Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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HR: Today is February 16th

SN: …and you can sit and and and you know uh get uh get a dessert, um baked goods, and sometimes even um sometimes I think even pho. You know pho right? Yeah, so, so those are probably the best kind, uh the best food because it’s it’s made by people that that just do it from home and then you’d just bring it out in the morning… I think that’s one of the um, one of the most precious traditions, uh Vietnamese traditions that uh I hope would never go away because it gives this very authentic touch um that you don’t see anywhere else.

HR: Could you describe your schooling in Vietnam? How far did your education go?

SN: um I got to 8th grade.

HR: When you came to America from Vietnam, how was the difference of the education?

SN: uh I thought, I thought uh a lot of the math and science classes uh were easier uh cause uh we learn math, much more advanced math than the American students at at the same grade level.

HR: hmmm

SF: um But that obviously doesn’t help because I was struggling to pick up English.

HR: hmmm

SN: And so for the first two or three months you know, um, you’re completely lost, you know, It’s like hearing a bunch of noises and you can’t tell what’s going on.

HR: Could you describe your um immigration process?

SN: Yea. I was a I was a boat person, I escaped by boat.

HR: Was that difficult?
SN: Uh yeah, actually difficult would be an understatement. Um, it took us three tries. Uh first try we got swindled and they took our money and never came they never came uh never came through with it to pick us up. Um second try uh I think second try we got caught uh by the police. And then third try uh we had to um to pretended to speak Chinese in order to get past the uh investigators um and then got on a boat with a bunch of other people and uh escaped. The boat is very, it’s a fishing boat, it’s very cramped. So you only have enough room to sit. There’s nothing to, you can’t even lie down uh for four days and three nights uh to Malaysia.

HR: Who else..

SN:..

HR: Oh Sorry

SN: Go ahead

HR: Who else was on the boat with you?

SN: My mom, my brother, and uh a cous…an acquaintance uh a couple of kids, my mom’s acquaintance uhhhh siblings. So as a favor to to my mom’s acquaintance she took those two kids with her, and a second cousin, uncle uncle, twice removed, so there was there was uh six of us in total.

HR: What do you remembers most of that experience?

SN: (Laughs) I think people, you heard about the the carnival cruise line that got stranded and people were saying how bad the smell is. I remember the most the smell um for four days and three nights um people basically go to the bathroom um underneath the deck and they uh and there so much wave and we’re talking 30foot-50foot waves, um and people get so seasick they uh they throw up and the worst part is that before they throw up they eat a lot of oranges because oranges help you keep hydrated actually give you nutrients but when you throw up it smells really bad. Um so basically you know it’s the smell would never leave uh, I think smell is one of those sense that has long- a lot of longevity.

HR: Yeah

SN: That’s why I still remember it. Um the second thing I remember is is, every, the waves are so big, that every time you’re on top of the wave you feel like you’re on a you know uh like a four story building and when you’re at the bottom of the wave it’s so dark you can’t see anything, just water at all sides. So it’s pretty harrowing, I mean at any moment you can die, and actually, um the group of boats that we went with, there were three boats, one of the boats sank and
everybody died. Yeah.

HR: Did you witness the boat?

SN: Yeah.

HR: When you arrived to America what was the first thing that you guys did?

SN: Well there is a, there’s a halfway house um they um they they brought us to San Francisco and uh put us in a travel lounge and I thought ‘Man that was luxury hotel!’ I mean the travel lounge was and now I look back thinking (Laughs) you know, that’s like second rate third rate, but back then I thought, ‘Oh my god this thing is incredible, it’s so luxurious!’ And I thought it was the most amazing thing that they in the morning they came and gave us donuts, a dozen donuts, and um so I thought ‘man we’re living the life now.’ Uh and n’ the third thing is it was really cold, and san Francisco you know high 50s but we thought it was so cold, we were we thought we were gunna die of of cold, and therefore from San Francisco we flew to Tennessee and that was even colder.

HR: Did the six of you fly to Tennessee?

