

**Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine**

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MCH: My name is Megan Huey and today is February 15, 2013. I am interviewing Stephane Guager and we are in the Asian American Studies department at the University of California of Irvine and this is an interview for the Vietnamese American Oral History Project. May I ask you first to state your name, age and where you currently reside?

SG: Stephane Gauger, age 42 in Huntington Beach, California.

MCH: And when were you born and where?

SG: I was born on August 30, 1970 in Saigon, Vietnam.

MCH: How old were you when you came to America?

SG: Well, it's all fuzzy, but I believe it was around 1972 so, when I was two. I always thought it was 1975 because that's my first recollection from memories that we hopscotched to Guam from Vietnam. But apparently when I was two we already had family in the Bay Area so my mother, she had a—because she was married to an American, we had an open passport. So she had me live with relatives in the Bay Area when I was around two, so yeah.

MCH: Do you have any memories living in Saigon?

SG: Not pre-Guam, so no, no. So no recollection within the first four years of my life.

MCH: Okay. Where were your parents—I'm sorry. What were your parents' names and how did they meet?

SG: I don't know how they actually met, but my mother's name is Han—her maiden name is To, Han and my father's name was Edward, Edward Gauger.

MCH: How do you spell your mother's name?

SG: Her first name was Han, H-A-N and her maiden name is To, T-O.

MCH: Okay, interesting. What were their occupations—do you...

SG: My mother was a housewife. She was divorced from her first marriage and my father was an agent for a construction company that built roads and bridges.

MCH: Okay. Do you have any siblings?

SG: I have many. My mother's first marriage, I have five older brothers and sisters who are half brothers and sisters from her first marriage to a Vietnamese man. And a natural brother, I only have one full brother. And then I also have two younger half brothers, because my father had passed when I was a child, so my mother, you know, consequently had two more children after.

MCH: Right, right. How did you immigrate to America then? Was there a specific reason? Did your parents immigrate together?

SG: Well, what happened was...it is sort of an immigrant story, even though I'm biracial and my father was American because he actually passed away in Vietnam. So once that happened, then it was just basically—we just took out the American in the equation and we were basically a Vietnamese family, but our family was nonpolitical, meaning that nobody was working for the government and this and that, but we were educated. So my Uncles had studied abroad, and so they left in the

early seventies. And my aunts, my mother's sisters married Frenchmen and they left in the late sixties. So everybody was just leaving, so I think the whole family knew that we were going to leave at some point. It wasn't like a heart wrenching, "Oh we don't want to leave." It was like "Okay, we're going to leave." It was just a matter of when. And because we already had family situated in California, it was the sponsorship kind of aspect of it. It wasn't a church, but it was like, "Okay there's already family in Guam, we could stay with them." So then we basically left Vietnam to resettle in Guam for two years before hop scotching to San Diego.

MCH: Do you remember things...[from] your life in Guam then?

SG: Yeah, Guam was very, you know, it was my first memory in life, yeah. So Guam is a Pacific island, so I just remember typhoons and Polynesian populations.

MCH: Do you think that affected, your culture growing up within your family—you?

SG: Definitely my family, I mean you know as a five year old you're just basically... everything's playtime. But I think for my family, it did because Guam is a little bit, I think it made my mother more of an entrepreneur, because it has that kind of free spirited kind of vibe where people could kind of...it's kind of like Hawaii where people could kind of, it's not as strict, you know. So she opened up a couple bars in Guam. And you know, that kind of put the entrepreneurial bug in her.

MCH: Did she have businesses when she came to America as well?

SG: Always, yeah. She was a very single mother who had boyfriends, but you know, she could always forge her own—she was very independent minded. She kind of had that business sense, you know. She liked working; she liked working hard. So I guess I would classify her as one of those gypsy Asian mothers.

MCH: So your father passed away before...when you got here?

SG: I think he passed away in Vietnam when I was one or two, you know. So I never knew him. He had cancer and he was still young, but yeah he had cancer and after that it was just one big family with my mother and my grandmother. So it was a very kind of matriarchal family because it was the grandmother and the mother that shepherded the whole family.

MCH: Do you think your grandmother had traditions that you have to keep up with then...Vietnamese...culturally...wise?

