of working and also timing, see like, you know, if I see it at other family, for example, like some of my husband’s sister, because they have more time so they, like in those anniversary dinner, they make all different kind of food. You know, that like ten different dishes. (laughs). But for us, if we two or three, (laughs) it’s lucky. (laughs).

DL: Do you currently, like since you’re Catholic, do you currently belong to any churches?

HP: Yeah, I belong, you know, to St. John’s, the Baptist here. And when my children were young, I taught Catholicism, you know, for the church. And I also taught – and I also the head of the parents’ association for the Vietnamese language school here for a long time. And also my husband…and my husband joined me later on, but I taught the Catholic marriage repairation in the Catholic church here for twelve years.

DL: What did you do in the Catholic marriage…?

HP: Well, they have to learn about, you know, different kind of requirement in the church. And in my seminar, you know, I also taught, you know, how to communicate with each other, how to respect each other, you know, financially and so forth. So, we had the whole plan lessons, you know, just try to kind of respect each other, how to communicate, how to maintain the
relationship and other people, we taught about how to educate, you know, the children and so forth. And so, the main purpose is just, you know, learn about the church requirement and also learn about how to get along and how to maintain happiness. And how to raise the children as Catholic.

DL: Do you still go to church everyday pretty much?
HP: Yeah, very much. Yeah, unless there something, emergency or what, so yeah I still going to the church every Sunday.

DL: Every Sunday. Okay. What kind of special foods, traditions does your family have? Like has there been any recipes that’s been passed down in your family?
HP: No, I- (laughs). I cook, I do a lot of cooking and so forth and I talk my children, you know, how to do that. But as far as the recipe, no I do not maintain that and I, like measure the how much, I just said I don’t know, a little bit of this, a little bit of that. And I show them how to do it and I remember when my son was away for school and then when he start working in Washington D.C., how come, mom I get the – I bought the chicken here and how do I get the thing out of the chicken, how do I cut the chicken. (laughs). And just recently, you know, I even showed my son-in-law, you know, how to cut the chicken in eight pieces. (laughs).

DL: Is it like a whole chicken?
HP: Yeah, the whole chicken (laughs). They don’t know how to cut it so you have to show them. I know when like my son learning how to cook, and he cut the onion and you can see that the-

DL: Tears.
HP: The eyes, the tears coming out and he said oh my god, you know, what I’m doing. (laughs). So I taught him, you know, by showing them how to do it, but as far as the recipe, no I don’t have any.
DL: Do you cook Vietnamese food at home?

HP: I still cook Vietnamese and we still eat mostly Vietnamese food. And, you know, I make something very simple, you know, it’s just like, you know, how to make the tofu and the tomatoes, you know, make it into the best soup and so forth and my children like that. And I also make Pho so forth but I – but as far as showing them, I showing them by doing it.

DL: Are there any special foods that you have to have at a family gathering?

HP: No, I’m very flexible. (laughs).

DL: Do you usually have family gatherings with your fam- or at your place?

HP: I think because he, my husband had more brothers and sisters here, so we getting together with them and usually, I remember, when I get to together with them, you know for some of those anniversaries, and they do have different kind of special food, but I’m not very much into it.

DL: What kind of family heirlooms or momentos do you have? Do you have any?

HP: See, because we left the country and also because when my family left North Vietnam, we left the home with the two empty-handed. And then in 1963, when my parents again left, you know, another town. So we left everything behind, so as far as the heirlooms, as far as any of it, and then when my brothers came over here, there’s nothing that we could bring with us.

DL: Do you, I guess…do you have like an ancestral home back in Vietnam?

HP: No, not right now. We…because people kind of scattering all over. And so like I had, I have some uncle who still left in Vietnam, many of them already passed away. I have one uncle in Canada, and we here. So that very tough to get together or to have like a family kind of home, the ancestral home.
DL: Do you have any photo albums or scrapbooks or home movies? It doesn’t have to be like back from Vietnam, it could be just in – your life here in the U.S.

