Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: STEVE PHAM
Interviewer: David Liu
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DL: This is David Liu with the Vietnamese American Oral History project interviewing Steve Pham on February 23, 2013 at his home in Garden Grove.
DL: What is your name?
SP: Steve Pham
DL: Date of birth?
SP: 8/18/1960
DL: And place of birth?
SP: Saigon, Vietnam
DL: What are your parent’s names?
SP: My father, his first name is Ho. Last name Pham. My mom is her first name Woo and her last name Yap.
DL: Can you describe them? How were they like? What were their jobs? Growing up with them.
SP: My both parents living in North Vietnam before 1950-something. So after the Vietnamese kick the French out and at that time and my parent decide to move south. Because that time they divide country in two parts: North and South. So I believe that time my father, my father he still in the military and that’s why they send him to South Vietnam to fight for the country. So that’s why he bring the whole family to the south. After they divided, and he decide to stay here did not go back to North. And that’s why he get involved with the U.S. military. And for that reason like myself I born in South and I have some brother sister born in the North. So that’s why my dad really get involved with the U.S. and they been taking him here for training and he back and forth, work for both side. And to tell you the truth, I really don’t know what he doing. But after we lost the country and I realized that he worked really close what he call like intelligence so that why the Vietnamese Communist they know him so well. So and that’s why we in trouble. And they arrest him and take him back to the North and put him in prisoner. So that had happened after 1975 and for that reason I try to stay until I get out of high school. I think 1978 and I try to join college and they say no because my family history at that time the Communist say, “I don’t think it good for you to go to college. We don’t want you to become anything.” So I feel that, “oh my God, I have no life here. No freedom and they treat me it not like the rest of the people and I am still good.” I have nothing to do with the war. I never had a gun in my hand. I know that my father and brother they have to be part of the country, fight for the country. And they have to do it. They give me a lot of bad experience with them, about how they treat people. I decided to escape out of country. It took me about six attempt and three time they put me in jail. I have learned a lot the way they treat people there. So and oh my God, thank God finally I get out
successfully. But during that six attempt I have learned and seen the people dying and people get killed and people get beat up, include myself. So the freedom what I got today not easy like the rest of people and you heard a lot of story and I don’t think my story is the worst one or something. But to me I had enough with them. And then when I came to the refugee camp is Paulau Bidong, Malaysia. And lucky for me and at that time and the United States come by I think about a week after I came to the island, the refugee camp, the United State. At that time a lot of other countries try to come to and try pick up refugees. So then they want to pick which one belong to them. So after they read my history profile they said, “You know what? We need to move you out of here.” So I said, “Oh wow, okay. I’ve only been here a week.” And a week later they transferred me to the I think the capital of Malaysia, what do you call? Kuala Lumpur. So I stayed there, a month, month and a half. And then immigration they came and they told me to interview to make sure they approve me to go to the US or not. So, it’s funny. I never forget that interview until now after some 30 year I still remember that interview just like yesterday. They came in and asked me four question, only four questions. And that four questions, nothing about me. They didn’t ask any question about me. The four questions, they only asked about my father: When did the last time you say him? How he doing? Why don’t you take him with you? Can you tell me what the location, the last time you see him? And then, they said that’s it. And he approved on my paper and said, “Steve, welcome to America.” I’m sitting there you know at that time my English, we had a translator. So I turn around and ask the guy, “hey. Can I have a question for the officer?” He said “yeah sure. Ask any question you want.” I said, “Can you tell him that I want to make some statements for myself?” He said, “Sure.” I said, “Why don’t you ask me one questions about myself? I suffer too. My dad, my brother in jail right now. They have to pay for the price, they served the country. I am out here too. I have no life and they treat me like dirt.” So the officer look at me and he stand up because he sit in front of me. He stand up, he walk behind me and put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Steve. We know that, that’s why we don’t want to ask. We just want you to forget it. Put everything behind. Let go to America and build your new life. That’s it. Thank you very much. You’re ready to go. We will transfer you to the Philippines. You stay there a few months learning English and then you go to America.” So in that moment I have learned, “yeah, you know sometime you bitter, you angry, you upset about the past about what government, the Communist, and the way the treat. And even, I still have my loved ones back in Vietnam. So I have to sit down and talk to myself. The future ahead of me. In next few months, I’m in America. And I was so scared. I don’t know how can I live there. Even though I have brother and sister live there before. So they immigrate here. So they escaped out and they came here first. So I said, “oh my God. You know?” I say, “You know what? It depend on me. How I deal with it.” I know at that time I’m only 27. I can’t even come and deal with it and face it and deal with it. And I get there. Go back to school learn a little bit about technology. I become a CMC programmer. Made good life and made good money and I met my wife. Start a family. Buy the house. Have kids. Since then, every Thanksgiving dinner, I always sit down with family and tell my family, even my kids. I feel like God gave me too much. Whatever I have then until now it look like I am taking. I never give anything away. Just me. Me. Me. Thank God I have this. I have that. So I
start thinking about you know you’ve heard people say “better give than take.” Right? So I say you know what? Let’s do something. I talk to my wife and say I want to give back to community. I want to do something to feel like you know, “Who gave me this life? Who gave me this life? America. American. Let’s do something, go back to the community”. And so at that time I really start go out to community. And try to volunteer whatever I can. And I think you remember the rest of the world remember is 9/11. And at that time, I’m at work. And I’m in my office. So we have the TV right there and saw the airplane you know, plunge in the building. And then I just could not work. I just cry. And I tell my boss, “I don’t think I can work today. I need to take day off.” He said, he looked around, “You know what Steve? I am going home too. It’s too much to watch.” So when I am driving home I keep crying I don’t know why. It kind of like it hurt me. And I realize, back in 1980 who really opened their heart to take me? Who gave me this life? America. America. And now some idiot from another country come here and kill them and hurt them. And that hurt me too. So I drive home and call my wife at work. I say, “I’m at home right now.” My head just spin around. I can’t talk. Let them know I am home. So she come home from work. And I said, “I want to do something from now on.” Because like I told you, I explained to you that. Whatever I think I am taking, I want to give back. So the next day I call my boss, “Can I have one or two days off because I still have a lot of.” She said, “You know Steve? I know you’re an emotional guy.” And I then go to the city and ask them “Come on. I want to do something. I want to volunteer. You want me to do anything. Let me know. Just let me know the time and date so I can join and help city, whatever I can. You want me to mop the floor, sweep the street, I can do it.” So the secretary said, “No Steve. I don’t think so. I have a better thing for you to do. Don’t worry about that.” So she said that, “Do me a favor and walk across the street, I think they need you.” So I asked her, “What do you want me to do and what is that?” She said, “Police department.” I say, “What? Police department?” and I looked at her kinda think she kidding. “Are you kidding me?” She look at me and say, “No Steve. I am not kidding you. I think they would love to have you because you Asian, you speak Vietnamese, and you know thing like that and you have a heart. And you know the department really need some guy like you. Just go there and try it out. If not work out, come back see me. I have a million thing for you to do. Don’t worry.” And I look at her again and want to make sure she is not kidding me you know? Because back in the country, especially Asian culture, we don’t like police at all because of corruption, abuse of power. So I said, “Okay. I will do whatever you told me and will give it a try and if not I will come back again.” “See you again Steve. Good luck.” I walk to the department, police department. I asked them, “I want to volunteer.” They look at me and said “okay!” and gave me like about fifty piece of paper and said, “Steve, we would love to have you. You know what? Go home and fill this out and give this to one of the officers.” After you fill it out, come back and see us. After I fill out and I give a call, “I fill out my application, questionnaire so I would like to make an appointment to see you.” They say, “Okay, let me check the time and date and finally we get to interview.” So at the interview they asked me, “what make you feel like you want to do this? Especially with your culture, the police department, I don’t think.” I said “yes, even then still have the back flash, police in the country, especially Communist. The way they handle. With the no human right and all. But here I want to make a
difference and just want to know more about the law enforcement system.” So from then I can be able to educate the community. I don’t know can I do that. I don’t know am able to do that? Can I do that? I just maybe want to give a chance. At the interview, they had three officers sitting around and they said, “You know what Steve? The department needs about maybe 6 months to a year for a background check because when we get you, you are an officer. Even though you don’t get a gun, you’re not a sweared officers but you are an officer. So we are very careful to take who you are. So give us some time. At that time, go do something, you can go to the city.” And I said, “Okay, I can do that.” So I think about six months or seven month later, they actually call me and swear in and been train. At that time I really come out and other than that in 1985 I do a lot. Volunteer for hospital, nursing home. And I am just crazy about volunteering. I don’t know why. A lot of friend of mine say, “Steve. You have time and you have nothing to do? You just volunteer?” And I keep telling them most of...buddy. I call them buddy because they same camp with me. “I don’t know about what you guy think but right now I feel like I owe this country. I owe. So now I have to pay back.” They say, “Steve, I the same but I don’t feel that way.” “That’s you.” So then, the way I interact with the community. I am everywhere. But you know my background just a CSC programmer with machine. I deal with machine, tell machine what to do blah blah blah write program, whatever you want me to make. And now I am out in the community I have to use my, what you call, communication skill, speaking skill, talk to people. Now I realize, I think I am a person people. But at that time, I say, "wow. For a long long time I just sit in the office and do the work and I never really go out. And now I feel like I really like it. With my wife's support, I have to say, without her, I don't feel think I can be today who I am. She really share me with the community and then the American Red Cross they looking for one of the outreach person for the Asian Pacific Islander. So long story short, remember Katrina? Right? At that point at that time my wife and I and two kid we went back to Vietnam. A lot of friends of mine in the community say, "Hey Steve, did you hear this? American Red Cross looking for a guy like you?" I say, "Yes?" "Why don't you apply?" I say, "I don't have any degree, how do I apply for it? I don't have social work or business." He said, "Steve, you have experience. I think you have more than a degree. You know give it a try." I say, "Okay. I guess I'll put it aside. I don't really remember that.” So when we went back to Vietnam for visit family, especially my wife family and we bring kid. The time we come back and Katrina hit. At that time I sitting there and say, "well I think you know Red Cross everywhere to help.” Okay. I tell my wife, "Honey, you want me to apply for this job?" She said, "Steve whatever you want to do. But remember make sure you know it fit with you. I don’t know. But whatever you do, I support you." So I decide to call them. American Red Cross I call human resources. I say, "Well I hear about this position and would like to apply for it. Can you tell me is still available?" And the human resource guy, the lady on the phone said, "I'm sorry Steve. It's closed. It's expired." I say "eh. Okay. Thank you very much." But before I hang up she said, "No Steve. I need to talk to you." I say, "You just said it was expired." "But we know your name. I hear a lot of people talk about you but we never see your application. So, are you decide to go for this?" I say, "Yes." It take me a while just come back from Vietnam, family. "Yeah. Let me give it a try, I don't know but I need to go deeper to see what benefit blah blah blah." She said "Steve, can you come see
me in 2 hours because I need you to turn in an application." I said "okay." "And bring your resume with you." Okay so I go to visit her. A few application, give her a resume. And a few week later she said "Steve, to tell you the truth, this position we have about over 200 applicants and we narrowed down only ten. You one of them. So good luck. I don't know what it take but good luck." And so finally, I go to three/four more interview so they finally decide to hire me. But now let go back about when we talking about salary. So the human resource director told me "Steve, I know your salary. And I just want to throw the fact here with the salary we pay you. I don't think this is a deal for you. But it's up to you." It's like this. Really big difference. "But I want you to make decision and make sure to get support from your wife. Because either one, you see her every day. Take care of family." I say, "Yes I know. Let me see." And then I go home and talk to my wife and say, "honey. Finally decide to get me. They have two guys and another guy. But they want to talk me but then the salary. I put it down for them and see." So she come up to me and say, "You know what Steve? You know me. I love you. I love the way who you are and the way you treat the other people. And you know. And that's why I always say I support you no matter what. But now we talk about family finances and you know that. If you take this job, we have a big chunk of losing money. But you know what honey? This is what I believe you know. Some people get so much money but they don't feel, don't see the happiness in their life. Maybe we just lost a little bit. You say you owe this country and you want to pay off so go do it. But one thing I want you to make sure and clear you right now." And I look at her, "you better tell me now. Don't tell me later." "You know, we will be losing a lot of money from now on but no more toys for you." So I said, "Okay." So I decide to get going. So I work with the American Red Cross. My job is to out them of the community. Build the bridge. To let the community know about the vision of the Red Cross. To help people because remember after Katrina, they have learned that Asian community they not really prepared. They don't really know about Red Cross. And so that is why after seven years I work with Red Cross. At that time during that time. I still out in community. I’m on board for Horizon now for a long time. I think I enjoy the work, 2000/2001. So I sit in board for a really long time. I am still on the board. After seven years I work with the Red Cross said because your budget coming down. This year let me know. You know what? Your program for the Asian community will be end this year. But we let you know. I think they let me know early in December so they said “Steve, sorry about that. You did a good job but we cannot keep this program going. You just let me know if you can find another job.” I said, "Okay don't worry about it." So I go home and tell Vanna and say, "okay. My time with Red Cross now close. I think about take maybe a month two month relax look for another job." So I call Vanna and say, "You know what? I'll stop by your office, we can get lunch and then I have to go to Horizon for a meeting." So I stopped by her office and take her out for lunch. After lunch I go to Horizon for meeting. I came to Horizon a little bit early, maybe 10 minutes. CEO then say, "Steve how you doing?" "I'm doing okay." And he say, "How Red Cross treating you?" I say, "Is there any good news? I heard they had a lot of trouble?". I look at her and say, "You know?" And she said, "Know what Steve?" I say, "you know about you know the program they eliminate my program?" "No I didn't." I say, "Yes. If you want to know truth they let me know this morning and my program will end." Life move on. She look at me and say, "Not move on that easy. I want