SN: No, no. So, when we got to the refugee camp, um after 7 months, my mom, myself, and my brother got interviewed to go to the U.S. The reason is we have priority one, we are the first priority to get out of the refugee camp because we have uh a direct parent, my dad was already over here in the U.S., other people with siblings in the U.S. would be priority two, and then people with distant relatives would be priority three, and then people with no um no relatives or no family would be priority four. And so basically, um my mom um pretend that the two kids that were entrusted to her uh were also our brothers to get them over here, and then um my uncle who had no relatives over here was stuck in the refugee camp for three years. Yeah, he never forgive us for that. So…. he never forgave us for that.

HR: Did you guys practice English while you were waiting for the interviews to go into America?

SN: No

HR: No (confirming)

HR: You mentioned before that you pretended to speak Chinese, can you speak Chinese?

SN: I only learned how to count to ten, and to say “how are you” and few other phrases.
HR: When you arrived to Tennessee, did you guys, where did you stay?

SN: So when we got to Tennessee, we stayed in SF for a day or two I think in the travel lounge, and then when we got to Tennessee uh I stayed with my dad because my dad was a graduate student and he has student housing and he picked us up at the airport, um we got home, and I opened the fridge and I thought I died and went to heaven, and cause I saw these two big liters bottles of Dr. Pepper, and I’m like ‘man that thing looks good,’ and I drank it and I almost threw up cause I wasn’t used to Dr. Pepper. But now it’s one of my favorite drinks.

HR: Do you have any other memories that when you look back at arriving to America and going to Tennessee that you just always think of?

SN: Yeah

HR: Could you describe…

SN: It’s uh funny story. Um I was very zealous uh about about learning English, about picking up English, and so I would practice all the time and I took every opportunity to to talk, so one day I was riding the bus, about 3 days after I got to the U.S., and when I was riding the bus, um this lady pulled a bus stop and she was walking off the bus, but um some man stood up and got in her way so she hit him on the arm and said “cuse me” and I listened to her really carefully and I heard “cuse me’ and I thought maybe the way you say the word “excuse me” is by dropping the “ex” and just saying “cuse me.” So a couple days later I went to the community pool in the housing complex, and um I was about to dive off the uh the diving board, and um there was a little girl about my age in the middle of the pool and she was trying to get out of my way before I dive down, I guess I dove down too fast and she couldn’t get out of my way in time so I kinda hit her on her foot, you know, when I dove down. So she went to the side of the pool and I went after her to the side of pool and I thought, “wow, what a wonderful opportunity to practice my English,” you know, I just heard you know “cuse me,” that’s the best way to uh, so and I went after her and said “cuse me” and then she got off the pool and I thought “uh okay she’s not very friendly.” So I follow her off the pool and I kinda walked, chased her around the pool a couple laps just saying “cuse me, cuse me,” and I thought, “man people are pretty unfriendly here.” So, I thought about, I was kinda annoyed but I thought nothing of it, and I you know wouldn’t stop me from practicing my English. Well, about four years later, flash forward to a cafeteria scene where uh so we have a bunch of friends in common, this girl and I, uh both in middle school together and I, we happen to sit at the same table and she she asked me, “what, you know, was going on that day, the first day I met you with you keep running after me saying ‘kiss me kiss me kiss me?’” and I thought, oh my god that’s what you thought it said, and uh um anyway I was very embarrassed and I thought wow I mean that’s you know a lesson for moderation, not trying to do so much at the same time um yeah that’s one of the things I remember the most I mean there are tons of other gaps and mishaps with languages but I won’t even go into them.
HR: Um, while growing up in Tennessee, did um, you have a lot of Vietnamese, like traditions that you guys still practiced?

SN: No

HR: No (confirming)

SN: Nah, we speak Vietnamese at home cause my dad wants us to keep the language, which I’m really glad for, um and we celebrate ___ and Lunar New Year. Um other than that, we pretty much cast-off in the middle of, you know, you know a strange land so, we try to hold on to any Vietnamese people we know and stay connected with them. The feeling I got was Vietnamese people who were there before us looked down on us because, you know, they think we are fresh off the boat, you know. Which I rebranded now too, to stand for “Full On Beautiful” not “Fresh Off the Boat” anymore (FOB), that’s a joke.