HP: Yeah. We do, like when we got married. We had a very…any time the kids was born, I make the baby books. I made the baby books for each of them and when they grow up, they kept it. They kept it and start taking the pictures out. I said you cannot take the picture out…but we like it (laughs). So yeah, so we do have those kind of pictures.

DL: Did you also do like home videos or home movies?

HP: We do home video. We kept some of the cassette and remember, once in a while my husband would take it out and the kids they said oh daddy, don’t do it. (laughs). They hear their own voice. (laughs).

DL: Who usually – so your husband would usually make the videos and you made the book?

HP: Usually, with the cassette tape and so forth, we kept it and then so – but then now, everything is so digital, we have to maintain those.

DL: What was usually in the home videos?

HP: Who did it or…?

DL: Or like what – what did you usually film?

HP: Well usually, the birthday or some of the trip, some of the vacation time we get together.

DL: We gonna talk to a little bit about your experience during the Vietnam war.

HP: Mhm.

DL: Okay. So, how did the war in Vietnam affect your family and your community?

HP: Well it affect me, first of all 1954, that when Vietnam divided into two different sides. North belong to the Communist. The South to Vietnamese Republic. So in 1954, that how we left the whole village, we left everything we have, we left the land. And so we came to South Vietnam,
and so in South Vietnam, we live in the city now called Bing Duong for a while and only for the first, from maybe from 1954 to about 1959. It was safe, but then in 1959, when the Communist started living in all those village, so they start coming in a night and kill people in the village, the head of the village and whatever. So then in 1963, we have to leave that country to go to another country and another town. And then all the time, until, up until 1975. And so we experienced all of those – we cannot really plan any kind of the long term and everything that we build up in the field in a few years, we have to give up. Not – and that most likely mean the people in the countrysides. You feel – the war affecting your directly. And I remember when I were young, we live in the house and I always slept with my face, facing out the door because I’m just so afraid that at night, maybe someone will come and slept in my bed. And I go to bed, all those years, with that kind of feeling. And then we would hear the firing around our village. And in 1961, that was when the Communist would come at night, during the daytime. Our village was controlled by the South Vietnamese army, but at night, the Vietcong will come. And then, so we always live under the fear.

DL: Where did you live during the war? Like, I guess, you moved multiple times, but how many of those times was it during the war?

HP: All of those times was during the war because really the war in Vietnam, it going continuously. Everything we left in North Vietnam. So, continuously like 19- we build up the life in South Vietnam, we thought it was okay, but then there was ‘54, but then in 1957, ‘58, ‘59, that was when the Vietcong start bothering, fighting in the village again. So all those moving times, they was under the war.

DL: Was it – I guess, you were in the countryside, was it different than in the city?
HP: It was a lot different from if the people lived in the city. See, if the people, let’s say if the people live in the city, they heard about it but it not affecting them directly, but because my family in the countryside, it affecting us directly.

DL: Besides your father, was there anyone else who actually joined the Vietnamese army?

HP: No.

DL: Okay. Were you ever captured or held by enemy forces during the war?

HP: No.

DL: Or any of your family?

HP: Not that I know of.

DL: Okay. Were you or anyone you ever known ever in a re-education camp?

HP: Not in my family.

DL: Okay.

HP: Yeah.

DL: Did you move before the end of the war?

HP: I came here in 1968.

DL: ’68.

HP: Yeah, as a student.

DL: So before.

HP: Mhm. So that was before 1975.

DL: Do you remember anything like, I guess, how were you feeling at that time, when the war actually ended? Like past during the Fall of Saigon.

HP: Well at the time when the war actually ended, I remember, like in the month of February and March in 1975, that was when the – we was at the University of Houston. I was at University of
Houston studying for my doctorate degree. And when we heard that this is all over, that was very – we tried to communicate with our family and I could not find – there was…very, very worried because you don’t know if they still alive or not and I almost gave up my school – you need to check the tape?

(Paused to make sure the recording was still running)

DL: Okay we could start again.

