Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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Track 1 [01:02:07]

HS: So can you tell me about your parents and can you describe their stories for me?

UV: Sure, we’ll start with my mom first. She’s about 68 years old now. She went to school in convent when she was 9. The French convent back then and she just grew up there. She became a nun, so she was a nun. She was 30 years old so it was 1995. So when the communists attacked, moved down to the south. She and another nun wasn’t sure to stay back to keep the convent and but the last minute they were told to run anyway because they gonna bomb it or take it and stuff anyway. So she ran last minute, she was shot in the cross-fire and her student actually also ran and they rescued her and 3 years later they have me. 1975. So um I don’t know the birth of my real dad but 2 years later I had a step-dad and he was abusive. I lived with him until I was 10 and then he became one of the boat person. He went his way and then my grand parents were the sponsor of my mom and I over 1990. Two years later after that he came over. He stay at the Philippines quite some time, a few years. He past
away about 10 years ago. I am the only child and I live with my mom right now.

Just test that, and just keep record short ones. Rather one full one your last and last old one.

(laugh)

HS: (laugh) Oh, but I think it’s like, it’s like recording. I think yeah.. It’s okay because the numbers is changing. yeah, I can set it a few minutes. Okay. and can you tell me where did you grow up and can you describe your hometown where you grow up?

UV: In Vietnam or here?

HS: Yeah, like can you describe like both of them? in Fullerton i guess, and in Vietnam?

UV: In Vietnam, I grew up in Saigon. In district 3. and um. We weren’t the poorest. you know. I mean the whole country was poor. But for rating on the curve, you know, we were rated little below average. My mom taught piano for a living. So she learned piano in the convent. Cause I get that blood from her, my whole mother’s side my uncles and aunts they are all musicians. So she taught piano to like to the rich communists, that came and took over so we had some money. And then that’s how we lived so I was okay. I mean, I really I didn’t know any better. So I think it’s okay beside being abused from my dad. Things were okay.

Yeah, like I said I didn’t know any better. At least I know I did a lot of research.

Self-research. I said, as long as you are loved by at least one person, your kids can grow up
okay. My mom left me and I felt that. Yeah so um. Yeah it’s cool nowadays. Things are never as bad so. Ah, so that was Vietnam.

I came here when I was 12 and that was just a world of change. From uh, third world countries and back and before they did the whole trade thing with America and Vietnam. Vietnam was really still pretty poor. So um, it was a big change. So going over here was a, um.. well it was a pleasant growing up over here. I went to school with like, In Fullerton it was like 80 percent Korean, so there was like no Vietnamese cause I had one Vietnamese friend. So most of the time I am forced to speak English so I learned English pretty fast. Yeah, so I guess I have a talent for that too because later I majored in singing and choral conducting.

In Choir.

HS: Oh~

UV: Choir Conducting. In Orchestras and stuff so I was already pretty good with, you know like, public speaking or people skills and talking and stuff. So I think that helped my English quite a bit. So um yeah, but I am the only child so I have always been fending for myself, you know, a lot. A lot of people say that about themselves to, you know, but I think everybody grow up and they just have to take care of themselves. One way or another. So I am not gonna say I am anymore special than anybody else, you know, but it’s just a big change. and
I liked it. Yeah...

HS: Okay. and so can you tell me about some of your childhood memories?

UV: Childhood memory...

HS: Yeah, either in Vietnamese Saigon or in Fullerton?

UV: Uh, well that’s a lot of memory. There are good and they are bad. Childhood memory....

Well, I was always, um.. I don’t think I am like smart like in a way I like study, memorize kind of smart. Like doctor smart. but I think I understand something, like I grasp concept pretty well and dealing with people pretty well ever since I was little. So I was never like a bad student academic. I am like a B student academic but I was really bad in behaving at school. So I was like leaning on tables and stuff so they call my parents up and all that stuff.

You know, they hit children.

HS: In the school?