HR: Ohhh

SN: So, no but we didn’t really get a chance to do much of it, people get to do a lot of it in California.

HR: When you met other Vietnamese people who also immigrated here, was there discrimination between you guys, like, where you were from in Vietnam and how you came here?

SN: No, not really.

HR: Not really.

SN: Because in Tennessee there are so few people, you just glad to meet other Vietnamese people. But then once people find out who came first that’s like a pecking order. An explicit pecking order, because if you came earlier you’re more advanced, you know more, you know.

HR: Do you still have family reunions with your family? In Vietnam or America, if you have them.

SN: Most of my family in Vietnam have passed away, um at least the close ones. The ones in here, the ones in US yes we still get together.

HR: Your mother’s um, two adoptive two children, do you still keep in touch with them?

SN: No, not really, what happened is that, after we, after they came over and stayed with us for 6 months, my parents filed papers for them to be adopted by foster parents, because it was too hard to look after four kids. They were very upset, and never forgive us for that, um so, but it was really good for them because they picked up English and became very Americanized and they’re
still living in Tennessee now. Yeah, I think one of them married an Laotian woman and the other married a Caucasian woman. Um, you know, yeah they’re very well adaptive because of that, but I don’t think they ever forgive us for that. Never forgave us for that.

HR: How do you feel about that?

SN: I think… a part of growing up is learning to make tough decisions. It could be financial decisions, whether to buy a dress or not, but gradually you have to learn to make tougher and tougher decisions. One thing that I guess everybody realized when you try to make a tough decision is that sometime there is no right decision or wrong decision, only time will tell, and, so the decision at the time seems like seem cruel but but in the long run it was good for everybody. Um if we had stayed to our principle of loyalty we would never do it, right? Just like the boat that sank, um, the man on our boat, his family was on the other boat that sank. So his decision to put his family on the other boat, um uh, drove him crazy because he should have stayed with them, he told us that he stayed, at least take one kid with him, one kid. But you never know the decision you make. So a part of learning to make a tough decision is the courage to live with the result, whatever it is, and I think, I think uh everybody needs to learn to make tough decisions. It’s not so much the decision that’s wrong or right, I think it’s more of the process of making…

HR: Yeah (agreeing)

SN: Yeah, and I have a lot of respect for people who are willing to live with their decision whether it’s wrong or right.

HR: Do you and your family ever talk about that past like that? Often?

SN: Oh yeah, all the time, my parents are very open, I’m very lucky; I have the two best parents in the world.

HR: Do you guys ever get emotional when talking about it?

SN: No not really, my… I think of all the years I know my dad, he only cry once. Um I think when he left the Vietnam for US in 1973 before the war was over that was the only time I saw him cry, and then, ohh the second time was when my mom passed away. Um, but my mom is very emotional, you know, and so is my sister. Um my brother and I were kinda in between, so yeah.

HR: Do you guys talk about the Vietnam War?

SN: Yeah

HR: Yeah (confirming)

SN: Yeah, yeah.
HR: Could you explain or describe some things that you guys talk about, when…

SN: Um, yeah, we talk about how confusing it is, how, how um before the war was over we were on top of the world, and after the war was over, we were at the bottom of the ladder, but then again it is just perception of things. Um, you trade, you know, uh someone comes and ask you “would you trade everything you have for freedom?” That’s a tough decision right there, some people chose to stay and they, you know, and they still keep their stuff but eventually they lose it anyway when the new government came in. So yeah.

HR: How were your family members involved in the war? Do you have any family members that were involved in it?

SN: Yeah my dad was, I think my dad was a Captain in the Army, and then he was lieutenant governor as well and my uncle was I think chief of police or something, pretty powerful family, and so I was insulated um I would say extremely spoiled was actually an understatement.

HR: So you were well off.

SN: More than well off.

HR: More than well off (confirming)

SN: We owned multiple companies that actually have that actually corner the market on certain things so yeah yeah I mean it’s just, uh my family uh, had a lot of capabilities uh but it’s interesting when it came down to it we couldn’t get out of Vietnam in 1975 um and that was interesting that was the first humbling event and then from then on it’s a string of humbling event one after another, you know, so yeah.