HP: Yeah. Yeah, so when we found out that the Communist took over and the whole country’s now under the Communist government and we was very disappointed. And I did – I did not want to go to school anymore, I didn’t want to continue with my doctorate degree. So that was very, very tough. Very, very tough time. But then my husband, he was my fiancé at the time, so he encouraged me and said you get to this far. So I continued to do it and because there’s nothing else you can do and because…so that was a very tough time for us as students here, not knowing, not communicating with the family. So that was a very tough time for us.

DL: What do you think of the U.S. policy during the war or after the war?

HP: At the time, when we was there and we felt like the U.S. government helping us to fight against the Communist. And I think all of us believe that that is how it’s go. But then, when… 1972 when the Paris Agreement was signed and that when the North Vietnamese and Vietcong didn’t keep any of their promise. The South Vietnam started feeling like we was left behind, alone, to fight the war. And, and so they tried to do it on their own and when Nixon said it was gonna be a Vietnamese _____ or whatever for the war.

DL: A Vietnamese?

HP: Vietnamese…what do they call that, the war for the Vietnam belong Vietnam only

DL: Oh okay.
HP: And then we feel like, you came to our country and you fought the war and now suddenly, you agree to let, to go and let other people, the North side, because that – there should be agreement so that if there is a stop of the war, it had to both sides. But the North Vietnamese did not give it. But in the South, they still keep fighting in the South, so we start feeling there maybe something not right with the American policy for Vietnam war. And then nowadays, you realize that because American feel like whatever that they can get out for their benefit, they would. And then they will left other people being on their own.

DL: I guess, besides the – being able to get the scholarship, what made – what encouraged you to make the decision to come to the U.S.?

HP: Opportunity to study and when I came to the U.S., I had planned to go back and to teach in Vietnam, in high school and also being a counselor, changing the Vietnamese kind of education system and encourage students to be able to do whatever that they are good at, that they like to do and so forth. So that was a dream. That was the plan that I had. But then when the war happened that way, then there’s no way for us to go back, but we know that’s an opportunity, even like my father, on his deathbed, he mentioned it to stay here to study, so that we can help the country, we can help the people better. So, but a part of it, I’m here now and in my kind of career right now, I’m also be able to help not only many, many young people, many students, all different ages, different races, but I also have an opportunity to help a lot of Vietnamese students. And, and also, because of my experience in education and so forth, I’m also a host for the Vietnamese television and Vietnamese radio station, so I have it on the weekly basis. So I do a lot of information. I do a lot of discussion about differences about the culture, information on higher education to help the Vietnamese people.
DL: When you came to the U.S., how did you leave? What kind of transportation did you have coming to the U.S.?

HP: I – we flew on plane – American at the time very nice airline and we ended up staying at the dormitories, so we didn’t need a lot of transportation. It’s most likely that everything is right there.

DL: Was your scholarship covering your whole time there?

HP: Yeah. The scholarship from a Catholic university, so it covered everything.

DL: When you came to the U.S., did you bring anything with you from home? Special possessions?

HP: (laughs). Not much. I missed the Vietnamese food. (laughs). But I cannot carry anything. (laughs). You know the first couple months was very hard because we could not get used to American food. And you miss fish sauce. (laughs). Yeah, but I could not bring anything with me and then the clothes, you come here and you just have to wear the clothes that you wear here. So, but only maybe on some special – later on, my family sent me some ao dais, so that like on some special occasion then we’ll wear it.

DL: Was there like a – was there a Vietnamese community in Michigan?

HP: No. At that time, there’s not many. There’s only the four of us in one school and there, we get to know one of the lady who leave about an hour drive from where we lived and she married to an American. And so she like, during the holiday, she would inviting us to her house to get together. So that was nice to have, to be able to get to her house and to have some Vietnamese food. And she had fish sauce. (laughs).