UV: Back then yeah. but I get hit a lot at home, so hitting at school is nothing. I am like “yeah yeah I don’t care”. Just few whipping it’s nothing. you know. so I did not behave very well.

HS: Was your teacher an Asian or.... an American?

UV: Yeah they were Vietnamese. So over here in the U.S, I don’t know what’s going on and
if I was a little older now then I behave more. Yeah I did not. You know. I would not run around all the time causing trouble. So I behave a little more, trying to learn and stuff so. Yeah I was a better student.

HS: Okay, Can you describe some like traditions of music, story-telling, dance or some other culture forms that you were like exposed to?

UV: In Vietnam or just world-wide or like?

HS: Both in Vietnam and mainly here, in the States.

UV: Well, I think when we talk about Asian music. You can kinda relate too. You know um. Everything kind of come from China. You know, and when it spreads it changes a little bit with the people the history and the culture you know. Some might not agree with that but that’s what I studied. Sounds so to me and that’s what I knew. So um. You know a lot of string instruments ziptars and such.

HS: Ziptar?

UV: Yeah, or you know string instruments. so but then Vietnams, heavily influenced by the French, which came over and dominated for like a 100 years. So the French came over and we got the whole Waltz and it’s getting more like dance music, Classic dance music. Americans came over and started getting more like cha cha, tango like Latin music. So last
generations Vietnamese were heavily influenced by that. So when I came here, well I played
the violin when I was little. So um, I came here I joined the orchestra and I majored in music
eventually. So I majored in sorta like singing. I was really shy about singing so I joined the
choir. It’s like, I don’t wanna be shy. I am not a shy person. Only with singing was gonna
change that so I joined the choir. So the American choir culture like say Christmas. They
have like 300 Christmas songs. You know. I have never learned any of them you know. I’ve
heard silent night that’s pretty much it. So I have learn a lot of choral literature. So um. I’m
short so I am always standing in front, in the middle you know so. I liked it. I followed it and
took it as a career. So I studied music and went to Fullerton college. Got my general
education finished there. Transferred to Chapman University. Finish over there.

HS: Can you describe how your neighbors are? Like what kind of neighborhood did you
grow up in?

UV: In Vietnam, it was quite complicated because Saigon is the most populated with all
kinds of people coming from north, central. So, I think it has a lot of things to do with people
there. A lot of kids that they are even now they are come over from Saigon, they are very
quick. That they are very quick. Yeah, you know, like kids over here they are playing games
and they never run outside so they are kind of jaded, kind of slow, you know. They don’t
know much, they don’t learn anything until actually when they, until high school and college
where they learn more about the society. Kids in Saigon they have to do with life like right
way, you know so may working some are little. So even when I was here, I start working just
summer like every summer I just work like full time in Fullerton. And lunch time I work in
cafeteria when school’s up we have 45 minutes for lunch I worked 15 minutes. So I was
always working mindset, always thinking about vesting or something like that, business mind
tip. So I think a lot of kids in Vietnam are like that too.

(Phone ringing)

HS: Do you need to answer (the phone)?

UV: No, it’s ok.

HS: Tell me if you need to answer the phone, we can pause. What job have you had so far?

UV: Well, when I was in high school, when I was 14. Summer I worked for a lawyer office.

Doing the database, calling and stuff, full time. During the school I was working in the
cafeteria.

HS: In high school?

UV: Yeah, in the high school. And then second summer I worked for police department. Just
doing filing and stuff too. One time, I sent my uncle a letter, “Mr. Un Tung Vu, you have a
hit-and-run case and we found your car.” Just kidding. And then on my junior year, eleventh grade, after that and the whole time my family they are all musicians stuff but they are most of engineers, so I was wanna to be an engineer. Supposed to be a civil engineer. So after eleventh grade I was working for Anaheim city, because I lived there. So I was working for the civil engineer department and they say “hi, you have a foot in the door, you go to school for engineering when you done you have a job, we will give you a scholarship for you too.”

And I worked there for summer, NNO! I don’t wanna do this!

HS: Why?