SG: Yeah, fortunately a lot of my Vietnamese language, I mean I would have to say that some of it is due to her because when she came to America she didn't speak any English. So I had to speak, you know I had to speak with her in the home. It was kind of like the Vietnamese wasn't really good because I didn't go to school for Vietnamese. But I had, you know, spoken it at home with my grandmother growing up, so then when I was able to work professionally in Vietnam, my language skills—I didn't need too much to catch up. So because of her I don't know if that's a traditional thing but it was some, you know, I had to give her that because I had cousins who, like I mentioned earlier, my aunts married Frenchmen, so I have cousins who are biracial but they were born in Paris and they don't speak any Vietnamese because their mothers wanted them to grow up very French and assimilated. And they always kind of regret that they didn't have the language and that they couldn't speak to their grandmother. And, you know, so if I ever have children, that's kind of important to me as well, so I guess you're right, tradition does kind of pass down. Because I'm proud of the language, so I would want to

share that, you know, in future children. So, but besides that, she wasn't traditionally Vietnamese, I mean that tradition that the grandmother carries down wasn't maybe specifically Vietnamese, but it was religious. Very, very Catholic, so we had to go to mass you know, I had to be like...I had to do communion and all that Catholic stuff. So, on her wall, she would just have a picture of the Pope, a picture of Jesus and that was—she would go to mass every morning. So that carried through her [to] our family.

MCH: Did she also have an alter for your ancestors growing up?

SG: Well, I believe that my grandfather might have been Buddhist because there was a little bit of—there was an alter, it wasn't a Buddhist alter, it was a Catholic alter. Because there were candles, and there wasn't any fruit. So there was, yeah.

MCH: Let's see...so you definitely feel the connection with the Vietnamese culture

SG: Oh yeah.

MCH: And I know you have the film, the Owl and the Sparrow, so you went to Vietnam to do filming for that then?

SG: Yeah, but that wasn't my first experience, that was my first time I directed a film in Vietnam, but before that I had already worked on I think five...five different projects working on camera and lighting.

MCH: So you go to Vietnam often?

SG: I did, I did. I haven't been there in probably almost two years, which is a long time for me. Because typically I would try to go once a year and I would try to find some kind of purpose to be there because if you go there and you don't have a purpose and you don't have a job, you can just kind of kill a lot of time just hanging

out in cafes. So I always try to, you know, or somebody will hire me to go over there and do some sort of shooting—film production, yeah.

MCH: Do you feel like you're treated well there? Do you feel any racism possibly because you are partially Vietnamese?

SG: No, but that's a good question because if you're talking about Amerasians, they're...there are two groups of Amerasians from Vietnam. One is the biracial Amerasians who were, I guess, in a way left in Vietnam, who didn't come to the States until they had the UN sponsorship program, which was in the late eighties. So they grew up in Vietnam and they grew up hard...with some hardship. And there are the Amerasians who were lifted out of Vietnam before 1975 or at 1975 so they grew up very American. And so it's two diverse groups. SO there are ones who, you know, I've gone to a couple of these Amerasian conventions, you know. They have them like, I think, once a year. Typically the whole purpose of them is to connect with your peers but also to, they have agendas, which is, you know, their programs that help them reconnect them with their biological fathers. And, also to kind of help one another and they're immigrants because they came to the states when they were 16, 17, 18, and so they speak with, they speak English with an accent, whereas, you know, a lot of Amerasians who were adopted after the baby lift, they have no Vietnamese culture roots at all because they were adopted when they were babies. So they don't have any Vietnamese ties so it's different, you know? Just being adopted when you were a kid or not can change who you are. So basically myself, I came to the US when I was young but because I speak the language and I'm tied into the roots, I'm able to connect with Amerasians who grew up in Vietnam, because we

all share our kind of pride for the culture. Those are two different groups of biracial Vietnamese, I guess.

MCH: So when you came here you said you resettled in the bay? Or did you...

SG: No, I think I spent a year with relatives in San Francisco then I went back to Vietnam when I was two or three. After that, I went to Guam and stayed there for two years and then we settled in San Diego for two years.

MCH: Okay, so growing up, how was your childhood? You grew up in San Diego?

SG: Yeah, well yeah. Ages of seven and eight in San Diego and then my mother being very entrepreneurial, found out that a lot of refugees were settling in Houston, Texas. So, and there was oil there so she just thought it might be a good place to try. And so basically we lived in Houston for two years and I was I think eight and nine. And she opened up another bar and then she opened up a mini market. So it was always some kind of new business but they would always fail, because she wasn't a very good businessperson.

MCH: Okay, so you moved around a lot?

SG: Yeah, up until like ten and then it was very kind of Orange county upbringing, you know, hang out by the beach upbringing. I was an avid tennis player, so it was a very kind of, you know, it was a pretty easy upbringing because being raised by a gypsy mother, she wasn't strict with grades and she was always out trying to start a new business or trying to pay the rent so I was left to y own devices. So I had a very free childhood.

MCH: Did you work in any of her mini marts or bars later on?

SG: No...I did, I did when I was in high school she opened up a janitorial business, so we did office cleaning so I would go to some offices after school and vacuum. So I was, you know, doing my duty. And that didn't last for very long, and yeah so it was always some new business.

MCH: Did you grow up with all your siblings with you then?

SG: Yeah for the most part, I think, well not everybody—we had a big family, but my sisters left when they were, I have two older sisters, and they left when they were teenagers. And they grew up independently of my mother, so I had a few brothers, you know growing up. And we'd all get along. You know, there's some reason, there's just no drama in the family I think, yeah.