to see you right now in my office." So you know I walk into her office and she close the door say
"Steve. To tell you the truth, Thee month ago I just want to snag you. Take you here. At that time
I think you are the guy really with the Red Cross. You have a heart for the Red Cross. You
always talk about the Red Cross. You everywhere. You do thing. I actually don’t want you to
jump in you know in the middle of the way. And now this is the opportunity for me. Please come
in. I can hire now! You can start next week if you want to." I say, "No. The end of the month, the
end of the year. I have some event I have to commit my to some event. I want to finish." They
say, "Steve, don't worry about it. Let them take care. You can start next week here." I say, "No."
And she decide, "Okay. So you start January 1st right?" I say, "Okay. Let do that." Then I go
home, talk to my wife and at that time I have another offer from Cal Optima too. They want me
too. But my wife say, "You know what Steve? You with Horizon for a long time. Everybody
know you. Everybody seem to like you. Why don't you work there? Cal Optima you know them
you just know them. You don't really know the system. So even though Cal Optima pay much
better than here. Remember you feel good. So go for it." So she gave me some kind input so I
finally decide to work for Horizon. Two year I work for Horizon. So you know and if you go
back to you know to story of my life, I know a lot of refugee even immigrant. They come here
for what? Better life. Everybody do. So to me, I don't wait. You know when I volunteer for the
PD. I have one of the officer that she always interact with school. So every time for July 4,
before July 4. She would take me out to talk to the kid. About the freedom. What is really
freedom? Here! And what really freedom for a guy like me. Come in here and get it. So you
know, I tell them some story. Some of them sit there crying. And student say, you know and a lot
of kid after that write me email or write my letter saying, "you know what? I have learned
nothing about the thing we are here even my kid." I say, "Don’t take it for granted. Because you
born here. You lucky to born here. That is why every time we go to Vietnam, we take them there.
Let them see the true. The life for the same each. How they live there." So you know, I want to
make sure that my kid I you know. When I go to school I say, "You know what? Maybe some
story I tell you about would be horrible. Story but it is true. But the thing I want to point out is
sometime this country, we have freedom in our hand. We have the voice, we can speak. You
know. Whatever we feel want to do. But we don't appreciate. We take it for granted. Will way
blah blah blah. Or complaining.” For the guy like me. Oh my God. I won't let it go. Believe me, I
won't let it go. So, I keep telling, show to my friend that you know. Remember when the
Communist takeover country. So I say, "If Vietnam take over the United States. I am not running.
I kill myself." So, for that reason you know I sit there talk to Thuy and say, "sorry I told you to. I
have learned nothing in this life, you know?" Sometime at the moment, you really don't think
that that there is no open route for you. You stand there and you become strand out and at that
time I feel like I am go for suicide. I just want them to finish me. Every time we escape, we
leave. You know that. By boat and you know really small boat. My boat about a hundred six
people and about maybe thirty feet. Thirty feet. You see people crammed in there and in the
ocean. The boat like that. I don’t know. That is only God can have that happen. I don't think,
"Why we get into camp?" I don't even believe that.” So you know, back to the story you know
when I try. I told you about second time and try to escape. And I remember one time we sit in
the, on the beach to wait for the small boat? What do you call that? Taxi? Taxi boat. To pick us up and they have some big boat waiting outside. We got ambushed from the Communist and the police. They behind us. In front of us is ocean. So where do we run? So in my group they have about three/four women and some children and have a few guy you know? I say, "You know what? Don't run." I say, "You know? We got caught. That's it. Don't run don't try to run. Because if you run they will shoot you. And a lot of them don't listen to you. They just stand up and just shoot them. I can see them fell about ten feet away from me. And then three officer come to me. At that time I am the only one who is younger. Twenty something. Sitting there. The first inmate come to me and one of the guy kick me in the face. I said, "hey asshole." Sorry I say that. "Why don't you run?" I said, "I am scared." Kick me in the face again and say, "Liar. You scared? Friend of you in ocean you don't even make it out of ocean. And you tell me you scared? You liar." And you know some women sit around me, some children they crying. One of them stepped his feet. Step around and put AK 47 right by my forehead. At that moment, I just close my eyes and say, "God, please just take me now because I want to stop. I want you to help me end my life here. I don't want to live as a human being and the way they humiliate me. I am think I am worse than an animal here. So why don't you take me now? So you blow my head." I wait for him to pull the trigger. So why the other two officer stand you know stand his feet in my face too. I said, "Hey. Let me ask you one question and you answer it. If we hear it right, we let you go free. How about that?" I at that time I just you know, "I said I am ready whatever you know? This is. I am basically. Mission of suicidal. I am ready." So, one guy ask me, "Can you tell me what make you think the life in the United State better than here? And then everybody like seem to run over there. Can you tell me any idea?" And then again, David. I close my eyes. "God, please take me now. I am about to tell you the truth. And that truth will help them pull the trigger." I said, "Okay. If you want to hear the truth, I will tell you the truth. The truth is I have no idea the life in the US is all about. No clue. No idea. But to tell you the truth, I don't have life here at all. So please finish me. I'm not even finish sentence, three of them beat the crap out of me. I lost like two teeth here and two teeth here. And remember Rodney King? I think I worse than him because they don't have camera right? So they just beat me. So I just pass out. The next day I am with another some man. They tie us up on the beach he got wait for the truck come take us back to jail. Like the morning I wake up. Oh my God. My head just swollen. My head still bleeding. So people sitting around me, they ask me, “are you crazy? Are you out of your mind? Why you answer them that question and let them beat crap out of you." I say, "oh my God. I don't know. God accept my prayer. I want them end my life last night. And why I am still alive?" So they took us to jail, do some paper work and put me in the cell. That time I was sure that you know I was still bleeding. My eye, I cannot even open it. So at noon time that three officer again come to the cell. Take me out. Everybody crying and screaming, “Come on stop. It's enough. You beat the crap out of him. What you do now?” I really look at them. "Okay maybe they decide not to kill me last night, maybe today in front of everybody. I am happy to see that. Let's go." So they pull me out of cell and they escort me to the kitchen. You know, away like about two rift away from the cell. Allow me to sit down. One guy, "sit down." Another guy sit right here another guy go back the kitchen; come back with a glass of water. Put it right in front of me. He
said, "Drink water and then we talk." And then, "why I need to drink water?" I said. "Drink water and we talk." Okay. I drink water. Put it down. So the guy acting he in charge or something. He look at me. He said, "Are you out of you mind? Are you crazy? Are you really want to die? Last night." I said, "Yes." He look at me, he look at other two guys too. "You really want us to kill you last night?" I said, "Yes." And they look at me and say and that time I look at them and say "you ask me to tell you the truth. That's it the truth come from. Either you like it or not. It's the truth. So you know what stop bullshit now and take me out and kill me. I want to end now. I have enough." So they look around the three of them, "This guy really crazy." You know? But you know what. That moment. The way I talk, the way I express my emotion to them. I think they have learned something. So three of them from that moment, they change the way they treat me. They take me out and take a shower, clean it up and bring me back to cell. Every day. Every day. You know like noon time really heat. We cram into you know small cell. Really dirty and you know. Every day around ten o'clock in the morning. Three of them maybe one sometime. Maybe two. Take me out of cell and take me out to some you know labor work outside. And feed me. And you know some of them sometime take me to go to supermarket clean up you know. And other time people because you wear you know the jail uniform. They see you they know that. They give you food to eat. And you know one day I ask them, "why you treat me different from the other?" One of the guy said, "You know what. I have arrest a lot of guy like you. A lot. None of them have the gut to tell you me us the way you tell. You really make us think you know, you different. I say, "No I am not different. We all the same. They all want." But because I want to end my life. Every time I try to escape, it never successful. And every time I come back or every time I get caught, you beat the crap out of me. Why? Can you tell me any reason why I want to live?" And they say, "You know what? You know. This is my job. I have to do whatever I have to do." "No offense" I said. "You beat me man. Hey. If you give me life, you think I should run away from here?" I told him, "If you let me go to college. Do you think I run away from it? You give me job? I have to stand like corner of Home Depot to get labor work. You think I will run away to the United States? I have to start over and learn English and new culture. Come on." And he said, "You know what? Yeah we know that." And about three month, one day I hear on the speaker they say they call my name for release. They set me free. Usually six month or a year. Only three month, my name called. And you know, I just walk out and they give me some money so to you know take the bus go back to Saigon. So I just want to turn around and look at that three officer so I can thanks them the way they treat me. None of them there. I look around and want to ask someone. "Oh they off today." So I work with another group go to the bus. Pay for the ticket and I just ready to you know go to the bus and three of them show up. And then bring me something you know. Food. You know fruit and something. I say, "Oh I am just about to look for you guys and thank you. They release me." They shake my hand. They say, "Steve, go home. And I know one thing for sure that you know you go again. You will go again. But good luck." So you know I jump in the bus. At that time I think, "You know in this crazy world, sometime we forget about whatever religion you are. We have something to follow up with." So sometime I complain about God never to listen to the people, even myself. I think God always, "You believe me. Pray. Help the other blah blah." Yeah I do that, sir. But do I get any good
feedback from you? Do anything change for me? Or am I still stuck here? If you know about Catholic right, you remember St. Peter? He three time to deny Jesus Christ. He not belong to him. He denied three time. Me too. I am just about to deny. At that time I don't believe God at all. When I in high school. I see the world from North to South the United States. How many people get killed? Fifty four thousand US soldier get killed. Both side more than two million people get killed. For what? For North and South? For what the Communist and freedom. This ugly. I pray God and said, "You have power over us. You can make it happen. Why don't you. Because everyday my bicycle to school. I pass like few temple and few church. Every day David. Every day I see a coffin in there. Some young solider the family crying. You cover just one city. I driving back like five/six of them. And tell me in front of whole country how many people get killed. And for what? And they all young. They not even finish high school. They have to go join the army and that's why I pray to God. Come on! Make it over! He listen to me. Make it over. And now what? Communist takeover. And now they treat us like dirt because we against them. So at that time, I say, "oh my God. You listen to our prayer and now we in trouble. Oh my God. What kind is that?" So and then we decide to go and we go to church every day you know try. Help me out. And every time we have a trip to go. Every time we get back I look around. At that time, I say, "you know what? I don't believe you at all." So back then you know I have them what you call him uncle. Not really uncle but he know my family for a really long time and in the past you know my father, he high ranking. Very elitist guy. So, they think all my family something. Because he have a boat you know. In Central of Vietnam so he come and tell my mom you know whenever we ready to leave country escape, we will take Steve with us. Because you know this family you, your husband help us so much. And now something we can pay back. My mom say, "Please do it." Because she got no life here. So my mom turn around ask me, "Steve. Now you don't worry. Since most of the trip you try to escape, they try to cheat you get your money. Illegal. So I can see real one here." I say "oh my God." And my mom told me turn around ask me, "from now on, all you have to do is pray to God. Because you just wait for the right time and you go with them. Go there and try to go with you know your life." So every day I just go to church and try to pray. About a month or two month later, I have something not right. I am not feeling right. I ask my mom, "Why don't we go to their house because I don't have any contact from them. They didn't let us know what's going on. So let's go to there to see what happened." So I take my mom go there. Drive by and drive my mom there. They already gone and the Communist take over their house. I come back and that time I drive home and just cry. I say, "Mom. I don't know what's going on. I hate to say God punish our family. I hate to say that. I don't know. But right now I am losing my belief. Please don't hate me for that." My mom said, "Steve, don't do that. Because a lot of people, they have a lot more harder you know situation than you. Why you do that?" So at that time, I say "okay." So I decide I am not to go anymore. Not to go anymore I say, "You know what? A lot of people try to escape. Not success. Some of them get killed. So now, six attempt. Why have to try?" So I ask my brother sister you know, "why don't you help me with some money so I can settle my life back in country." So my brother and sister agree to help me. They will okay send money on the way. So remember the last attempt I told you. They release me three month later and they get home. I still have infection.
Skin infection. My hand. One day I sit at home and I remember that new year. Chinese New Year. And my mom and my sister go out, I sit home alone. And the guy who took me the early trip. He come back and say, "Steve we have a trip. Let's go." I look at them and say, "no, not me. Because every time I go with you, I end up in the jail. You want to see my teeth? You want to see my face?" I say. "Steve, you already with us and we try to do this. It's not 100% successful. Sometimes we get caught. Sometime we don’t. But today we have a trip to go. You want to go or not, it's up to you." I say, "No I decide to stay. My brother and sister will help me stay here." The guy say, "If you make the decision to stay, I will call somebody else." He just about to leave. Listen to me David. At that time I think I am not me. And something just push me. I just sign up. I go change. And then I walk out the house. Just close the door and just follow him. Like how do you say, like? Just follow like... like you at night you... sleep. Like you just walk to the guy. I have no idea why I decide not to go. And uh, that night we go a little bit South Vietnam. Cần Thơ province. We stay there eat a little bit dinner than night. That's how I get out. Successfully. Four day, four night. Okay. So when my boat came to the camp. The United Nation have refugee camp have us to do paper work. Check in, take your picture. They put us in the room. So people from the camp can pick you up and put you in the house. So we just sit there waiting. And I decide at that time just to wake up. I look around and say, "what the. What am I doing here? I don't think it's true." I pinch myself really hard. I just scream. And a lot of people say, "Steve? What are you doing?" I say, "Is this real? Oh my God. I think it's real." So I say, "Really? I am in the camp now? Refugee camp now?" Because back in the Vietnam I hear about Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines. Now in Malaysia? Oh my God. I just realize the day I go I didn't tell my mom or my sister. I just close the door and go. So you know when they check in the next day I go to the church. I knew that was it. God I am so sorry. I think I am losing hope in you. But for something unexpected you just come out and take me out. No warning. Now I am here. I think you just here playing game with me. Whatever game you play. David, I would like you to meet Vanna my wife.