UV: because it’s boring! I don’t wanna be in office all day, you know, computering. I am the year of horse and run around. I feel free.

HS: So you didn’t like it.

UV: but I am glad that I have that opportunity though. Not a lot of people have. I mean I was almost went to college for engineering and then later I found out that the work is really boring. Then I will lose 5 or 4 years. I am right there.

HS: So that’s the last job you had before becoming a musician?

UV: Uh hm, so my senior year when I finished all the math requirements everything so senior year I dropped everything. I dropped my math. I dropped everything I could and I had like
other six periods. I had like one P.E. the rest were all like music. That’s like two band and
one choir or something like that. They had orchestra there so I took an orchestra. On eleventh
grade I already took an orchestra class at Fullerton College as a bridge student. Bridge
students they let high school students go to the college and start taking class already. So I
went to Fullerton JC for three years and I had 150 units then. So every year every semester I
took a lot of done, a lot of classes too. As a few more units in high school. And that’s why
my career started.

HS: So you came to have the passion for the music when you were in the high school.

UV: At the end of the high school, the senior year. And then in college, I started everything
in the music. So the first job there, I worked in a music library. And when I finished the first
year, I became a tutor, I tutored music theory. And I started my first church choir director job
at the church. Every Sunday, they pay and I teach them some music to sing. So I have been
there for 14 years until today.

HS: Can you describe you schooling in Vietnam? What level of education did you have?

what were your teachers and peers like?

UV: what my teachers and what?

HS: your teachers and your peers like your classmates and your friends.

HS: Umm, so how did the schooling influence you?

UV: well, we go back to, you know, they hit and they really care when I ran around and I was always the fastest one. I’ll be here too. So ran around table and you know, we play high and six and play other games and stuffs so. And teach your heads and whatever.

HS: Ok, and I will ask about your family and kinship. What do you remember most about your parents and grandparents when you were a child?

UV: When I came here, my uncles and my aunts and my grandparents from my mom side were already here. So it was very fun because I didn’t have many families. In Vietnam I had only one uncle, that’s all. Teachers here were nice, I mean first two years I was taking the ESL class, you know.

HS: What is it?

UV: English as Second Language. Besides that, I took a math class and a P.E. class. The rest for everybody was ESL class. I get another class which was orchestra so I was little more lucky, I learn more than English.

HS: What do you know about your family name and the story about its history or origins?

UV: My family name, the “Vu”, it is not a very popular name so I don’t know whole about
the origin because I took my mother’s last name. So I really didn’t care about it anyway

because, maybe, I don’t know, some other last names if they are not, they are not “Vu” either

or I just have, I really didn’t care too much to find out about it. I just know about my

immediate family more. Like my grandparents and my uncles and my aunts. I just know them,

who they are.

HS: So you haven’t asked about the family history?

UV: That’s like too long. No, not really. Every family there is always somebody bad and

good so, maybe, back then there was king, that’s great, but you know, that.

HS: Is there any traditional first names or nicknames in your family? How do your parents or

like your relatives, your aunts, your uncles and your grandparents call you? Do you have any

nick name?

UV: No, I just came by my first name.

HS: Ok, can you tell me what languages do you speak? I mean besides English, do you speak
different languages in different settings?

UV: Just Vietnamese.

HS: Vietnamese and English. And in the family, you speak Vietnamese?

UV: A lot of English, actually. My uncle and aunt, they speak English to each other. They
were first generation, but back then in Vietnam, they were educated so they were starting speaking English back then already. So they have worked many years here so they speak English since 1970s so they are just older now.

HS: What memorable stories have your family members told you in the past? Do you remember any story?

UV: I remember a few stories. The thing about it is during wartime, so there are a lot of interesting stories. Then I guess why, you know, the whole resource thing cannot take place. I am sure every country have itself, especially during wartime, before and after.

HS: Can you tell me one of them?