MCH: Did you all graduate from high school in Orange, or did you...? Because you said your mother wasn't very strict on grades, did you have a path to college, career-wise?

SG: Yeah, you know I think in high school, I went to Fountain Valley High school and they had one of those career guidance counselors. They came in and they'd make you take a test to see what field you would probably like to do in the future, you know. And I think even then I was taking drama classes in high school and even then it was, I think I checked a lot of boxes and I think it had something to do with visual arts. So that was just kind of the path I took and then I didn't have anyone steer me to go to like a film school so basically after high school I went straight to Cal State Fullerton. They didn't have a film program but they had a very good theater program so I majored in theater and within the theater department they did have T.V. production. So I didn't have stellar grades but it was good enough to get into,

you know, a four year school and then I didn't feel like I needed to go to grad school because doing film production, MFA doesn't really help you, I think it helps you if you actually want to teach film down the line, but if you just want to work in movies, you wouldn't need a degree. So I started doing a lot of apprentice work to build contacts and connections after I finished Cal State Fullerton. So, I mean, that's the thing with entertainment. You kind of have to work for free for sometimes one, two years, because it's so, just so many people want to get into it that, you know, there are a lot of free interns, you have to do a lot of grunt work for two years, you know. So that's kind like my education in a nutshell.

MCH: Okay, wow. How many films have you been involved in? Either directed, assisting?

SG: Oh well, I mean you know before I started directing, my bread and butter was lighting, so I probably worked on a good dozen independent films as the chief lighting designer. And I'd jump on camera sometimes, but yeah I probably worked on a good dozen at least and then commercials, what not, just to pay the rent. And at the same time I was writing screenplays, trying to see if I could get them financed so it was a pretty tough, but then finally I was able to do Owl and Sparrow, and that opened up some doors, so now I'm doing more producing and writing and directing and getting paid for that, you know. But I still have to do other jobs to pay the bills so that's why I was...like this week for me for example, it was tough scheduling around because there was this little studio that's opening in LA and I was hired to come in and implement the lighting design for this mini stage that they're going to

shoot web, new media content on. So yeah, I enjoy it because it, you know, it's good to kind of work on new things with new people, so nothing's ever really stagnant.

MCH: I've noticed that a lot of your films are, they're heavily based with Vietnamese ties, would you say?

SG: Right, right, right.

MCH: So do you find it hard to get financial backing for that because it's not an entirely large enterprise?

SG: Oh, you mean like mainstream.

MCH: Yeah, like getting that public support or personal or business to support you.

SG: Well to get the, to get those projects financed, it hasn't been that tough because the budgets are so much lower if you're shooting in Vietnam so you don't have to raise that much capital. The harder thing is to, is on the distribution side, is getting butts in the seat because, for example my last film Saigon Electric, you know, I did that to kind of cater to a younger audience because it's a hip hop dance film. At the end of the day, a lot of the kids in Vietnam saw it, they enjoyed it but my social campaigning here to get younger Asian Am. audiences to watch that film wasn't successful, because at the end of the day, it's...I hate to say it but you know, younger Asian Americans would rather see white faces representing the entertainment than Asian faces, is what I, or they just want to spend \$11 to support it. They rather watch it on a pirate Youtube or upload like that. So then it becomes tougher to market and it's the same with like, I attend a lot of Asian American film festivals and there are a lot of Asian American film makers and screenwriters and actors and they want to tell specifically Asian American stories but the issue is that film production costs

money, a lot of money. And once they get these films out there they have to think about distribution, because somebody's got to pay for the film productions, the movies themselves. And, you know, answering to the investors after the fact is just playing at a few film festivals, they still have to recoup and sell some tickets and somehow and get some sort of distribution platform, but there's not a lot of support for Asian American films, so if the investors loses money then it just becomes harder for the development for Asian American cinema. So that's an issue that, it's just constant and everyone will agree to that, you know. If you see like Justin Lin who does Fast and Furious movies, they'll say the same thing. If you want to support Asian American cinema, you got to buy the tickets for these movies when they open up, because otherwise, you know, it'll always be relegated to some niche art form.

MCH: What sort of film festivals are you involved in?

SG: Well my films have played lots of film festivals. So the biggest Asian American film festival in the US is San Francisco. San Francisco International Film Festival, which kicks off in March every year. There's also a good one in Los Angeles, they've been around for a while. San Diego is a good one. New York has one. All the metropolises typically have one. New York, been to Pittsburg—Dallas. Thos are the major ones. And then another big one is Toronto Asian Film Festival, yeah. And actually they have ones in Europe too so my films have played like Berlin Asian Film Festival and yeah, even in Norway they have a film festival called films from the south which is like south Asian. So there are lot of niche festivals that do like to program good Asian cinema.