HR: What made you guys decide to come to America?

SN: Um, I think my mom realized that we would have no future there, uh secondly it’s hard to raise us without my dad, and so, for most people they just escaped just to uh, you know, get some freedom, but for my mom there’s a second reason that is just as strong so it’s a no brainer, you know, her husband is over here.

HR: Was it sad to leave your friends and um your grandparents in Vietnam?

SN: It was very sad to leave uh my grandma. Um, so my grandma raised me, and completely spoiled me. And basically, you know she presided over a empire, business empire, so everything was laid at my heels, I get whatever I want and um all that so when, basically I think after I came back um to Vietnam years later, the relative would tell me that um I was her reason for living and so after we left, um you know um, she didn’t feel like going on, but um somehow she found the courage to, because she had this feeling that we made it, cause basically after you escape there’s years of blackout, news blackout, you have no idea where you end up, there’s no news, so so she had no idea whether we were there or not but theres a faint way of hope that we made it that kept
her alive, and when she found out we made it, yeah, you know, that kept her holding on. I think there’s a huge story that is unexplored of how people um, how the ones that stayed uh feel, uh you know. I actually started a um book years ago when I was in high school, I started a book about my escape in Vietnam, and I wrote the first three chapters and um I published it in a town newspaper I believe and then somebody offered to give me an advance for a book, um but I was too busy with applying to colleges, so I didn’t follow up on it. I published it at Northwestern University in the college newspaper and there was people, were people lining up in my dorm hallway, you know just crying, I came back to my dorm room like “what is going on?” Um because I talked about you know, uh about how I think my grandma would feel afterward, um but I think there’s much more complexity to it, now that I’m older, I think maybe what I’ll do is probably uh write something later about about how I imagine she would feel piecing together all these pieces of oral report that you hear from other people and what I know her, so yeah, um I think that’s the missing story, you know.

HR: When you saw her again, how were your feelings?

SN: Oh it was incredible. I named my um, what is it? Oh so I named my first company, CONSsede? It actually stands for ____ that means um, I will, your son will be home. So.

HR: When was your first time, um, visiting Vietnam again?

SN: I think it was uh, I think it was 1991? 1991? Yeah.

HR: Were you scared to go?

SN: Sort of, I was sort of scared, wondering what what might happen, um but then I was also excited after all these years, and I also think that I was a little bit egotistical that you know I’m this big shot from the U.S. and I know things, you know, I wanna, you know, so it’s a whole mix of feelings, um but in general, it’s a rare very rare privilege um for people to be able to return to something they thought they lost, it’s kinda like this tiny feeling that you get when you open a up jacket and in there your closet and you find 20 dollar bill, it’s kinda like finding a pot of gold from your past, you know.

HR: When you arrived in Vietnam in 1999, were you a little nervous when you saw the waters, did it make you think of the boats, of your experience?

SN: Oh you mean 1991?


SN: Um, uh, no I’ve gotten over my fear of waves, um uh yeah I’ve gotten over most my fear of things, I’m pretty resilient, um no, no, yeah.

HR: You stated before that you moved in many, moved a lot in the U.S., could you describe, how so?
SN: Yeah, so I uh, so I was born according to the zodiac, the Chinese zodiac, the year of the horse, and horses are known to a, oh, horses are known to just move around a lot. So actually, I wanted, I thought about there’s this incredible highway system in the U.S. I love to take roadtrip, and then, when I was in college I found out that you do an internship with a company they pay for your moving, so what I do is I get the moving alliance, I then I buy some old car and just drive to the place and see the scenery at the same time, so I do that a lot, so every summer for every internship I go to a different place, I go to: Warren, Ohio; Boise, Idaho. And then after I graduated I worked at as a consultant, so I go to a lot of different cities, um so Tulsa, Oklahoma; Austin, Texas; Houston, Texas, um uh New York, um, you know, San Francisco, Seattle, I mean, I don’t even remember them all, yeah. So so, so I’ve always been moving around, and then uh after I got married I kinda settled in Huntington Beach in Orange County, but then after I got divorced I moved to San Diego, and I’ve been in San Diego for about 4 or 5 years, um I don’t know whether if it’s because I like the city so much or if it’s because I’m at a age where I just want to settle down. Yeah, I mean there’s this great country quest to explore and you know, just a chance to see so many beautiful things, and if you miss home you can always go to a Mc. Donald, there’s always a Mc. Donald, you know, their fries are the same everywhere.