UV: Well, like some creepy one was that when my aunt was running south, she ran and when people running on the street, and they found out that somebody is bombing him or something. Like “BOM!!”, everybody go after she and seek shelter, or jump into a hole or a ditch, a house or something, you know, cover themselves. So my aunt ran and to this hole, a shelter, there is a bomb shelter and she saw a person like really don’t have a half of the body. And the other one is like a half and she was like nine, so she was like, so she has never forgot that.

And then one my aunt-in-law, she was a boat person. And when she was on the boat, she was like about 10, 12ish. So they got robbed by the pirates, like Thailand, Thailand pirates they
are infamous for catching Vietnamese old people, so they killed everybody and they raped
women and they killed them and they took everything. They burn in the boat. One of the
person that there was push her down to the water, the ocean, with like a milk bottle, like a
liter, one litter milk bottle so she hang on to that milk bottle for three days on the open sea
with like no land. So the boats were burnt off and they all ran away. The people were dead or
captured. That was the story. So ABC, well you know ABC London? The radio. They are
pretty famous like worldwide so her story, they talked about her story once.

HS: So she talked about her own story?

UV: Yeah, they talked about her story. Some boat went by and they rescued her. So she
married my uncle and they have two kids now. One fun story is, it is light-hearted. So you
know when everybody were running south, nobody take anything. They just ran. Some very
rich people, maybe they were carrying money but they will get rubbed, you know. So mostly
people just ran, empty-handed. So they need to travel by sea, or run so my family was kind of
parted because I have like eleven uncles and aunts so some are in the army and my mother
was in the convent and some were married, so and some went by boat, so like the big boat
just take people from north to south and my father and my aunt and my uncle were on that
boat and they brought nothing but a guitar. So they said that everyone was sitting on the boat
and they were sad and they were losing their houses, families and everything. In the boat they were just like smoking and sang and everything, and people were sitting like this. There they were sitting and singing. They talked about that.

HS: What kind of occupation have your family members held in the past?

UV: Well, my mom came over here and she went to school, she went to a college, Fullerton College.

HS: Pardon?

UV: Fullerton College. Then she transferred to Cassif. Yeah, she got her Bachelor degree in French. She speaks French in the convent. So that’s one of the thing what she did too when it was after the war, she taught French privately and piano to the kids.

HS: Here?

UV: No, in Vietnam, to survive. So she got her French degree here.

HS: How about your father and other persons?

UV: He worked for a Japanese battery company so they make battery, or kind of battery, you know. Like radio watch, triple A and battery, everywhere. So whoever ordered battery, they made battery for them. He worked for them for eight years, just like assembling worker.

That’s the only thing he ever good at. He was really good at working and times worked hard.
But he was always negative and he didn’t hit me later on in the life. But he was always very negative. Sometimes “I hate this life” like this like that, you know. Bad person.

HS: Can you tell me more about the education your family had in the different generations? Like your grandparents, your uncles and aunts.

UV: Most of my uncles and aunts they are engineers so they have Bachelor Degree. My mom was a nun she had about like a Bachelor degree almost Master Degree in Theology. So all the nuns and the priests they have to study Theology. So about Bachelor average.

HS: Do you know how old your mother became a nun? How old she was when she started to go to the convent?

UV: Her aunt was a nun. French were over there for hundreds of years that crossed about two generations so on the mission, when over there usually they go to the houses, you know the rich Vietnamese family. So that’s where my grandma’s father was rich. So later on, after the Vietnamese beat the French out, they killed him too. After that my grandma and my grandpa started become poor. So mom’s aunt which is my grandma’s sister went to the convent. So I mean the French missionary, they go around and “hey, do you want a good education, from western education, you know. Come into the convent, we teach you.” So that’s, yeah. After that, my mom’s aunt get my mom to study. Easily anybody gets to study in the convent they
are good studying. So, privates and usually it cost money, but it didn’t cost my mom’s
because she knows the aunt, who got the network, hehe.

HS: Do you know how did your parents, grandparents and other relatives come to meet and
marry?

UV: Can you tell me again?

HS: Can you tell me how did your parents, grandparents and other relatives come to meet and
marry?