DL: What was the journey like coming to America? Or at least by plane? Since you were in the village, did you have to go into the city?
HP: Yeah, we have to go to the city to go to the airport in Saigon at the time. And then so, we flew from Saigon to Guam and to Hawaii and then to Detroit. So yeah, my first impression when we landed in San Francisco one night and stayed with the – some of the people there and then the next day to go to Detroit, and I remember when we was – they was driving us from the airport to the home and I – all of those highway bridge, my first instinct said why are they building the bridge and no river? (laughs). And we look down, didn’t see any river. But then one bridge over the other on the freeway, so.

DL: Were any of your families in a refugee camp at home?

HP: Yeah, because my brothers, all four of my brothers. Two of them was in the refugee camp in Thailand and another two in the refugee camp in the Philippines. And also in my husband’s family, we also have her – his younger sister ended up in the refugee in Indonesia. Yeah, so we do have a lot of our family members was in the refugee camp before they can join us in the U.S.

DL: How did they leave the refugee camps then?

HP: Well, there’s a process, the paper processing that we had to go through and make sure we related, make sure that they will be eligible to come here and so that’s a lot of paper that we go through the Catholic charity organization at the time, a Lutheran church, so that was a lot of the different kind of immigration office that we have to go through to get the paper, the paper correctly for them to join us.

DL: When you said that your brothers came by boat, was the boat to refugee camps and then…?

HP: Yeah, the boat, they go through the ocean and they roughly ended up in some – in Thailand. And luckily that they was rescued or whatever to be able to get to the camp after all those days in the boat.

DL: So after they went to the refugee camp, did they come here by plane to the U.S.?

DL: Okay.

HP: Mhm.

DL: What were some of your first impressions and early experiences in this country? Or in the U.S.?

HP: (laughs). I said all American look alike, they all blonde and blue – blonde hair and blue eyes. (laughs). It hard to tell the difference sometime, but I – my first impression in the school was that, I told them, how come they speak so fast? You learn in Vietnam and you learn English in Vietnam, but you never learn how to…not have – an opportunity to listen to Americans speaking. And you learn the vocabulary, you learn the grammar, you learn to read, but you do not get the way to listen to. And when you speak back, you thought you say it correctly, but you totally incorrect. And so the communication in the beginning was very, very difficult and that why I have to ended up stay in the ESL courses before we can start taking the college courses. And I think the food just so plain. It’s like no taste.

DL: Did you cook for yourself or did you eat from the cafeteria?

HP: No, we stayed at the dorms so we had to eat at the dorm in the cafeteria and Friday night, only thing they have was macaroni and cheese and I never liked cheese.

DL: Every Friday?

HP: I never liked cheese up until now. So that was very bad. (laughs).

DL: So when you first came here, you came to Detroit. Where else have you lived in the U.S., I noticed that…?

HP: Well I lived in Detroit, going to school in Adrian, which is not to far from Detroit, for four years. And from there, I went to Scranton, Pennsylvania for my Master’s degree and then to
Boston for some of my clinical training. And from Boston, I went down to University of Houston in Texas for my doctorate degree and worked there for about five years before I came to America – I came to California.

DL: California.

HP: But I think, so, because I associate most likely with the school, but the way that I learned a lot about America is when I was in Michigan. They had – they asked different students to take an international student home. So I’m lucky to had a student who took me to her home the very first Thanksgiving. And ever since that, they almost like adopted me.

DL: How was that?

HP: So that was really, really interesting because then, from there, they showed me everywhere. The very first Christmas time, they showed me to the four industry – they make the car, and she showed me like Greenfield village during the snowing day. And then they also take me to visit many of their American friends, so I was able to really learn about American way of life rather than just through the paper or through the school. And so I appreciate that a lot, by living with an American family during the holiday and in the summer when I had the vacation, they also take me in, so I was able to really learn a lot about American life through the association with that family.

DL: What, I guess – why did you make the decision to come to Southern California or California?

HP: I liked the weather.

DL: The weather?