HR: Where do your other family members live?

SN: They’re both in the bay area. Brother and sister in the bay area, and my dad’s in Houston.

HR: What challenges have you experienced when you starting living in America? Besides the language barrier.

SN: I think when I was in Tennessee there’s not a Vietnamese, not a lot of Asians, this is back in 1980/ 1979, a lot of discrimination. Um, I remember winning my first essay contest, um in high school um (sigh) uh and and, and then, you know, winning all these other essay contest that I entered, and then one essay contest I didn’t win because, and I heard through the great-vine it was because I was Asian. Um, and my buddy at the time, she won, and she she beat me out, um uh so they ended up, I guess someone complained, they ended up giving us both the prize and we get to go to Washington or something. But, but actually, I’m sorry, I remember that problem, it was, that was another contest, but there was one I didn’t win and I heard it was…, so um, I don’t really know whether it’s true or not, but there is this probable feeling where ever you go, that people are always looking, cause people have never seen an Asian person before, um and and you know, in school, you know, you don’t get to sit with the other kids, and that kinda thing, they kinda void you that kinda thing, um but as it happens with everyone who’s in a new community, there’s always somebody who actually end up connecting with them. The person who connected with me was my first girlfriend, Ronda, um you know, I thought, wow she’s out of my league, she’s so hot, she’s a basketball, cheerleader, everything and yet she wants to hang-out with me, um so I took her to homecoming and all that stuff and that really helped me, you know, realize that no matter where you go there’s always good people and bad people. And then my best friend, Lee Hilton, um he always hangs out with me, he taught me how to drive and everything,
um so, and we crash parties together, you know, almost got killed a couple times, um I mean beat up not killed but… um, like we crashed all African-American party, and he was white and I was Asian, and so, we were saved because one of the girls at the party, you know, I helped her with her math homework, so she came over and saved us, kept us from getting beat up. So, but any way, um that’s a long long time ago.

HR: As you start growing up, did you experience less and less discrimination?

SN: Oh yeah.

HR: Yes (confirming)

SN: Yeah, I mean, in California, there’s almost none, if anything it’s actually reverse. You know, you go to UC Irvine and go to UC Berkeley and you’re not Asian and they ask you what country you’re from. Um, but I think I think, a lot of us carry this chip on our shoulder, when we run of excuse, and we don’t want to take responsibility for what happens to us, we , we, say it’s discrimination. You know, but, everybody feels discriminated against, whether it’s via race, or uh how much money you make, or your title in a company, everybody, whether you’re a woman, you know, whether you are straight or gay, everybody feels discriminated against, but so it’s a fact of life, but uh that doesn’t mean we should stop fighting it, right? Um, but I think people have to be realistic that, that it takes time for society to change, you know, they won’t change, especially discrimination, it won’t change overnight, you should keep the pressure on, but, should give it time to change. You know.

HR: Do you vote in U.S. elections?

SN: No.

HR: No (confirming), why not?

SN: Um, I feel disconnected from the process, um I feel um, and actually I made the decision to start voting, but, but thus far I felt disconnected from the process, um, I think partly I feel disconnected but that’s actually really an excuse, I’m just lazy, um and, and I realize there is no excuse for being lazy, so, so, whether it counts or not, you know, it is something that we should um know about and um maybe eventually voting would not mean anything and people would, do away with that, and there’s another way to elect people, but for now, you know, um I think it’s a participation, like I said about decision, it’s a decision, it’s a process about making a decision that’s important. Cause I think if we don’t vote, we don’t actively seek out to understand what the issues are, and we don’t understand what the issues are, we’re not really living in our community, so voting is just a, just a signal, just a, you know, a signal of things, but really what matters is the process of getting to the vote.