MCH: So are you kind of a nomad then? You travel a lot for films?

SG: Well, I mean typically it's not a huge time commitment. I think if you go to a film festival, it's like two or three days. The festivals will last seven days, eight days but I mean you just come in, they'll show your film twice, so you present your film and you just hang out for a day and then...but what's nice is that you start to form a community, you know? Because I think that Asian film festivals all have the same agenda which is to promote and develop Asian American voices. And with my films, they take place in Vietnam and they're in Vietnamese language, so they're not typically Asian American films but because I'm classified as an Asian American, then they program my films. And there are some people who have asked me, you know like, for example Saigon Electric is about a band of dancers in Saigon who are trying to find their way. People have asked me after I've shown my movies here if I was going to ever do a film about, you know, Vietnamese youth here. And before I said I don't know if I have any stories to tell about Vietnamese youth here, that would be my answer but my answer started changing to a more economic sense which is, if I make a film in Vietnam, would a Vietnamese cast in that language, I will have that market there to sell tickets. We'll open the movie in Vietnam to basically recoup at the box office. If I do a Vietnamese American film here, I don't know who my audience will be, you know. Because I have to answer to who ever's going to finance. So it just becomes now an economic model, I don't have an audience. Even if I want to tell a Vietnamese story here, I don't have an audience for it, besides the film festivals and, you know, that's not going to be able to recoup two hundred, three hundred thousand dollars of somebody's money. So I think there's a lot to balance I think in art and commerce, I guess.

MCH: I have a personal question, are you married?

SG: No.

MCH: No? Okay.

SG: That's not that personal.

MCH: Well I'm swapping over to a different subject. I was asking because you travel a lot so I was wondering how that affected your personal life.

SG: If it was personal, you'd ask me why, but asking me is not personal. It has affected me because one of the reasons why I'm not working in Vietnam full time because the industry is burgeoning over there. There's more money floating around to finance film projects, is because my girlfriend who's practically my fiancé, she's Vietnamese American but she's very rooted here and I had to compromise and tell her that I would try to base my future projects here because it's just too far away for us to be apart. So that's why in the last I think year and a half I've been writing projects to try to shoot in LA and so I'm currently writing a project to shoot in Lost Angeles, you know, this summer. And I've done that because I try to keep a healthy relationship because it's a little bit tough when you know you have a very nomadic lifestyle but you have to think about the other person too. And it's not like, she's not really, you know, she grew up in Orange County so she grew up here and Vietnam's kind of like a wild west. So that's one of the byproducts of trying to be in a creative business, you know, that takes you far from home is kind of balancing that out.

MCH: That's interesting that you're going to be doing that in LA. It's very different from your films.

SG: Yeah, yeah, the new one is actually, I'm rewriting it right now but there's a producer who has liked my last films and she proposed to do something new but she wanted it to take place in a liberal arts college. So I made up a fictional one and so it really revolves around privileged children at a liberal arts college, you know. Which is kind of new for me, you know, but I try to, see the thing is, one of the things as a film maker, one of the skills sets you have to have is a good sense of observation so I was able to encompass a lot of experiences that I've had. I've shown my films at a lot of Ivy league schools in the east coast so like I've had my little excursions like at like Yale and Brown and Princeton—I've been to Georgetown a couple of times, so I kind of harvest my observations in dealings with some students in trying to kind of put that into, you know, the screenplay as well. So it is going to be different. It's kind of like an Anglo cast and the producer wants to cast, you know, kids from CW shows. So they're all kind of cookie-cutter, you know, very Caucasian.

MCH: So this isn't going to be a Vietnamese, or Asian American project, it's very...it's different.

SG: Yeah, yeah, right, right, exactly, Yeah, it's still an independent film, but it's not addressing an Asian...and I think it's okay, I think as a creative type to change your canvas. It just kind of, it's a little bit more of a challenge, you know. Keeps you on your toes a little bit.

MCH: Do you think you'll go back to maybe, possibly writing something for Asian American castings?

SG: Well, yes. I think I told you, I miss Vietnam, it's been almost two years, there's just a great creative energy when you're there. I have a friend Bao, who is a young

cinematographer, he's living in, he's a Vietnamese American, he's living in New York for a while and he just moved to Vietnam to shoot full time maybe nine months ago? And he feels like Vietnam is now how New York was in the eighties because there's a lot of energy and a lot of striving for a development for a better future and optimism, I guess. There's a movement, and I think people want to be in a movement, you know. So that's why a lot of Vietnamese Americans are going back to Vietnam to work in media, advertising, film and music as well. So, I think I went off subject, I know I talked about New York...I'm sorry.

MCH: It's okay, you're talking about, I asked you a question about making Asian American films, would you go back to that.