HP: I had a good job at the Houston community college, and I visited America, California, in July and that was so beautiful. And in Houston, it was so hot, so humid. Very, very, very humid.
So I came here and then I told my husband that I like to work in America, I mean I like to work in California. I want to get a job here and I applied for a job and the very first time I come interview and got the job offer and they had an opening, so that why I moved.

DL: So when you applied a job, was it here at Orange Coast?


DL: How do you feel about your decision to come to the U.S. today?

HP: I think that a very good decision. That was a very good choice to be able to come and to be able learn so much about life, so much about America. And that also because having an opportunity now that I am in this kind of career that I am able to help many, many different people.

DL: Who helped you find a home in the U.S.? I know that you said that you lived in the dorms but I guess, from your other…?

HP: When I came to – we was in Houston and we bought a house right away, not right away, but after I got - my husband had a job and I had a part-time job. And so in 1975, when the more Vietnamese came to Houston and we talked to each other and that they said it good to be able to get the house rather renting it. So among ourselves, we talking what we learning about and so that how we start looking for the home. And then I remember, I think I said oh, so you really not owning the home because the interest was so much. And in Vietnam, usually there’s nothing like that but then he will say but here that the way to do it because otherwise if you rent the house, you never owning anything. So I remember even some of my students, I was a consultant for one of the school district in Texas, and I had many of the refugee children, like they are eleven or twelfth grade. And one day, we were sitting about, they said yeah, if you buy the house, it only
forty-five thousand dollars. But by the time to – it like a couple hundred thousand dollars. Where do the money go? (laughs). Yeah, so then, so we learned the system.

DL: During your other times, like in school for your Master’s and your Doctorate, did you stay in the dorms as well?

HP: No. Only in my Bachelor’s and my Master’s degree. In my Doctorate degree, that when I start – at first when I first moved to Houston, I share a room with a roommate and then later on got married and so...

DL: How did you find your jobs?

HP: When I was in my Doctorate degree, when I was in the dorm, a part of my way to pay for the tuition and be a Resident Assistant at the dorm, an RA. So I do that and I also do a lot of babysitting as a graduate student. Then when I was at University of Houston, I also have fellowship to do some research, I work in the department. And then when I start working on my Doctorate degree, when I was writing my dissertation, I start looking for a part-time job and os either through friends, through the people that I know. And then my very first job in the career was – I usually do it for half-time, not even half, maybe ten, twelve hours away from the halfway house in Houston. And I work as a liason person at the school district in Houston. And then when the Houston community college has a career counseling position open, I apply for it as a part-time first. And when I work as a part-time, I got from school to school, a few hours a week. When a full-time position opened, I applied for and that how I get it, so I work as a counselor at Houston Community College for five years. And then when I planning to move to California, I start looking for the school in California and I wrote to a few schools and when they had a position open here, they sent me an application and that how we get it.
DL: I remember reading online that you went through different occupations while you were here, different positions, what kind of positions did you have?

HP: Most likely I was like a counselor, I was a counselor, when I was a counselor, I counseling students and I also taught career planning classes for a long time. I taught morning classes and evening class. So my students is variety, some young student and some returning student. And I have many returning student and then later on, they bring their children. When their kids ready for college, they said okay you should go take Dr.Pham’s career planning class. So I enjoyed teaching the career planning class and like planning and so forth. So I do that for 15 years and then when the previous Dean retired, I applied for the job and go to be the Dean. So teaching counseling, being administrator and so forth. So that my main job, another thing that I do, volunteer, I do a lot of volunteer work for the community as, teaching Catholicism for the church here, teaching the preparation for the Catholic marriage, giving a lot of lecture like college days for parents and so forth. And then doing the radio and T.V. host and it all volunteer.

DL: Do you notice any similarities or differences between your old community and the community that you are in now?

HP: The old community, even for the church – for example, when I was at St. John’s, the people who came here earlier that, very much in the, kind of, the same kind of level. But now that I return to the church, there’s many, many, many new people. And I think many of them are new immigrants, either they being sponsored by the family or many of them going back to Vietnam and marry and then bring their spouse over here. So now like I return to the same church, but it very few of old faces.