HR: How did you feel after the U.S. policy after the Vietnam War?
SN: You know, I don’t, I, I, I’m ambivalent, because I didn’t know much about it, I was too young to care, you know, I was worried about dating and, you know, getting good grades. So, I didn’t, I basically forced um ignorance on myself, I mean, I induced my own ignorance, so I can focus on the good things, um, maybe, you know, later in life, you know, like right now I would be more active, because, you know, I feel like there so many belief for next generation.

HR: What traditions or customs have you made an effort to preserve?

SN: Oh, uh language, I think the Vietnamese language is probably the richest language, uh one of the riches languages in the world. Personally, I’m, you know, I’m very good at English, I mean, I write books and stories in English, of course, I won essays and contests that kinda thing. But, when it comes to language and I compare Vietnamese and English, there is no comparison, I mean we’re talking about a history of 4,000 years of language, um, uh…

HR: Did you teach your children?

SN: I’m sorry?

HR: Did you teach your children Vietnamese?

SN: Um, no I don’t, I’m a bad parent that way, um, but, uh but her grandfather does, But yeah, the language is very rich, and, and it has a, the nuances that I’ve not seen in any other language, I mean I, I, I, you know for my thesis in high school I, I analyzed um, The Grapes of Wrath, at five different levels, and Shakespeare’s Sonnets, but the nuances of the Vietnamese language is even more overwhelmingly, um uh, numerous then that of even, you know, what you see in Shakespeare’s Sonnets or, um John Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath.

HR: Do you like to speak Vietnamese more than English? Or is it just second nature?

SN: Um, English is such second nature to me, there are tons of words in, in, in Vietnamese that I don’t know that I have to use English for, so, but that, that that’s what it excites me, that every day I’m learning a new Vietnamese word, that reflects these words I know in English already. In other words, my consciousness and my conceptionsal framework is very sophisticated under the English language, and now I have this sophisticated conceptional framework of feelings, of nuances if I could, retranslate that framework to Vietnamese, and I would have another rich set of language and maybe my conceptional framework would grow even more, and by conceptional framework I mean abstraction of certain ideas, and things like that, so now if I teach…take down notes, abstraction for things, I have to do it in English, I don’t have Vietnamese words for it, but I’m sure there is a Vietnamese word for it, and I am actually almost positive that the Vietnamese words for it sounds better. Um.

HR: You sated before that you tried very hard to master English at a young age when you came, how did you practice English when you said that your father spoke Vietnamese at home with you?
SN: Oh yeah, yeah that’s um, it’s really interesting, it only took me 3 months to learn English. Um, but I did it in such a tough way, um I was in 6th grade and I remember I would stay up at night until 3am or 4am in the morning, every day, every day, basically, every school day and I translate every single word in the social studies in the history book to, to Vietnamese, I write it into the book so I can, can, know exactly what they’re talking about. And, and I remember my dad saying, I don’t know whether he was saying it for real or if he was joking, he said when you can dream in English you English is good. And I remember about three months after I came to the U.S., sometime in September, I started dreaming in English, and I knew that my English was good at that point. And so, basically, second, you know, whenever I think of something I think of it in English, so um, so from that moment on English was easy, simple to me, um the challenge was to read things that had, you know, complex words that kinda of thing, um yeah so, so, so, um you know that challenge forces me to do all those translations.

HR: Were your siblings as diligent as you were?

SN: Um I don’t know cause I don’t check on what they do, but they’re even, they’re way smarter than I am, um my brother is a standardized test demon, I mean, he scores like a 1490 on the SAT, and I think he scores in the 170 something on the LSAT, I mean, so he’s super smart, um and my sister very artistic, she’s a great writer, so they’re way better than I am, but my sister were born here so you know English is her first language, um, um yeah so, so I don’t think they worked as hard as I do because they’re smarter than I am.

HR: You’re the eldest sibling correct?

SN: Yeah, correct.

HR: Yeah, did you feel a certain responsibility?