SG: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I would love to go back to Vietnam, and do a bigger film. And I want to put Vietnam on the map, so the next film I do in Vietnam I would want to almost have it in English language and be able to bring an international actor to Vietnam to give more exposure to the industry there, you know. Yeah, because right now it's still kind of in a bubble, it's still kind of in a niche, you know, like Vietnamese films, they'll kind of play at some film festivals. They're in the shadows of Korean cinema, because everyone talks about Korean films, all the cinefiles, oh you know the Korean, you know, they're really at the top of the game in Asia. And you know the poor cousins are like, Vietnamese cinema, Thai cinema, Singaporean cinema. I don't even think Singaporean cinema even exists. Philippines has the industry though. But they're always like the poor cousins of Korean and Japanese and Chinese cinema because they have the bigger budgets, you know, and they have better established film schools and things like that. So I think a lot of Vietnamese

Americans are in Vietnam making films trying to elevate the industry there and that's part of the movement that I was into.

MCH: So this new film that you're doing, when should we expect a release date?

SG: Oh, well, I mean if we shoot it in June, we were going to shoot it in April, and I was trying to fix the script and I still am because the budget is lower, you can't fix things with money so basically a lot of the script revolves around a campus and a frat party and to utilize locations and things like that, school gets out typically in June and that's when we can start to book out these locations, like a campus. You know, fraternity houses and things like that and we can recruit a lot of background extras and things like that when people are freed up from their finals because it's more of a college age youth based film. So it just makes sense to shoot it in June. Plus I think it also fits in, because we want to hire actors from some of these like CW shows. She wants to get the guy—the producer has a relationship with the main actor from Teen Wolf, which is an MTV show. So their hiatus is typically in June, which is when they get a break from their full time TV shows to do their independent films so sometimes it's a schedule thing. So I think June is the thing. So if we shoot it in June, we would try to do like a, because it's an independent film without pre-distribution, you want to launch it at the film festival. SO the film festival would probably be a good six, seven months after that and you try to find a buyer and that buyer will be either buy and distribute it for the big screen but I think for this film, it's more suitable for video on demand which is the new media now and DVD and even though the DVD market's dwindling, you know. So a lot of distribution platforms these days is video on demand and so it's like instant Netflix

and things like that, yeah. You kind of have to, I mean, keep up with the times, you know because yeah, I mean the traditional distribution for films has changed, yeah.

MCH: You're saying how earlier that it's harder to get an audience for Asian American film. And then I was thinking about how your fiancé now, do you plan to get married, have kids, if so, how would you raise them, culturally? Because I know it's very different from generation to generation. So...

SG: She's Vietnamese American but she's very Americanized, but she's still traditional. Meaning that she would like to—her whole thing is that she's a Bruin, she's an attorney. So her whole thing is she's going to put a lot of emphasis on education, and that's a very kind of typical Asian upbringing, which is the emphasis on education. So that's where, I think it would be different from how I grew up. And the community where she lives in right now is in Yorba Linda so it's a lot of upscale homes with good schools. So it is very, very kind of traditional in that sense, so yeah. I think we would raise them traditionally.

MCH: So you celebrate Tet and everything? Do you have special traditions for that? Do you go to the festival in Garden Grove?

SG: Not every year. I didn't go this year. And our family doesn't, it's interesting, our family doesn't hover around for Tet. We're kind of more into Thanksgiving and Christmas gatherings than Tet gatherings for some reason.

MCH: Do you guys associate with Vietnamese things, because I know that they're very American holidays? Do you guys just do traditional presents and Turkey and whatnot?

SG: Yeah, right, right. Yeah the things is I think, my sisters host and they'll have the Vietnamese cuisine mixed with, they'll have the Turkey, so you can choose.

MCH: Interesting.

SG: So it's kind of like, you know some people will come and they'll prefer the Vietnamese stuff and, you know, some people prefer the turkey. They'll have options.

MCH: Do you guys have special food traditions that you maybe it passed down through generations from like your grandmother to your mother?

SG: My grandmother's from the North of Vietnam so she has Northern dishes that she would pass down, you know, so definitely there's a lot that I get, you know, get attached to, you know, that home cooking—grandma's stuff.

MCH: So do your sisters and brothers the recipes? Do you know the recipes?

SG: Yeah, I do, and my sisters do. I mean it's basic stuff, I can't do like the pho. I mean my sisters can but that takes twelve hours to do, so I just do the simple stuff. Yeah there are definitely some specific Northern dishes we grew up with. So my grandmother there's a lot of Vietnamese Americans who are, what they call [insert Vietnamese] which means Northern 1954, which means that their parents left after the French got kicked out from the North. The French lost the war and they call migrated from the north to the south. Not because the French—yes actually because the French lost the war, which mean the communism regime was taking over. At the time it wasn't even communist because Ho Chi Min, when he started leading, he wasn't officially communist, but he started taking in more Marxist philosophies because he studied in Europe.