Vanna: Hello. How are you?
SP: David from UCI
Vanna: Nice to meet you.
SP: You go to work now?
Vanna: Yeah.
SP: Right. I put you stuff over there.
Vanna: Oh thank you.
SP: And then you know what I say? "Really? Something I not really pray for. And you took me in." And I say, "my God. Really?" So, I kind of lay back a little bit. And when I at the refugee camp I hear a lot of people there for a long time and they still have no country to pick them up. I said, "Really? You come here and stay here?" A lot of people, "Yeah, we been here three years. Some of them two years." "Oh my God really?" At that time I say to myself, "I have no idea." And then a week later I told you, the United States group come and they have a special interview with me right away. They said, "Steve, don't try to borrow the net, the blanket because next week we will move you." I say, "Really? Move me where?" "To another camp for an interview." I say,
"Really?" So kind of like you know something go so speedy. And I not even control it. A lot of people, "you are so lucky." I say, "I don't know." Kind of like gossip, "huh you don't believe me huh?" So remember go back to the camp. Remember the family that told me they try to help me? And they gone? They still in the camp. They see me. They kind of feel sorry. You so hurry we can't take you. Don't worry about it. Because they don't have strong relationship with the United States, they still waiting for Australia or Canada to pick them up. The uncle and his wife really feel sorry that you know they take the trip out. You know what it's over. At that time I feel like, "you know what? Sometime whatever you ask for you don't get. But you get something else." From that moment, I say, "thankful for my life. Don't ask too much. Just go to the flow. Whatever you get you get. Some bad, some good, deal with it." And then I came to the camp month later. I feel like nonstop. A lot of people waiting for that but I am nonstop. And you know for how many years here I feel here, "oh my God, a lot of people they been here for a long time" Can they make it? No. A lot of them still suffer today. You know. That's why I say you know. Sometime the mercy, the glory of God. Give it to you, you know. Silently. Then again. You just take for granted. Whining and complaining about everything.