SN: Oh yeah.

HR: Yes, what kind of responsibility did you…?

SN: I gotta make money first, so in case they need money for college, I can take care of them that kind of thing… I feel like… if we live in the wild forest, only one of us should go out there as bait for the animals, right? (Laughs) so I was the bait for the animal, testing out the forest to see if it was safe or not, so my brother and sister can walk a safe path, um there’s no reason why multiple of us should be bait right? So that’s what I thought, I’ll go out there and see what it’s like, and you know, uh, do the march and the fight, and then put up a path for whoever comes after.

HR: When looking back at your past, do you think moving to Tennessee helped you, like learn English more because you were a minority?
SN: Probably? But, not, it’s too hard of a way to do, I would have preferred being in California, cause I think if I, had I been in California, my Vietnamese would be a lot better, and, it’s a much richer language, English you learn no matter what, cause you’re forced to, but Vietnamese you only learn cause you want to, and uh yeah, yeah it’s one thing to, to learn a new language, but it’s another thing to learn the language of your mother’s tongue.

HR: Yeah (agreeing)

SN: Again, it’s kinda like discovering this 100 dollar bill in your ___ pocket, but not so much money, but the, the thought, the concept, the emotions the, the beauty that the language that, that you get, it’s more than any 100 dollar bill. So I think that’s why I’m a lot more involved with the Vietnamese community in Orange County now.

HR: Did you ever feel too disconnected from your culture at one time, that you really wanted to hold on to your Vietnamese culture and traditions, like an awakening in some way?

SN: Oh yeah, I think I went through that, um, yeah definitely I felt disconnected, now I’m reconnecting with myself. But it’s kinda like discovering a new world that has always been there, um kinda like you move to this house and you had no idea there’s this garden in the back yard, or oh my god there’s oil underneath my house, you know like the Beverly Hillbillies, right? Um, but beyond that, I think, I think um, I’ve always felt too American to be Vietnamese and too Vietnamese to be American, so um, of course if I get a, if I have an American girlfriend then I would feel really American, but it makes you feel even more Vietnamese cause when I hang out with her dad, you know, I feel so, so awkward, and when I had a Vietnamese girlfriend I feel like I’m too Americanized, they feel like I’m too direct, and I’m too um, uh straightforward about things, they require a little ___ nuance, the Vietnamese community.

HR: Do you visit Little Saigon often?

SN: Um, yeah, maybe once every two weeks.

HR: (repeating) Once every two weeks. Do you have a specific reason why you visit, or do you just enjoy to go?

SN: Uh, the food, uh, the, sometimes the people, um, yeah, I think mostly the food.

HR: What do you think of Little Saigon?

SN: I think it’s great, I think it’s a gem, one of those things that Orange County can be really proud of, um it’s not every day you can get a ethnic group that really developed, helped developed a city.

HR: What are the most important that future generations of Vietnamese Americans should remember about their past?
SN: Um, I definitely think, um that they’re connected to a very rich culture and then a ___ to that, um that they are where they are here today um, and have the ability to navigate to two different worlds, because of the sacrifice that their parents made, and the community, not just their parents, their Vietnamese parents, but the American community that support them. I mean countless churches have sponsored you know, Vietnamese over, and you know, and so many good people here that actually help teach English and all kinds, I mean so many people chipped in, right. But it’s just like, you know, just like the pilgrims and, you know, the Irish-American, they tend to forget their root sometimes, it’s inevitable but to the grid that you can hold on, you know, it’s good.

HR: Are there any other memories or special stories you would like to share?

SN: Uh, not that I can think of right now, yeah, hopefully I can have more good stories in the future?

HR: Yeah, do you think your gunna write any other novels besides mentioning your grandma?