MCH: What year was this?

SG: 1954 after he booted the French out. So I think a lot of the Northerners migrated to the South. So my grandmother was one of them. So she's from the north, but everyone kind of adapted to the south.

MCH: You were saying earlier that your whole family just started slowly immigrating to America. Did any of that have to do with the fall of Saigon? Or was it just a natural...

SG: No, our whole family came to the US before the fall of Saigon. That's why none of us are boat people. We were all sponsored by family before the fall. So I don't have those horrible boat people stories, but you know like my girlfriend slash fiancé, she does. And she's like, she was born in '77 so she was one or two when she was on a boat. But her mother, you know, her parents, yeah I mean they came from good families and it happens a lot. People come from good families and they're just forced to flee their home countries, so, but she has no recollections because she was only one or two but they drifted out to sea and they, you know, I don't know if you're going to do more of these subjects, but I mean it's just horrible when you hear like some of the, and it's very educational too because some of the tactics they had was when the Thai pirates would kind of, they were usually Malaysian or Thai pirates that would kind of jump on these boats—the women to prevent being raped they would smother feces on themselves that they would stink so bad that nobody would want to touch them. So that was one of the things that she said her mother did. And her mother's like this queen bee and she's very kind of regal and, you know, she has a superiority complex and, you know, she was forced to do that. You know, we don't

have any of those stories, but you know if you dig into other Vietnamese Americans, you know, you'll hear a lot of it.

MCH: Do you think you'd ever write a film script based on these experiences that you possibly hear. You said you do a lot of observations and what not.

SG: Yeah, it's hard because again, you have to balance the art with the commerce and you have to warrant going out and getting a budget for film projects. So a film project about Vietnamese boat refugees is going to be tough to finance and do it well. And my friend Ham did it, and so I recommend you watching Journey From the Fall. And he was able to raise money from Vietnamese Americans who felt that their story should be told and these Vietnamese Americans are very anti-communist and they had to flee their home country so with a very strong fundraising campaign my friend Ham was able to secure enough funds to shoot in Thailand for a good seven weeks to create this saga. He did a very good job, I think he did the, a very good kind of quick central refugee boat saga. Because it was about a family that had to flee to America and had to assimilate. So I think he did a very good job with the film. So I would recommend that. He'd be a great subject for this, except I think he's still in Vietnam right now. He's working and he just finished a new film project, but he's a really good subject.

MCH: Maybe we'll grab him when he comes back then.

SG: I mean, keep in touch if you're doing more subjects. I know that Thuy was saying like there's some sort of timeline, but if you're doing more and you need recommendations, let me know.

MCH: Definitely. Let's see, do you have strong community ties in the Vietnamese community here?

SG: In the arts community? Yes. In the arts community, I do, because there aren't that many Vietnamese American creative types, honestly. So, all the, I guess, photographers, and filmmakers and actors, yeah I think we all know each other and then there's the other side of the coin which is the...music, music is very integral to Vietnamese culture, but a lot of the music that's, you know, that's been kind of the staple is like Vietnamese pop music or ballads, traditional stuff like that and that's kind of like a different world. It's more geared towards a more older, traditional audience. So there's that side of it, you know. I get to decide which appreciates like Vietnamese fine artists, photographers, spoken poets, spoken word poets and filmmakers and actors. Yeah, so we all support each other. And there's a Vietnamese film festival here in Irvine every two years, so the next one is going to be in April, coming up, yeah. And it's pretty good, it's like six days of the best of the best of Vietnamese cinema. But mostly from overseas because there's not too many Vietnamese American films being produced here now for that reason that I told you which is like there's not enough of a market for it so a lot of Vietnamese Americans are going back home to Vietnam to make films in Vietnamese language for the market there because there are now a hundred and twenty cinemas. And a rising middle class that has disposable income to go to the movies. Whereas here you know it's like, I had to say it, most of the younger people here are going to be geared towards watching a lot of the mainstream Tet pole films like Twilight and action and romantic comedies that are mainstream here. So there's not enough support in

the US for Asian American cinema. But we still try to, I mean it's a community yes, I am very much involved with the Vietnamese arts community here.

MCH: Do you, do you go to Garden Grove often, because you're from Huntington, correct? I know that there's a large community of Vietnamese in Garden Grove, do you often go there? I mean...

SG: For food? For food, yeah. For food, yeah. Fortunately, it's the best, I mean San Jose will counter this, but Orange County's got the best Vietnamese food. And they'll say it's even better than Vietnam. You know when you have pho here, the filet beef is from like healthy steer, healthy cattle. So you go to Vietnam and you have pho, the beef is a little bit stringier, because you know, their cattle isn't as, the industry in cattle there isn't as big as we have here, so you notice things like that, you know? So it's like the quality of the beef but also the broth. People will kind of like say, broth is better than their, so broth is a big thing with pho. People get picky on...but yeah I'll go to Westminster for food, yeah. Because when I was living in LA, I was living in LA for a good twelve years, I would miss it, you know? Because when I was living in LA, I ate Mexican food all the time, because that was kind of available. So now that I'm, you know, in Orange County, I try to grab Vietnamese food a few times a week.