Vanna: You don't throw this away. Save it.

SP: Okay. And then when that happen I know that. When I come here I try to start over again. Remember the INS tell me about forget about everything. And then I came here. So in 1989, around 1989/1990. The Vietnam government believe that they need help from the United State cannot stay away from the United States. They need help financially, the economy. So back then I remember, Clinton will give them some demand. If you want us to back you in relationship this is thing you need to do. So for the first thing he wanted to do is release all the high ranking officers. First thing you do. The second thing you allow us to come into your country. Whenever we want to look for MIA. And after that we will help you with money, food, blah blah blah. After so many years, the Communist think they make the wrong decision, make a big mistake. Now they have. That's why they think about release my dad. So in 1989, I think 1990 so they decide to set him free. So my mom and my sister and him. So when he come over here and meet family, reunited. You know at that time. Now I am old enough to know what's going on. I throw him some question. "Daddy, I know you are tough guy back in the country. You back and forth. You work for both side, seem like everybody know you. But let me ask you this Dad. You know that the world come to an end. You know United States will withdraw. You know that. And I believe the US embassy came to our house twice and ask you to take the family out of country. Why don't you do it? And I know that you been in jail for 14 years. You suffer, I know that Daddy. But Mom and me and rest of family suffer too. But you do it. You know what's going on." He look at me and say, "Steve, I know at that time you just a kid. But remember." He point at me, "remember when they came. The US embassy came with the bus. I turn around and ask you guy if you want to go, just go. I am not going with you. Free to go. And you don't go." I say, "Dad. I am little. How can I go?" So he said, "You know, you ask me why don't I go? Good question. So after 14 years I am in jail. The life in jail is not happy. But to tell you the truth Steve if they keep me in jail more, until the day I die. I still happy. Because that my pride. Because that why I fight for." So when he have the interview with the United State. You know, for the first group of
prisoner release. Two young state department ask him a question. My mom tell me that. "Ask him." "So we have two time come to your house, send you and pick you up and you don't go. Why you go now?" My dad say, "If you ask me that question, now I go because I have family there. I have my kid there. But back then not go. But if you feel like I am going because after 14/15 years I am sick and tired because of the way the treat me like that. So you do me a favor and put me back in jail." My mom say, "You kidding me. I am waiting for this moment. Why are you saying that?" So that two state department say, "no no no no no. We cannot do that. We just want to ask you the question. We just want to make sure you know we came to you. We want to rescue you but you refuse to." "Yes. I have the right to refuse because I don't get paid by the US embassy. I get paid by the Vietnam government at that time. Only the President of Vietnam at that time can ask me to go. Even if he ask me to go, I am not going. Because we didn't lost the country yet. If you don't like it, take me back to jail. Tell them. Put back me in jail. I okay with that." So and then I have learned from my dad, father and son. I learned from that. Tough from that. Remember?" So I said, "Okay. Daddy I am okay now. Now, let me ask you this. Okay after you refused not to go with them and I remember April 30, the day we lost the country. Early in that morning I still remember in my head, my dad. Early that morning around 9/9:30 in the morning. You said to Mom that you go out for a cup of coffee. And an hour later 10:30, you come back home. And you go upstairs and you put your belonging in the suitcase, luggage and you bring it down. And Mom ask you, "where you going now? Where you planning to go now?" And you say, "No I am not going". Mom ask you, "Why you have the luggage right here?" And you said that, "they will come and get me." Dad! You know that they come and get you why you sitting there? I said, "I am proud. Why do I have to run?" So April 30, 1975, at noon the President at that time have surrendered peacefully. Forty minute later and they came and take him. So he told me that I know that you know because as advisor for Pentagon. They know what's going on. So I know that you know the United States make decision in 1973. They want to take it easy. Luckily until 1975 we survived. In 1973 he resigned. And now I have learned after forty years that "wow my dad really my hero." I keep complaining why he have to do that. So I ask him last question, "you know what; now we are family here we get the freedom. The United States give. Everything history now forget the whole thing. But I still have one question I want to ask you please. Because I want to tell my kid about who you are. I know that the companies know you so well. When I came to the camp, they know you too. They ask about you. Tell me the truth dad, did you work for the CIA? Back then?" And he look at me and he come to me and give me a hug and say, "Steve, if I work for CIA even I die, my soul still not tell anybody. Not even your mom. So my answer is I take the fifth." You know what fifth is? Be quiet. I say, "Okay Daddy, I love you and now I have learned more about you." Unfortunately, a year later he died. I think because kind of like run out of energy. And two year later, my mom died too. But at least they are here at least for the last time in their life. And from that moment, I have feel that life at the first moment I met, a lot of people come here for same reason. Most of that reason is to get better life. You hear anywhere in the world, you hear some bad things. But we are here in the richest country. And sometime a lot of people from other country come here even people born here they don't appreciate it. They whining about something, complaining about something. And
you know what? I keep telling people, “If you don't like it, go to LAX go to any airport. We don't stop you. You want to fly back? Fly back. But if you accept it here you know go with the flow, learn about the new culture.” Also back then, I have a family live with them, with American family. They really gave me a lot of new picture of new culture. And I owe that family my life. That's why you see the way I talk, the way I interact with people, way I'm out in community. A lot of people, even when I wear uniform, police uniform don't believe that. "Are you Vietnamese?" I say yes. "Are you police?" "No I am volunteer" "Same thing" "What's wrong with that?" “So, we don't like police.” “No you don't but not me.” So that's why we need to change in our culture. Especially now for how many years. If you look back Japan. You know after the war how many years they have here. Now they blame society. Russia. They came here. Cuban. That take time for them to learn. There are a lot of up and down in community. Hear bad thing, good thing. Even when I get a mission from Red Cross to go out to community. I don't think I can survive. Back then, seven years ago. I know the Vietnamese community so well. They not united. They just you know. A lot of problem. Then my main job is how to recruit more volunteer. To serve the community. So every time I end up going to any university, school from high school, college, university. I try to recruit some you know Vietnamese or Asian volunteer. Most of them young like you. I say, "Steve, I really like Red Cross mission, really like it. But you know, your program is kind of like can I do something else? You ask me to go to Vietnamese outreach when I don't think I can do it." So I sit down and ask them, "Can you tell me why?" "I heard from my mom, my dad, my uncle, that's ugly. Is not united don't go. Try do something else." I look at them, "are you finished?" "Yeah. What I heard" "I want to do something else for the Red Cross."Whatever you said to me, want to know the truth?" "Yes." "One hundred percent is true. One hundred percent. That's why I recruit you. You and me we can go face it. Right? Because if you say that okay let go take a U turn or left turn, right turn. It still broken. Why don't I ask young generation, you are the one to take over? That community and I am you know one and a half. Come on guy. If you say you because you think that you know problem and you walk away from it, still problem. And how can you tell your children in the future? You the one making it happen. And they say, "Okay you talk right. I don't guarantee with you. Tell me what to do. When I first come to American Red Cross and give me the list of the Asian Pacific Islander volunteer, less than 10% for the county." Less than 10%. So I said, "Now I want to focus more on because you get more volunteer and more things to do." After three years David. You know how many percent I get? Out three year?