DL: Yeah.

HP: Many, many new people that I don’t know.
DL: Have you ever encountered racism and how was that experience like?

HP: It hard to say. I remember, at one time, at the University of Houston when I was about to work on my dissertation. And I remember one of the psychology professors, at first I thought I would have him in my committee for my doctorate dissertation, but then he talk with me and then he said well you been here this many years and I don’t think that you ever be able to finish the dissertation and get your degree.

DL: So why did he say that?

HP: Yeah. And he just said that about, I don’t think you have the ability to do it. And I said well then, I will. I told him I will and you watch me and then – and that’s so, I don’t know if because I am an Asian person or international student or whatever that made him say so, but that kind of made me angry. And then I said you will wait. And then after that I finished my dissertation in a year and a half.

DL: Wow.

HP: For any kind of discrimination, I personally, I don’t really experience it. I do feel like, and I heard a lot of story from my student here – they feel like discriminated because they do not speak English or because their name is different. And then we talk about it, but personally, I don’t feel that kind of discrimination.

DL: How do you identify yourself in American history – in American society? Like, for example, do you identify yourself as Asian, Asian-American, Vietnamese, or Vietnamese-American?

HP: I still feel that I am Vietnamese.

DL: Mhm.

HP: Because the terminology has a lot of different meaning. So to me, I think that if you said that you are Vietnamese-American, that mean you must some kind of American blood. But how do
we define American blood? That different. But while I am totally 100% Vietnamese, I live in America, I speak English, I know American culture, so a part of me is also American. And the life that I live here, it twice as much as the life that I live in Vietnam. So yeah, I can also identify myself as a Vietnamese-American, but if biologically, how could you define it? So culturally, societally, then I feel like yes, I do feel as a Vietnamese-American, but I still think like, to me, I’m Vietnamese.

DL: Do you have any funny or memorable experiences of culture shock or being shocked by American culture?

HP: When I first learned in school and you learn language and the slang and so forth. And I think slang is really funny. And I don’t know, because when I was in Detroit and many of my American friends, they are very interesting. And one time, we went to a restaurant and, what did I…after the food and you take it home for the dog. And I remember one time, I was saying something like is it really American culture? (laughs). To take the food home for the dog only? (laughs). Or something like that. Or some of the American expression…they taught me something and they was all laughing at it, so I said what does it mean? And they explain it to me, but I cannot understand it either. So but then, so I always feel like, you do not really understand the whole culture if you are not really mastered in the language. And so like they said if you go to sleep and if you start dream in another language, that mean you become a master of it. And it’s really funny because sometime when I go to sleep if I scared, then I speak in English or when I get mad, I speak in English more than Vietnamese. (laughingly). I think the Vietnamese language does not allow the women to say the bad words. (laughs).

DL: Are you currently a U.S. citizen?

HP: Yes.
DL: Did you go through the naturalization process?

HP: Naturalization. Mhm. Yeah, have to take the exam and everything, and the interview and everything. Mhm.

DL: How was it like going through the process?

HP: Well, it was very easy for me because – but here’s the thing, when I – anytime I go…one time we go down to Mexico, and they would ask me, how did you become U.S. citizen? And I said through naturalization. Oh, but it is a funny story, when I was in Nogales, Arizona back in 1972. So I was in school in Michigan, we went down to Nogales and my friend also went down with us. So we walked because her house is right by the border, so we just walk across the border and I don’t have any paperwork with me. I don’t have the I-94. I had a passport and everything, but I left it at her house. So she said don’t worry, we just walk to the – let’s walk through the - it’s like going for a mall, going to shopping. So and then suddenly, we cross the border, we come to Mexico. And here, so then we walk around on the way home and she said, asked me do you have your passport or your student I.D. or anything. I said no I don’t have anything. And then she said oh that’s okay, my uncle is a big lawyer here so don’t worry, if anything happen, he can get you out. And then she just said that it’s usually they will ask you where come from? Okay? So that what she told me. So then, when it getting a little bit darker and then her uncle or her relative have the car and so we all get in the car so we can drive home. So I sit in the back and then the driver’s here, so when we go through U.S. customs, the U.S. look at all of us and said are you all U.S. citizens? And we all shook our heads, including me. (laughs). And he look at me and said where were you born? And I said Michigan. (laughs). And they said okay, you can go. I said oh my god, why you was good. (laughs). So that was back in 1972, but usually, when she said that
it’s usually at where do you come from? Okay, so that mean I came from Michigan. She goes to school there but he was asking where were you born? I said Michigan. (laughs).