MCH: Okay, yeah. Do you often eat out with your fiancé there or does she—do you guys cook at home together?

SG: No, she's an attorney so she never got into the rhythm of cooking so she likes to eat out.

MCH: So are you the chef, if that happens?

SG: No, we, yeah if it happens I think we'll do it together but we eat out all of the time. Which isn't really good, as far as trying to save money. And she likes fine dining, too. But for Vietnamese food, yes, we go out to restaurants in Little Saigon a lot. And maybe you're familiar with some of these places, but she loves crab and lobster so we go to Boiling Crab.

MCH: Yeah.

SG: So you've been to boiling crab? Yeah, so you know Boiling Crab. And we didn't have dinner last night so we'll have dinner tonight, you know like, she wants lobster. So that's the thing like, you know, I'm the creative type so I know how to live poor. She's an attorney so she doesn't know how to live poor so, you know, it's different for me dating her. Because, you know, I'm not used to having lobster dinners, but she is. So we'll have lobster tonight. So, yeah.

MCH: How did you guys meet?

SG: We actually met at a Vietnamese, I guess, networking. It was a thing that they had every two years; I think they only had three editions of it. It was called VANG, which stands for Vietnamese American National Gala. So, they invited a lot of, they had panels, so they had business panels, so I was on an entertainment panel. And she was volunteering to help put together the panelists and that's it, you know. We had it at the Beverly Hills Hilton Hotel, but it was cool because, you know, it was a very good sense of Viet pride because you know like, Dat Ngyuen was one of the guests, he was one the first Vietnamese American NFL player on the Cowboys and one of our good friend's Leena Ngyuen and she's on KCAL 9 and she MC's these events a lot. I'm good friends with Justin Lin, who was on 21 Jump Street and he's

one of those guys who has basically he's transformed his life and you knew, you talk about how tough it is for Asian American media. You really have to think about how tougher it is for minority actors, because here's a guy, he was on a show for three years and then I think in the nineties he was on that show with Pamela Anderson. It was called, she was called a private eye...what was it called? But then basically as media was starting to be new in Vietnam, he came back and acted in some films and then subsequently he opened up a film company in Vietnam and now he's there full time. Simply as a means of necessity because he wasn't getting any roles as an actor in Hollywood so he had to reinvent himself. So I think that's happening also in China and Korea like, you know, Korean American actors and Chinese American actors are going back and you know, Kelly Hu, working in China, you know as a means as necessity because there's not enough Asian American parts. So, it's sad in a way that there aren't more opportunities, but it is what it is. Even though I'm doing a very kind of Anglo-Saxon kind of Ivy League college film this summer, I'd like to write in at least one or two roles for Asian American actors, you know, just to have some representation. So, yeah just because I know a lot of Asian American actors and they need work, you know?

MCH: Yeah, yeah.

SG: Yeah, it's tough.

MCH: I know that another kind of realm that's opening up is online media, like you were speaking about earlier, so definitely a lot of Youtube stuff has sprung up out of this necessity of, you know, trying to get work. So people will film themselves or

other Asian American people, or actors and actresses and how do you feel about that? Would you ever go into that space?

SG: Yeah, as a matter of fact, I have, recently. So, I worked on a project in December that was financed and produced by a new media company called YOMYOMF. I don't know...yeah you know?

MCH: Yeah definitely, they came here, that's why I was—the whole Youtube thing, yeah.

SG: So my friend Elizabeth was producing and basically we worked on a feature, which is going to be ten webisodes, so I was a director of photography and it was a adaptation of a David Henry Wong play called Yellow Face. And we had a very small budget to do it, but it was a good play and they wanted to adapt it to film and then break it up into ten parts. So it'll be ten-minute increments and they'll launch in May, but it was the first time I worked with YOMYOMF and then they asked me if I wanted to direct a segment with Ryan Higa, so Ryan Higa wanted to, he's a big MMA fan. So we were going to have him train with these MMA icons and then he was going to fight a real match.

MCH: Wow.

SG: But we were going to handicap the other fighter to make it, not so one sided. And then, you know, I wrote out a treatment and this and that and it was just going to be a three segment thing and then we get on the phone with Ryan because he lives in Vegas and he was just concerned about the safety of it and yeah we said yeah if you really want to do this you really have to train for a good month. We can't just go out this weekend and shoot it because you'll get hurt so that's kind of on the indefinite

schedule now, because I think he got a little scared. But it was, yeah, my introduction was, I didn't even know who Ryan Higa was, I didn't know who Wong Fu was. But I got an education on how many hits they get. And how many followers...