DL: 80?
SP: 65%. Now if you go to Orange County. More Asian than the white, the black, the Spanish. I feel so happy. When you building a bridge, you're building the future now. The future. Now you know if you know that from high school they already have the Red Cross Club. So you know the thing you do; even now I am not with Red Cross. No longer as a staff, but I still believe in their mission. I still go out to the community every month David. Every month I teaching CPR/First AID and Disaster preparedness. I think the next one next Saturday, we have the Family Safety Know How. And they in Garden Grove. So you know, go back to the story. I don't know why the volunteer were kind of like leader man something. So that moment, when I do that. You know
Vanna and my wife. They get caught in the middle. Every time I go they go with me. But to be true, I tell them that they you know the experience in life, the skill I talk to you today. I don't get any school. I learn it from the community. By interact with people by really know what their situation and put myself in their shoe. I talk to a lot of new immigrant who come here. You know what you lucky to come here. I come here I don't know that. Back in the country I learn English, I know nothing about ABC. It tough. I live with American family, I don't eat their food. They are Christian, I am Catholic. They take me to Catholic, they take me to Christian, and they pick me up. I live in the home, I don't even speak English. You think I am happy? I want to talk my language and share how I feel. What sadness I feel. I can't. But from there, I you know what. The first thing you need to do. Learn the language and move on with your life. Stay out of the house. Smell the roses. That's why I am different. And you know, like Thuy told me, "Steve, I just joined board" I think she joined Horizon board two years ago. "I am so gladly that I met you Steve but everywhere I go. I talk about you and it seem like everybody know you. So how do you feel about that? That bad for me. Because do they know me for good and bad? "No no. I never hear any negative." "Oh that's good. Thing you do in the community, it will stay there forever. And a lot of politics you know, position always say, "hey Steve we have money. You want to go any office?" Politics is not me. I have learned from my dad because you know. Sometime they good, sometime they bad. Any country they have political. No matter what where you go you will have that. So, and then after so many years here and I have learned that you know I want to share with you the feeling, the first time I go to Vietnam. 1995. When I get married with Vanna. She want me to bring her home. So she can introduce her uncle and aunts that live there. And after so many years, I go back there. The first night, we land and stay at a hotel. I don't know for some reason I cry. Vanna, my wife ask me, "Why you so sad? What happened?" I say, you know what, I don't know. I know this is my home. I born here and raise here. But now we fly we just get here. To tell you the truth I really miss home, the US. I don't know why. I don't see this my home now. I know that we have family here but you know I think I can handle it. But right now at this moment, I miss my home in California." So I don't know the rest of the people. I keep joking with people. If in Vietnam right now, they invite me to become a Prime Minister. I will say, "No." They say, "Why?" I just want to be ordinary people here. In this country that is what I have learned and put so much here. I am proud. I am not an engineer or doctor or whatever. This is what I learned from my mom. Her name Jessica. She teach me from the day 1 I met her. She said, "Steve, a lot of people forget. I don't care how degree how smart they are. They forgot two words in their life. You know to make a life to live a live differently, everybody need to make a life. It doesn't matter how much money they make. A lot of people stand there work for hamburger stand and fast food. They get less money. A lot of doctor ton of million you know dollar. Lawyer. But do they live their life? Do they have that? So I want you always to focus on make a life live a life." Everybody do have a path. Whatever you do with your life you happy with that. You don't feel bad about yourself. Go for it. It isn't about money. Some other thing she teach me I have learned. At that time I remember, "Mom you know can you tell me what school and thing I have to learn so I can make my life here. Make good money." Let me tell you in the United States you have two jobs. Understand two jobs. Whatever job they face "may I help you"
is not real job. It is just a temporary job for you to move on. I want you to take any job Steve, but in the future, they see you have to make a point. That's a real job. Right now you have to go to school, you go to school in and go to work in the morning, school at night. Even if you work for fast food, that is "may I help you job" temporary. But try to get school. Get more English. Get something you have the skill to make your life easy later on. I say, "Yes" and now with that I always share with people. Because you know that. I sit there I work for employment services. A lot of young people, young kid. Twenty, twenty one come to this they looking for job. I give them the same thing I have learned from my mom. I have to call her mom because I live with the family. So you know but but. How do I express this? The day they take me into the house. And the next day, I am part of family, I don't know why the way America they treat people. I hear a lot of people bring Vietnamese family here and they're all broken. Because they have some you know. With them different, they love me. You know sometime, she try to protect me than her own children. I don't know why. Maybe she feel sorry for me whatever. She always try to protect me. Remember that the family tradition. Every month, the third Friday every month the whole family go movie. So you know I go with family. Later I just try to excuse. So I said, "I have some homework to do mom. Can I just you know stay home?" So time to time use excuse. So one time you know family ready to go say, "Steve? Can you go?" "No no no mom, I have homework to do." Come on brother sister have fun. Go watch movie, let me know. So you know they ready to go and mom walk into room, my room. She close the door. "Hey Steve. Sit down. I want to talk to you." "Yes mom" "Let's go. They waiting for you." "Tell me the truth. Why you not going? Lately you not going with us." "Mom. Did I tell you? I have homework I need to turn it in. My final blah blah blah." "Steve. Look me in the eyes. Tell me the truth. I want to hear the truth." I just sitting there, I said, I cry. "Mom. I lied." "Don't ever lie to your mom. I am you mom. I know. Tell me why you not go." "Mom tell you the truth, I don't have money." At that time I work minimum wage. Pay rent. Whatever. I have to send money home. To take care of my mom, my dad and sister. Sometime I don't even pay a dollar. I don't want family to feel bad. Just go without me. When I have extra money, I save it I go." She said, "Now that's why I love you. Just tell me the truth. Don't lie to mom. Whoever mom, don't lie. Now Steve I want you to go wash your face and let's go." "Mom I don't have money" She said, "go wash your face." I wash my face and she give me money. "From now on we go to the movie I am the one to give you money but don't let my children know until you get money, you don't take my money. Is that fair?" Then I go. Then you know every time I tells story to my kid. A stranger. Not even your people. Not even your country, they give you a whole love. Unconditionally. But now we are our people. We get jealous. Or try to cheat them. Try to hurt them. I don't know why. So you know, that's why I always keep telling all the story to my kid. So then they have learn from them and don't try to take advantage. You know I don't care what the other people. You. You under my roof. You have to learn the life here. Me and your mom. Not easy. My wife too. She escaped out of country too. Her father get killed. And she came here with her brother and finally the family. They have a lot of sad story. But you know what? To me without that experience that you have learned in the past, make stronger for you to who you are and you move on. So you know you have to build your foundation. To be like. I am really tough you know. I remember when I first
live with family. They sit there watch TV and just laugh. Because they understand I just sitting there, "what's that?" From that moment, I try to rewind the tape. I see how difficult when I first came. But when I say, life move on. Like you say right now, you invest your time in school. Because the job you are in the future, some people need to make an appointment to see you. Not may I help you job. The big thing about that the different is education to take you there. That's why I tell the kid you lucky. In this country they give you financial aid. You go to another country. Come on. Get real and why don't you take advantage. And you know what? I keep telling you even my kid. Let's say you in the future you have this degree, that degree. You get good pay. Who get that money? You. Who get that title? You? And who get benefit? Your wife, your children. Not even us. Right? So you think about it. After the country care for you. You don't like this country. What it's called. No Child Left Behind. I took my kid back to the country. A lot of kid have to work at the supermarket. Emily ask me, "do they go to school?" "You think they can go to school? Aww" This is something you know sometime you know. The picture. The ugly picture is not good to see. When you see it, you have to appreciate what you got. After 9/11 I have learned that whoever come here, hurt this country. Hurt this people. It hurt me. I have to protect them. I have to defend. Even I am not a soldier something. But you come up to me. I am going to kill America. Kill you first. No matter what. And then you know, Move on move on and then I am with the Horizon. What the agency do? Help immigrant. Help from ESL to class. Looking for a job. Citizen class. You know. I feel like I go back from beginning and I look at the people when they look at the people. Same thing like me. Worried. Scared. You know. Confused. And that's why I speak from the heart. I put on table. This is what you need to do. It tough. If you ask your mom and dad they will tell you the same story. But you know, that's what we are been through. Been there done that. That's why you know. The story of my life I try to incorporate. I told them that remember in this country. Have two guy very successful. Bill Gate and Steve Job. You know how much money they make?