UV: Well, back to my grandparents, they are more arranged. So arranged marriage back in
my grandparents’ day. My mom’s generation, my mom she was already pretty old, she was
the oldest daughter in the family, kind of arranged too, but not really though. All my uncles
and aunts, they are pretty much on their own. I mean they listen to my grandma, you know,
like “You have to marry a Catholic!” so they couldn’t marry someone are not Catholic. So
it’s more free every generation, I guess. So now you can marry, gay marriages are gonna be
here soon. Vietnamese cultures are just like most culture like them, more arranged.

HS: In Vietnam or America, does your family hold reunions or annual gatherings? What
activities take place?

UV: In our family? What activities?
HS: Yeah, do you have reunions or gatherings?

UV: Oh, we gather all the time, we find any excuse, your birthday. Every family fight sometimes, and my family fought. At one time, they were for 5 years like they were pretty separated. And my grandma died two years ago, so they decided to get back together and they just party a lot. Yesterday we had a party. In the big family with eleven, nine aunts and uncles deal a life today here and they will have family, kids, all of them, oh, eight of them there’s one nephew, she just got married and she doesn’t have a kid. So always somebody’s birthday, and they party every weekend. They just “HEY! PARTY!” everybody was like. Because they are pretty old they are in their fifties, late forties, they are pretty chill now they just wanna party.

HS: Do you celebrate any traditional festival together besides birthday?

UV: Well, there was Vietnamese New Year, Chinese too. Do Japanese celebrate this the same day?

HS: No, but in China we celebrate.

UV: But you guys have the separated date from the western month? Do you have your own new year? Japanese?

HS: No, we celebrate the new year on the western calendar.
UV: Oh, ok, it’s less confusing. Because they are always done on the different date, end of February, the beginning of March…

HS: Yeah, because the lunar month calendar is different from the western calendar. So last month you celebrated the Tet Festival with your family?

UV: Yeah, so that’s a kind of whole lot of fun, traditional Vietnamese, they are few but I think that Vietnamese families over here they. The one they came here for longer time they are working class, they don’t celebrate a year whole year, like my family nowadays, like last two years have been doing a lot because they were getting back to each other so they enjoy each other’s companies and they party a lot. Just a weekend, so a lot of people come here and they don’t really have a job and they just came or something. You see people who came are just really hardworking they are just smart. Complicated, a lot of people. But at Spotlight we are trying to find whatever it is just make it fun. You know, like moon festival, for example and we are trying to keep it. I like party so I always find an excuse to do something fun and different too. So I celebrate the American’s days, like Groundhog day. Groundhog day, not a lot of people know about it.

HS: I don’t know.

UV: Exactly, but I do. In Philadelphia the groundhogs come out of the trees and the persons
pick up the groundhogs and then if you see a shadow then you will say “Okay, this winter
would be snowy and stormy”, if there is no shadow, then it will like “okay, there will be one
more winter!” for example, they made a movie out of that, a movie somehow like groundhog
holiday too. I got the movie and watched it again and had some beer with my friends. And it
was really fun. So days like that. So whatever come up in calendar, I catch them. I mean I am
gonna go out anyway, maybe once a while, same restaurants. After a while, it’s just the same
restaurant, you know. St. Patrick day is coming up, one of my best friends, we grew up in 7th
grade, his birthday is on St. Patrick day, so every St. Patrick day we go out.

HS: Okay, I want to ask about culture and tradition. Are there any special family traditions or
customs, like songs or foods in your family?

UV: No, not really. That’s what you are gonna get out of me and my family a lot, even
though they are first generation Vietnamese, but they came here inside 1925, so my families
are very Americanized. Just like a lot of Japanese here, they are like 4th or 5th generation, you
know, they don’t know a word of Japanese. My first girlfriend was a Japanese, and she didn’t
know anything. What she knew was “Maigo no maigo no Koneko chan…” (a Japanese song)
and she ate rice with ketchup. I even cannot eat rice with ketchup. But so like that my family
is both. We are very Vietnamese, but we are also very Americanized too. So you have both
culture, and American culture is part of what I do too.