SN: I’m not sure, not sure, I’m very ____, I’m probably one of the most ___ persons I know, and for me writing is a therapy, so I would say that if I write it would be notes, and some people call it memoirs, whatever that is, but I don’t intend publish any of my, any of my personal writing, I published business book, I wrote a business book back in 2011, um, this, so I think when you write there’s two, you either write for yourself or you write for other people, for the reader. When I write for myself I don’t intend to publish it, when I write for other reader, which is like business book, then you write to make a living. So a lot of novelists, who write to make a living, they write for the reader, they write to entertain the reader, to engage the reader, to teach the reader. I write more to resolve things, to see things more clearly, or to discover this garden in the back, you know, to enjoy the richness of language, and when you write for yourself, it’s kinda like playing tennis or playing the piano, you know you’re never going to be good enough to play professionally on stage or to be in the tournament, but you don’t do it for the money you do it for the fun of it, and you’re actually do it losing money, right?

HR: Are you involved in the Vietnamese community in the U.S.?

SN: Yeah, currently, I’m more and more, yeah.

HR: How so?

SN: I’m on the board with the Vietnamese American Arts and Letters association with professor Dang and professor Vo.

HR: What do you aim to do?

SN: To, to, to increase awareness of the richness of the Vietnamese culture, and then secondly through that awareness, um, build a community around, around the things that, that beauty and
richness that we enjoy, and not just for Vietnamese, everybody. I think it’s like, everybody loves Pho, you don’t have to be Vietnamese to like Pho, right? And we have a premier we have some movies that are coming for the Vietnamese international festival that I think will draw a lot of different audiences, not just Vietnamese.

HR: Did you celebrate the Lunar New Year?

SN: Uh not this year I was so busy, but I should have. I mean there are many things that I don’t do that I should do, um but if I sit there and think about them ill feel so guilty that I won’t do anything either (laughs).

HR: In your opinion, what will become of the Vietnamese culture of America?

SN: It can go both ways, it can ___ you know, 40 years, 50 years, from now or it can get stronger. Um, it really depends on how people, on whether that core is formed, the core is formed then it will grow based on that core, but it is very hard to form that core, that core can only be formed if there is such of thing as a definition of Vietnamese Americans. Cause if feel like we have a core for African-American, right? And then everything actually grows around it, so African-American has music, um all this culture that is not African, not American, African-American. There could be something for Vietnamese-American, but unless we form, find that identity it would just be ‘oh you’re just trying to Vietnamese’ or ‘just trying to be half American, half Vietnamese’ no, it’s more than just trying to be half American, half Vietnamese, you know, and hopefully, you know, the Latin culture the same thing, Latin American, you know, uh in the U.S. could form that chorus well, because that makes it, the U.S. very rich.

HR: Have you ever seen other cities in the U.S. that has such a big Vietnamese culture as Little Saigon?

SN: No.

HR: Do you think there should be?

SN: Yeah, but I don’t think it’s something that you can push, something that you can only encourage, but you can’t, you can’t force on people. You just, you can only make the environment for that by having a lot restaurant a lot of good restaurant, by having you know Vietnamese movies, that kind of thing, Vietnamese writing that kind of thing.

HR: When you meet other new Vietnamese friends and you heard their stories of how they had their immigration process here, do you think they had it easier then you, or is it still difficult?

SN: A lot, a lot easier, there’s a few that are harder than mine, but most a lot easier.

HR: How do you feel about that?
SN: I’m ___about it, because I think everybody has their own problems, you know, Lindsey Lohan probably thinks she has a lot of problems and to her, her problems are huge. My problems are huge to me, but you know, what’s the point of comparing them.

HR: Do you have any songs or images or artifacts that remind you of Vietnam?

SN: Uh, yeah there is a song called _____. It means, a soul, um a soul on the rock or something like that, kinda like Neil Diamond’s Love on the Rock, you know, probably before your time, Love on the Rocks, it’s one of Neil Diamond’s most famous song, that’s his break out, ___ is kinda like the equivalent of Neil Diamonds, Love on the Rocks

HR: Do you like to listen to it a lot?

SN: Yeah, yeah

HR: Yeah, Do you feel kinda nostalgic listening to that?

SN: Yeah, yeah, I would say that.

HR: Yeah? Do you have any plans visiting Vietnam in the future?

SN: Yeah, but I don’t know when. (Whispers: I have to go pick up my daughter)

HR: Okay, we will stop then.