DL: Billions.

SP: Yeah, some of them don't even finish college. You know why? This country, if you have your brain, work. Opportunity out there for you. I see a lot people they don't even have a degree. They still make their life here. And now look at that. We have some black president here. In my country, out of Vietnamese but they don't accept me. They try to kick me out, kill me, beat the crap out of me because I run away from them. Because the truth they don't give me life. How do you feel about it? So this country we have everything. If right here I want to eat Korean food. I can sit right here. I want Taiwanese or Middle East. Everywhere. So you know so sometime I keep telling people. There are a lot of people who can make it to the freedom. When I came to the camp, the refugee the high commissioner refugee, "how many people get killed in a day?" When they tried to get here. And now we are here. We don't make it out. We keep complaining about, "oh, no one helping me." To tell you the truth, when I live with the American family I have learned that and I have to surprise my mom take to social work to apply for refugee benefit. We can collect money from government like welfare, food stamp and she asking me because the guy give me all the paper. "Sign here Steve. And every month we send you a check. Medicare, take care of your health. Food stamp okay sign here and we will take care of that." And my mom
said, "No Steve. I don't want you to sign now. Take it home and read it. And give it back." So they guy said, "Steve okay take it home, read it and give it back to me." So I come back home I ask my mom "What is this about?" "Yes Steve, you come as a refugee. The government will give you some assistance aboutfinance, food blah blah blah. Is good you deserve to have it. You've been though. This country try to help you. But let me ask you this Steve. You twenty something years old right now right? Are you healthy?" "Yes" "If you get a job, would you go to apply for the job? Would you like to go to work" I look at her and say "Mom. Do they hire me? With no English?" "Why not. If they give you job. Will you go do it?" "Mom, 100%" "So don't sign this. I don't want you to depend on this." So few day later she take me back to the office. So these guy, "okay are you sign?" and my mom tell them, "Steve decide not to sign." "Yeah I am not to sign. Can you get me a job?" "Sure." At that time they have on the job training, so the guy ask, "you sure you want to go to work? You just come only a week. You sure you want work? We can get you a job." "Sure why not?" So the guy told my mom, "you go home and we drive him around and find him a job. We will call you later." And that day I got a job. Work as a machine shop. So remember I told you I came for a week. So I still have problem learning about time to sleep. So when I work the manager come out and say he look at my I-94 because I just come in. "You only here for a week. Why don't you go home and three month later come back? I will hire you. I say, "No no I really want a job. Please help me." And the guy said, "Okay." He asked me to sit in one of the warehouse. He tell the guy to show me how to measure the part. "This is good. Oversize. Undersize." The guy show me. Thank you very much. And he walk away. It is so easy. I can do it. About an hour later, I just. I sleep.