HS: Why do you feel like you are some way Vietnamese? Like in the language or the culture?

UV: I am a Vietnamese?

HS: You said that in some way they are very Vietnamese while they are very Americanized.

UV: Because they grew up learning Vietnamese moral. You know like little stories that kids learn about Vietnamese and live in Vietnam and speak Vietnamese. I speak Vietnamese very well, a lot better than English. So I am kind of like a well-spoken person. My mother she was kind of like a poet, my mom she was very bright-brained person. As a musician, she wrote two poetry books, so she published two books on poetry. And she can do a third one too but she can't type fast any more because she is older now. When I was little, whatever she read, I read. Whatever books I can get in my hand, I read. So even though I finished 6th grade, I can read Vietnamese very well and read and speak very well. With the whole online things like facebook, I am good at slang too, teenager slangs, because I teach little kids, so I am pretty good with that. I am Vietnamese and I am proud. You know a lot of kids come and they are Vietnamese, they are not very Americanized but they want to be Americanized. They speak Vietnamese but they don't know Vietnamese, and they speak English, they don't know
English either! So they can’t speak both. So at least you would be good at one! So you know, yeah, so I am glad to be Vietnamese, and I grew up there and I was Americanized as I can be. I am not whitewash, wash everything, which is a lot of kids here are.

HS: So you have chance to celebrate American holiday?

UV: All the times! As I said, I celebrate everything, I just wanna find an excuse.

HS: Okay. Can you describe one of the festivals you just celebrated? How about Christmas?

UV: Since I am a Christian, a Catholic, so I celebrate Easter, Christmas, and I work at a church too. Like church choir, we prepare 2 months before for the concert, so I am very deep into the whole celebration. So now it’s the Lent, I know Christian calendar pretty well because I have to meet the director. So I was heavily influenced by the church calendar. So I know when it is Lent, Ash Wednesday and all those Christian and which is also very western. But at the same time, I am not a Buddhist, but a lot of my friends they are and I saw them on Facebook and stuffs, big days, I know about it too. So I mean like that. But anyway they don’t celebrate a lot of much for the Buddhism except for that everybody goes to temple, and I do to. So every time my friends go to temple, I go with them. So things like that. I always prepare ahead because of my students, they go performance for those events, so 2 months ahead I always have to prepare for those events coming up. So I live on those cultural events.
HS: so do your students perform on community events?

UV: yeah.

HS: Oh, so like in Garden Grove. Are those communities Vietnamese communities, most of them?

UV: Yeah. Most of the events they perform at were Vietnamese events.

HS: Do you speak Vietnamese, or all of them speak English?

UV: English. All of the kids speak English. They are born here, so.

HS: so they don’t speak any Vietnamese?

UV: They do, but they just speak English more.

HS: How about the songs they are studying?

UV: I teach them both. English and Vietnamese. Usually the parents come in and they want them to learn Vietnamese. But kids want to learn English so I kind of do both. Sometimes it depends on where they have to perform. I teach them what they need for the performance.

But I have some students they are singing, but most of students they are piano, and violin.

HS: Does your family keep an altar for your ancestors? What kind of traditions or celebrations do you maintain for the ancestors?

UV: back then there was the Catholic, they forbidden the whole ancestor table things, they
thought it is worshipping ancestors, that was not good. And later on, like now, even like ten
years ago, oh, you just like commemorate ancestors, so it’s allowed. My family was more
Catholic, they followed that, so they keep up of traditional like ancestors, and we do
commemorate things like my grandma for example, ancestor day.

HS: Ancestor day? So it is like a special day?