MCH: It's definitely geared towards the younger crowd, which is interesting, contrasting to what we were saying earlier that there weren't enough young Asian Americans who want to go and support film. So this is the new version for that.

SG: It's mostly comedy-based and it's mostly web-based so it's different. Yeah, yeah, yeah. If I wanted to, for example I think the next film I want to do is going to be shot in Paris in a French language and with something like that, everything's kind of geared towards the demographic, so with that because there is a huge, huge following for European art house fair, which we call the blue heirs, so it would be the retired folks who go out and watch, you know, European cinema, you know, across the street at Edwards University, I mean they're very, very loyal to their French films. So that, if I did a film in Paris in French language and it was an intimate drama it would be geared towards the art house crowd. If I did, you know a different kind of film, you know, so for example if I did a film like Ivy league kids gone bad, that would be geared a little more towards a video on demand market, you know, new media. Because, you know that's something that would be relatable to that audience, so. Again, art versus commerce. You make the film, you know you make the film but the commerce is like, okay who is this kind of geared towards and then going out and doing the marketing, yeah, so.

MCH: I definitely don't know how, I mean money is made from these web-based things.

SG: I don't know either, I mean YOMYOMF...a lot of it is—I don't know if they're making profit, but a lot of the stuff's funded from mutual investors. So basically YOMYOMF got a big cash influx from Google. So that's how they're operating. They actually have a staff, you know and offices and you know so, I mean these companies that have deep pockets they see the potential in it and it's like oh okay, what are you doing because you know I don't think they're dummies. They see that young Asian Americans are very lucrative...kind of pot of potential consumers, you know. So you know if they can kind of tap into that I think that's a wise choice but, you know I mean the stuff on the web, I think a lot of it is advertised...it's advertising revenue, so you got all the pop ups and everything like that so that's how they're surviving.

MCH: Is there anything else you'd like to share, possibly? I mean we could even go back further to childhood if you want to just want to just...childhood, adulthood to now. Anything you'd like to add?

SG: Yeah, you know, in my way of supporting, so I think the night before the last, you know the East West Playhouse? So the East West Playhouse—I haven't seen a play in two years so I was invited to see the opening of a new play called Christmas in Hanoi and that has...the plot of that play is about a mixed race—this kids who go—their mother has passed away so they want to go back to Vietnam with their American dad and so it's a sibling kind of rivalry between a boy and the girl and then their dad and then their grandfather and in the cast there were a couple happas, you know. And there were two Vietnamese actors in it and basically, the younger

brother was, grew up in kind of aloof and very Californian and surfed and then the sister was, you know, the responsible one who was, I guess kind of grew up more Vietnamese. So in a way, my upbringing was a little interesting because I look more Caucasian and I grew up in Caucasian neighborhoods but at the same time, I would always feel Vietnamese as well because when I came home, I was raised by my Vietnamese mother, I had Vietnamese siblings, I had a Vietnamese grandmother, we spoke Vietnamese in the house. So it was kind of like that duality which is outside on the surface I kind of grew up as an All American kid, but behind closed doors I was very Asian. So, I think that kind of shapes who I am because I'm not really tied into one community or the other. I'm able to adapt. So I think that that happens with a lot of Vietnamese Americans that sense of being able to assimilate if they grow up not, you know, just hanging around Vietnamese friends, but assimilating. I think it kind of builds your character if you're able to do that.

MCH: Growing up in high school did you feel any different from the kids, I mean demographically, did you fit in as well as, you know, did you feel any pressure, racism? Any kind of outsider feelings or did you go along with, because you said you were able to assimilate.

SG: Yeah, yean, you know it's very interesting, Megan, because, you know, I've definitely have never experienced racism because I look more Caucasian but because I did grow up in an Asian household, I have always kind of clicked better with ethnic friends and to this day, most of my friends are Asian. Just because there was a, I felt a better understanding, you know, with I guess, ethnic friends, you know, who kind of came from immigrant families because, I guess, you know, so

yeah. I mean that kind of continued on through high school as well, you know, so I was on the tennis team, you know, for a few years in high school. Of course you know you're going to get Caucasian but you're also going to get a lot of Asians, actually. So it just kind of continues from there.

MCH: Was this at Fountain Valley High, you said?

SG: Yeah, yeah so, I guess that's you know, just having that duality, I think is—there's a lot of people and at the surface they don't know how Vietnamese I am but I'm actually a lot more Vietnamese than a lot of Vietnamese who are younger than I am because I've embraced my roots and there's a deep understanding and love of Vietnamese culture.

MCH: Well, is there anything else?

SG: No, I think that's it, yeah.

MCH: Yeah? Thank you so much.

SG: Yeah, you're very welcome, Megan. I hope this helps.