DL: The time

SP: They come into the room I hear and they say, "Shh. let him sleep. He just came. Leave him alone." So I feel a few people feel sorry for me and want to support me. So you know later on I am okay. So you know want to hear about my first check in America? I tell it to my children too. Two week later, I get the first check. I so happy. I want to go home. My mom. Get the check you know jump in the bus. Stop by one of the 7-11. You know what? "I want to cash this check and want to buy some soda, can of soda and a chip." And he cashed the check. "Would you do me a favor, cash in dollar bill?" The guy said, "No problem." At that time he gave me a hundred something. I get my soda and chip and come out. I sit at the bus waiting for another bus come. And then I take the money out and count. Two. Three. If for some reason I lose count, and tear come down. I say, "my God. I am making money in this country. I really making some money." I just counting money. And I realize you know what? It tough. At that time I really don't speak good English but I still make money out my own hands. I sit there crying. And then I go home and tell my mom about it. Oh man the whole family give me a hug. Say, "Steve, I don't know you maybe say you lucky to have us, but to tell you the truth, we lucky to have you. I want my kid see the way you are today and how lucky they are and even my brother sister say, 'you make us proud. Seen tough but you seem like you care us. Just got for it even you get hit by a bus'" I say, "Yeah you remember they put gun to my head. I am ready." The family know who I am. I have to tell you this David. Take me for a long time to you know have to focus whatever your friend you have to focus. And remember in school. Maybe your mom and dad tell you, "There is
a will there is a way." That is what I am the will. That is who I am today. And whatever I make, even my job I helping people. It not because I. I get paid here to sit here every day. But I will give them some feedback about the experience. A lot of people sit there when I talk and cry. "Oh my God. I just been here three month. I cry and complain a lot. I hear story about you. I don't think I deserve to cry. I think I still have more than here when you first come here." That is what make you feel so good about. And to me, you know. Like yourself, with your degree. In the future you more likely work with the people. A lot of people make a ton of money. Later I have a lot of friend with a lot of money but they never happy. Marriage broken. Kid somewhere. I am PD have Juvenile Justice Center. I sit there talk to the kids. Some kid are grown up. Family school, trouble with the law. I sit there and talk to them really. Oh my God. I never hear that from my mom and dad. Thank you for teaching me that. A lot of kid tough when they come in. They think. One time I want to share you. He about 17, cut school you know. Get trouble with school. And the family chose to send him you know every week have to come to juvenile justice and counseling. So I sit there and guy come in really tough. And I read his file something. Okay sit down. I say, "Okay you know what? Why don't you just start? Whatever inside you, don't feel good take it out." "I hate American, I hate Mexican, I hate Vietnamese. Blah blah blah. Hate this." Angry hatred everything. I sitting there and after he kind of take air. I say, "You finished?" "Yes I am. So what you going to do about it?" "I don't think I can do anything. You know what, let me sign you off go home early. I don't think me or this society or even your parent can do it. The way you talk right now. You know what? I have you go home and call your mom and dad pick you up. I think we enough with you. That's it." He look at me and say, "You don't leave me anything? Counseling center" "no. if you keep the way you talk. I don't think we should no keep you here. It danger. You know what? I want to sign you out. Go home." He said, "Okay. I don't care. I want to go Vietnam or whatever." "Even if you go to Vietnam, you in trouble too. You want to go? Go! I don’t care." I sign for time and date. When you waiting for your parent. This is my offer to you. My personal offer to you. He look at me, "what offer?" "You go home today, tell your mom and dad that next time you come here, tell them that I. My name is Steve Pham. I am the one who will buy you a ticket to go back to Vietnam. With my money." He look at me and say, "You kidding me." I say, "No I am not kidding." "Oh no you're kidding." "No I am not. If you want me to write a statement I sign my name." "Do it." "Okay." "Sign my name and give him piece of paper. Go!" Next two week I will see you again. At this time he come with the family. He said, "Are you Steve?" "Yes," and the father shake my hand. The mother said, "oh
my God Steve. I don't know what you say to him. What the power in the world you pour on him. He cried from that day until now. What did you change my kid? I say, "I didn't change anything. Give him give you anything give to you?" "He gave me that. Paper here." And the family asked me, "Steve are you really going to do this?" I look at him and say, "You think I am crazy right? You think maybe I am rich or whatever I don't care about it." "Yeah I am confused before I let him talk to you first." I say, "No. When I sign, I mean it. I am behalf the PD here. I don't take the PD out for joking. I mean it." Okay let say whatever it take $500/$600 for one way ticket it will come to my check. It hurt me too. That my money. But look at the future. The country, the society. Even you don't. We need to take him out. If he still here, we need to fix him or let him go away. That's what my thinking." I even tell my wife. My wife say, "you're crazy." "No I am not crazy" So the guy walked in. Shake my hand. And said "Steve, I am so sorry. You know I am elder guy. I have so racist whatever. I have now realize I wrong, you right. You don't even talk to me months. You even ask to go home. But you make the statement that. Nobody easy to come here. But you want to get out, get out. Even it hurt your money but you still doing that because you see bigger picture." So the family sit down talk to me the parent ask me, "Steve, to your advice, what should we do with him? What make him better?" "I think with this teenager, you've been there. It's just bad influence. He go with the wrong crowd. You know Try to make him join the you know church group, whatever. Non profit. Go out you know. Interact He will learn from it. Take my advice. Move him away. Do you have any state you can live?" "Oh yeah we have family." "Move." "We've thinking about it. We have another two kids." The family really move to New Mexico. You know who is now? He become a pharmacist. Few year later, I think 7/6 year later. I thank him. He come to me. He says, "Steve you remember me?" "Yes I still remember. You know what, the paper you signed? It changed my life. And you know the family move there.
He finished high school he go to college. He picked pharmacy and now he become. He work there for a few year in New Mexico, Move to Texas move back here. California. You know, to me, sometime you know. Other families sometime kid don't listen to parent. If you get some good counselor who really care for you. Talk to you like where conflict. I know that if I keep you know one by one give him. We will get into a fight. I cannot stop him. I just want to I want to make conclusion, I and done with you. I think this society done with you. If you keep thinking. I sign it. Let go. So then I feel like you know in this world, you just have one family. One person you know in the situation they need to pass by you do it. You feel like you build the whole world. That make me feel so good. That's why I keep. I talk to my volunteer group at the Red Cross. To me, I think with myself or even with you, I don’t think we can move that mountain. But with the whole group, believe me, if we want to move that mountain we can do. But with the whole group. So you know, make sure you know we are in the same page, we know our mission. And let’s go do it. In the past 7 years with Red Cross. They know everything about us. We go to school, we go church, go to temple, any group teaching CPR/First AID, disaster preparedness. They really see who I am. Who I really mean to do. I give them a favor Red Cross, here to help you. Not after two years, I am no longer as a staff. I say what's wrong with that? So you know that story of my life I hope you not bore with it.

DL: No no no. It was really interesting. Thank you very much. Let me check. Okay. I guess. What are the most important things the future of Vietnamese Americans should remember about their past?