UV: Well, that’s kind of have gone. Last time I heard about that was that when you get
married, so one of them you do is you bow and have an incense for your ancestor. But then
there are a lot of those, so it has been cut down, cut cut cut… It is almost nothing left. So my
generation nobody do it any more. Because we musician we work for wedding a lot.
Especially if they are Catholic. All my uncles and aunts they skipped it, they actually didn’t
know that. My generation nobody do it any more. The parents do have the table, have
grandparents’ photo on the wall, you know. They have a space for that, and my mom has one
for my dad, my step-dad. He said to her that you have better keep one for me if I die first,
because he was like your son probably not want to have one for me. Haha. So my mom say
that yeah, that’s pretty sad so I am gonna have one for him. But he was right.

HS: So you said you are Catholic, is it the influence from your mother?

UV: Yeah. From college, I made it my belief.
HS: So you decided it?

UV: Yeah, I kind like God gave me music as my gift, so I feel spiritual, I feel my religion in my performing more than baptism, like other branches of Christianity, Catholic, you know, Mormon. I don’t feel it. Everyone has some to say, like it is organized religion like that. But I feel spiritual in my music as I really get into not I get out of things. And I grew up, I don’t know, when I was little I was abused, I had no friends, you know I had Jesus. That sounds cool but that the only thing I had. So I feel close to my religion. So in the college I tried to find out who is right or whatever, but it is belief that you cannot proof too much. So I chose to believe, I chose to believe my own spiritual.

HS: So are your family all Catholic?

UV: Yes, they are all Catholic, they are not Baptists, but they are all Catholic. My mom and one of my aunts, their practice, they go to church every Sunday.

HS: And in what capacity join the church? I mean, every Sunday you attend church, what kind of other activities, like you mentioned the choir.

UV: The choir stuff, is my job. So I get to go to church every Sunday and I get paid. So that is my job. It keeps me in church. That’s part of me feel connected to church through my job. So 14 years I teach in church every Sunday.
HS: for 14 years?

UV: Yeah, that’s long.

HS: What special food traditions do your family have? like traditional recipes you have or your mother cook?

UV: Well, there are a lot of Vietnamese food. My mom can’t cook.

HS: Oh, she doesn’t cook?

UV: Not really. She is a yard person, she worked in the yard with plants. She can plant anything, but she was not a good cook. But like pho, spring rolls, a lot of them. The north and the south and the central has different kinds of food and in California they spread out and the weather is kind of different. All kinds of food. Vietnamese food, but I like Japanese food, Chinese food like Asian food too. Those are my first food group. I like Vietnamese food first and Asian food and I like any thing else after that. I don’t hate anything really.

HS: Who does cook in your family?

UV: I eat out a lot. Just go to work and so I eat out. Yeah, my mom just do the cooking.

HS: In the family parties or family gatherings, do you have like special food in those festivals or the parties?

UV: Yeah, pretty much is that they have a lot of food. The moon festival too, they have like
HS: Oh, moon cakes? Are they sold in the supermarkets in Garden Grove?

UV: Yeah, everywhere. Once those in December, everywhere.

HS: What family heirlooms and mementos do you possess? Like from your grandparents or relatives?

UV: Not that really, because my grandparents came here empty handed, they had nothing. So nobody had anything, so did my mom you know, she didn’t have anything. They bought a house and so the house is mine and I took some money out for the spotlight. That was it.

HS: Did they keep pictures or some like..

UV: Rarely, not a lot. If anything, what they can carry with their hands, maybe a bunch of pictures, they put in the bag and they have it, like the black-and-white pictures.

HS: Have you seen those pictures?

UV: Yeah, that’s pretty cool. My mom was a nun. So interesting.

HS: Did they talk about those pictures history to you?

UV: Yeah. But with the Vietnamese, what I think is we are not as cultural as Chinese or Japanese, or Koreans. We are more like Filipinos or whatever, because we are more influenced by the western. I mean, so Chinese and Japanese too, influenced by western, but
what I like about Japanese and Koreans is you keep root foundation, you know, and that’s why I personally like to keep those roots. Vietnamese like to keep roots, but that’s not a lot. Because Vietnamese are heavily influenced by Chinese anyway so we didn’t have a whole culture compare to Chinese or Japanese, or Koreans which is the country, like China is so big and Japanese and Koreans they like that. We are very separated you know. Just not like in Vietnam as Cambodia, Thailand and all. Vietnam was a stronger country, compare to the others, and smaller one around there but they are always very fold and not a whole of, we are not keeping a whole of culture.