DL: And he let you go?

HP: So he let me go, there was nothing. Oh my god. (laughs).

DL: Do you vote in the U.S. elections?

HP: Mhm.

DL: I guess, what makes you want to vote in the U.S. elections?

HP: I think because you have a choice, you can make a difference. So and you need to voice your opinion by voting.

DL: Do you still keep in touch with your family in Vietnam?

HP: Mhm. Very much.

DL: I guess, who do you usually keep in contact with and how would you keep in contact with them?

HP: Right now, we can through telephone very easily, Skype, or whatever, email. Mhm.

DL: Who do you usually keep in contact with the most?

HP: My sister.

DL: Your sister?

HP: Mhm.

DL: You said that you’ve been back to Vietnam, how many time have you been back?

HP: Four times.

DL: Four times?

HP: Mhm.

DL: How was it like going back to Vietnam every time?
HP: It always have some excitement, anxiety as well. And the first time was very – I recognize that there was much changes because when I left Vietnam, Saigon is not really that big. And after about 10-15 minutes outside of Saigon, you start seeing the rice fields. You start seeing the countryside. But this time, for my – from Saigon to where I used to live, and it suddenly get to the house, and I was still looking for the rice field. I said what happened to all of the rice field now? Because everything was industrialized, housing and factory and everything, so actually from Saigon to where I used to live, no more rice fields, no more, it’s totally changed. So if you want to see really the countryside or the rice field, you have to go much further in the ____ Delta area. So that make a really big impression on me and said that I didn’t realized that it was changing, that fast. It very crowded, very hot to walk on the street. I still not be able to cross the street by myself, I just feel every car was going to me.

DL: So was the cars trying to around?

HP: Yeah, that’s right. I always have to hold on to somebody’s hand and follow them. (laughs).

DL: Are there any songs, images, or artifacts that remind you of Vietnam?

HP: The song by Pham Duy, “Vietnam, Vietnam.” It’s a very famous song and I still think that song is really express well about the country and about the people.

DL: After coming to the U.S., what kind of traditions or customs have you made an effort to preserve?

HP: At least to keep the custom – some of the custom of the wedding, like the ceremony at the home. The two – the wedding in Vietnamese custom, Vietnamese culture, it’s not only of the two person, but the two families. And then for the family, not only the living family, but also our ancestors. So, I think having some kind of ceremony at home to – in front of the elder, of the parents and grandparents. That’s meaningful. And it’s just like to introduce to a new person into
the family, the relatives, the one who present, but also the one who already pass away, so the person to come into a new family feel like, yes I’m a part of it and I’m very important and I become part of the people who are not only living, but the one who already pass. So we still like to preserve that. When my daughter got married, that how we had the church celebration, but then we also have a celebration, the ceremony, at home.

DL: For the wedding ceremony, is it usually at the bride’s side of the family or the husband?
HP: Mostly at the bride side, but I think it also depending on the convenience.

DL: Are there any traditions that you have given up or changed?
HP: Yeah. There maybe something that we’ll be able to keep. But, let’s say something for the funeral, there used to be a lot more that the person had to do for the funeral to keep the body and do that. But now, it – because it cost a lot here and it also because not for the convenience. Like sometime people, the way they dress up for the funeral, sometime it tough. So then we just have to kind of showing what it is right instead of just wearing, like when people have to wear all the white, with the hood and all of that. And some family are still trying to keep it, but I also say that there are many other family just wear the black and with the white band and make it simple. So, I think it acceptable.