SP: To me, the Vietnam War and with the Unites State get involved. At that time you have to remember because of the power of the country. And the United State have the right to worry about the Asian area. At that time Russia and China they control that that's why the United State
need to be there. But the only thing I am very disagree and very upset when I get is I know that. Whoever run the country. Whoever sit in the Congress chair, make decision to send fifty four thousand solider to get there get killed for that stupid war. I don’t understand. You know last time I said both North and South. I think this is a big mistake. Any war is ugly. Is not good. Evil. To me you killing people evil. Politic, economy or whatever. Evil. You know, and with the past I have learned that you know even if you know remember. If we still have South Vietnam with the United States. I don't real like that. The thing I have learned from Communist. Say if I run in 1975, before the Communist come. You think I know about Communist?

DL: No not really.

SP: No. I know nothing. Right? But I live with them for about 8 year. And the way they treat me. Do you think I forgot? No. Do I forgive them? Yes I forgive them? Do I try to forget. I try. Sometime flashback you know. And that a thing Vietnamese community here need to kind of like let it go. You know but you have to keep your root. Tell people about proud to tell your children your grand children who you are. What you fighting for and you know don't make it kind of like. Here the Communist. You have to hate them forever. Believe me. To me I think the Communist, don’t get me wrong, try to fight the way to fix their country. They still Communist, don't get me wrong. But they try to find a way. And you know. We have to learn to you know forget and forgive. People cannot forget. Even myself too I not easy to say. It's not but to me you know. For example, you hear about visa student you know. Come here you know and most of them you know from Vietnam and their children of some powerful people and they come here. In this community they really against them. But to me I'm not. I kind of support them. I want to give them a hand. They are the one to go back. They see it. They face it. They live here. They study here. You know. You have trained them and have teach them whatever we have here. They don't
want to go back. So make it happen. Why do we have to cut it off? You know, to me I remember back then my dad, he in the power. My aunt, brother, sister want to go here. They sign paper they're here. So you know, but now some people have power so they have their kid here and we jealous? Nah. Come on. That's what I forgot to ask. I asked my dad how do you feel about the history of the war. Before you big guy, now you prisoner. "Hey Steve. Tough. Accept it. When you in power you can do anything. Now it's your lost power. You a prisoner! What you want me to make? What you want them to do? You want them to keep asking you sir? No. Steve accept." So you know I have learned that from him. You have to keep your pride. You don't them borrow your hand and let them trick you back. You have to accept now you're a prisoner. They can beat you and take you out shoot you whenever they want. To me in the past is strong evidence for you to learn how you are today. And that's what the way I think.

DL: Thank you. Is there anything else you would like to share? Culture? Tradition? You grew up with?

SP: You know what, back in the country. You know and, you know that we don't have you know good time like you guy here. Summer time, Winter break. Summer you know. Spring break you know. Back then we don't even know tomorrow we go to school. Because it fighting you know. To me that is you know. Most of the thing flash me back is people dying. Family lost their loved ones. Never united. And some families the father have to go fight and you know what the new year for? Nothing. I remember I sit in high school at that time you know. We go out to some of the military away from homeland we have something. We go paint their house, clean up their house. You know, most likely at the time. We attached so much with the war. And most of us when you in high school, you in 10th grade or 11 you start worrying because they will draft you right away. You not even finish high school. But, to me the different story because my whole
family already join army. If whatever happened I still the one not to go. So I am not worry about that much, eventually I still feel like it is not right because you know most of them. I am driving bicycle out, pass by the church, temple. Some of them so young. And some time I stop by and he just pass the training for three month. Out a week later he get killed. I am lost one of my oldest brother. He get killed too. That really hurt me. I don't know. That is what I say. Because of the power of the United State controlling around the world. With some small country that just run whatever the Unites State want to run. I don't know at that time you big guy with a small country like that and spend so much money. Weapon everything and even send your people there, you get killed. I don't know. You know right now. Iraq. We end two three thousand people everybody screaming about it. I don't where all the government. All the elected officer. Sitting there do nothing and keep sending people. I don't know. That is why I said, "God please stop."

DL: Thank you. Is there anything else you would like to share

SP: Yeah, my culture and now for this, the new generation. I would like you know the Vietnamese or Asian community you name it. You like him you have vision, you have to understand our generation is not stop from here and you don't you know bitter and angry. Move on. Make the country proud about who we are you know. And as you know now. Every time we talking about Asian student. What they say, "wow you guys so smart." Keep that good thing happen you know. Sometime you hear some weird thing. Not small percent but to me you know we need to keep history, history. We don't leave history. Move on. Make it something better like in the Vietnamese community have a lot of Vietnamese school. Like weekend who go to school. That thing they need to do. Politics. Come on, you have a right. This is free country. You can hate people, become different political party, but eventually we still as a community; we want to do something as the other community look at us. It is not just about one bad apple or two bad apple.
We have to learn thing how to live together because you know remember the old generation soon or later like my father and uncle. Sooner or later they will have to go. And as a young generation you need to start somewhere. Remember don't say that. I hear a lot of bad thing about community you don't want to go. You need to go. I keep telling them. I have written one of the sentence from one of the guy very famous in India. He wrote this one and I have learned from it. "When on the road from A to B, you and me one route to A to B every time we go. We hear the dog barking we stop and try to look, why dog barking. You never go to the B point." Even in the mission you go on the road. The road you go, some people will say something to try to discourage you, try to distract you. Look at the B and go for it. You don't have to spend time to look" Why they against us? Why they go on strike, protest?" You believe in your mission and you make good for community go for it. And I believe in this country you know. The law always say, “Justice for all.” Not because "oh. I believe I am Asian so police try to target me." I am out there with the new officer every time we hire new officer, they have to ride along with us every three month. So we need to score them. Talk about culture difference. We observe them when they stop the Asian people how the way the handle it. With the culture you know, the culture and language barrier different. Sometime you know, both officer and the people not understanding is not mean we hate each other. You breaking the law that’s why I stop you. Sign here and don't mean you accept it. You can go to court. Because I say, “45 you run 55 stop you.” It is a red light you run red light. Not because I hate you. Remember back then when first Asian come to this. A lot of officer don't like the way we talk. We don't look eye to eye. A lot of people ask, “Steve you not Vietnamese." I talk to a lot of Vietnamese and they never look at me in the eye. I say “okay you can say that.” When I first live with the family, they always correct me. Mom talk to me say, "Steve look at me." "I'm sorry mom." Take time to train it. So that's why when the new officer
hiring we always talk to them. When they look away is not because they not respect you. That is culture. They a little bit scared it's not mean because flashback. They think back in the country police this, police that. Understand that. Bear with that. And you know that's why as a young generation you gotta hear that. Grow up. Tell people, "Okay police didn't do their job." If you don't do anything they don't do anything with you. If you tell them, look at them. You can arrest officer. If the officer doing wrong, I can arrest him. Not because he can arrest me. If he do something wrong I can arrest him. A lot of people don't know we have right to do that. I know you know a lot of you know culture thing like you know child abuse, domestic abuse, family and most of that usually for the newcomer. But you know with you guy. Like you yourself. I know that for sure you respect your wife, your kid. You don't abuse or beat them up. But most new immigrant, new comer they don't want to learn more. Unfortunately now a day, lot of program, workshop that is helping them with orientation culture. They don't have that. When I am still in refugee camp, they already tech us how to do that. How to get the bus. How to call 911. Most new immigrants, "I have to go to work" and leave their work. It hard for them. So I keep telling people when you sign the paper of behalf of yourself and in front of the government. You say you will take care of these people. Are you doing this job? Or you just bring them here? I sponsor you. You by yourself. I can't let you stay here for three month you go by yourself. How can you do that? I don't know that's why I tell people you better change the way. Call them, 'hey." if you come here. Tell them straight you know if you want to come. Pay for it. I think you better stay. A lot of people have a hope. Everybody come here what? For better life? What they get? They get stuck here. No support they feel they away from society? What you want them to do? You know. Yeah I know it tough.

DL: Okay. Thank you so much for this interview. This is David Liu interviewing Steve Pham for
the Vietnamese Oral History Project

SP: Okay. Any question, give me a call. Alright?

DL: Thank you.