DL: When you do funerals, is it usually like in a ethnic ceremony – cemetery?
HP: Mhm.

DL: Or like a Vietnamese cemetery?
HP: Mhm. Yeah. And some of them take it for a long time, especially for the Buddhist. That’s long. For the Catholic, they have the mass, and they have the funeral ceremony. But then for the Buddhist, it take longer.

DL: In your own – in your opinion, what will be come of the Vietnamese culture in America?
HP: Can you say it again?

DL: How will – how do you think the Vietnamese culture will be like in America?

HP: I think some of them will be remain and it depending on – it depend a lot on the family. Some may not be able to and it also depending on how the parents pass it down to the children. They are trying to do a lot of different things, at like the Buddhist temple, so that the children can learn the language and also about the culture. And so those are the kind of thing that will be maintained. Some of the Catholic church also try to keep the Vietnamese language classes as well. So I think there are still some that can be remained, but it really depending a lot on where at, like in Orange County, because it a big Vietnamese community here, so I think that easier to keep some of the customs. But if for those people who live far away or not many Vietnamese, I think by the second generation, it’ll be very tough on them to even know about that.

DL: In the Vietnamese community here in America, do you – the majority – Buddhist or Catholic?

HP: I think the Buddhist still very, very strong. They doing really well-organized. But I think the majority of the Vietnamese people are still Buddhist.

DL: How has the community, the Vietnamese community, changed in your opinion? Or has it changed?

HP: It changed a lot because the children now, they grew up in American society, they learn more about American, they get used to it more, so therefore, yeah it is changing. For example, like taking care of the elderly. In Vietnam, yeah, of course the children have to take care of the elderly people but, and then they don’t want to put them in a nursing home or anything. But then now in reality, not family can do it. Let’s say you have three kids and let’s say that my kid, they
have their own job, they have their own family, how do I expect them to keep me with them. So, there will be a lot of changing about the way of life. And so we will have to prepare for it.

DL: Are you very involved in the Vietnamese community here?

HP: Very much. Mhm. I’m still very involved with the Vietnamese language school and by doing the radio talk show and T.V. host, I’m very much the voice for them.

DL: Yeah.

HP: Mhm. Yeah.

DL: Do you visit Little Saigon? A lot?

HP: A lot of the time. Mhm. Yeah.

DL: What do you usually visit it for?

HP: Supermarket.

DL: Supermarket. (laughs).

HP: (laughs). To get the food.

DL: Yeah.

HP: (laughs).

DL: What do you – how do you think of it? How do you think of Little Saigon?

HP: I think they really growing. I think that they should be able to make it a little bit more inviting atmosphere for other people to come. I’m surprised that sometime I talk to our student, they’ve never been there.

DL: Ohh.

HP: Many of them never been there. And before, when we have the opportunity, I used to have the tour to take the faculty and the staff and the students to Little Saigon. So I’ll take them to
different temple, different restaurant, and the supermarket, so they’ve been exposed to the business of the Little Saigon, but not many of them ever been there.

DL: What do you think are the most important things that future generations of Vietnamese-Americans can – should remember about their past?

HP: They really should remember where they came from. They should remember about the beauty of the values, of the culture – like the family traditions – the respect of the elderly, and also like the Confucius kind of values between husband and wife. I hope to see that the family will stay together more between husband and wife rather than going through the break, going through the divorce and so forth. So, those are the kind of values that hopefully that they can learn and respect. And I do hope that maybe more and more people getting old and hopefully the Vietnamese community will be able to come up with some kind of nursing home for the house for the elderly for the Vietnamese, so at least that they don’t feel so lonely when they go through that kind of stages.

DL: Are there anything else that I haven’t asked that you would like to share maybe?

HP: (laughs). A lot already.

DL: (laughs). I know I’ve asked a lot already.

HP: Yeah, so what do you have to do after this?

DL: For me?

HP: Mhm.

DL: Hold on, I’m gonna -