HS: How do you think the war affect your family?

UV: Oh, we are here because of that. So most of us are refugees more than immigrants. We are not really immigration. My mom and I are but because it is the rest of the family were refugees and they were here and there were no one back there so they sponsored over. So we are all like 1.5, we are the after-affects more than so refugees. My mom and I are immigrants but if my grandparents they weren’t. When the war happened we were still over there.

HS: Can you tell me what year did your grandparents come?

UV: 75. Like Japanese and Chinese those first wave came here for work, like Koreans, not pretty sure about Koreans. But Vietnamese definitely because of the war. So the all wave
came over at 1975.

HS: So your aunts and uncles came over with your parents during the war?

UV: Mmmm. Because one my uncle-in-law, he was a high-rank officer, so he had about like 200 under him. So he had a helicopter, flew the family over year, so everybody were trying to go over here. It is not easy. That half of the country was trying to flee the country. They didn’t know what’s going on, because they were not for sure when the south come over they will rule the north, but when the north come over, they will rule the south. So they just wanna run. Of course, who doesn’t want to come over here to US? For most of people, yeah. So everyone wanna flee. So my uncle-in-law was an officer, so they didn’t want to be captured and get into a concentration camp and go crazy. So they were lucky they came here. When we say in 1975 they came here, their luck, they are rich had influence.

HS: Okay, so you lived in Saigon before coming here, right? Did you move in Vietnam?

UV: No, I lived in Saigon for all my time in Vietnam.
Track 2 [00:07:48]

HS: How was your family involved in the war?

UV: My uncle and aunts they were pretty young, they were only students. Two of my uncles were officers, one of them ended up in a concentration camp. The other made it out, he became the book person and he died in a trip. And my grandparents, they were just civilians and one of my aunts, she married a pretty high rank officials so he flew my family over with a helicopter and stuff. They flew to the base, and they took them over the U.S.

HS: Do you know anybody in a reeducation camp?

UV: My uncles were there, two of them. One who died.

(Mr. Uy Vu was cooking the noodles)

HS: Can you tell me what was it like living you home country? How did you feel?

UV: I was a kid, I left Vietnam when I was 12 so I didn’t know anything better besides the U.S. is, you know, heaven. So I was pretty innocent. I hang out and I played. I grew up abused, I wasn’t happy about that but I really didn’t have any family over there because all my uncles were here. So I was hoping to come here to be with my family here.

As student, I grew up being more like middle class because my mom taught piano and she makes enough money.
(We were preparing the noodles)

HS: What do you think about U.S. policy after the war towards immigrants like from Vietnam?

UV: U.S. Policy?

HS: Yea, U.S. policy towards immigrants.

UV: At that time, I don’t know that much. They were taking refugees at first because after that, when the first wave of people have gone, then they had a control policy to determine who were refugees or immigrants because everyone wanted to come here. So they didn’t take immigrants directly from the country but they took whoever were from Thailand, Indonesia… So they had to go through the interview process and everything. Immigrants can go for reasons of freedom of religions or things like that if you’re not officers, just civilians.
HS: Okay, let’s continue the interview. So tell me why did you come to the U.S. and how did you leave Vietnam?

UV: I’m more like immigrant because my grandparents sponsored my mum and that’s why I’m here.

HS: What possessions did you bring with you when you come to the States?

UV: Possessions? Clothing, Money that my mum had and my violin.

HS: What was the journey like? Can you describe the journey?

UV: First we drove to Indonesia and stayed there for 3 days in a little camping and then flight to the U.S.

HS: How was the life in the camp?

UV: It was not much, but was just an open room for everybody and we got a blanket kind of thing. Then, every lunch time and dinner, everybody had a box of food. It was not much but it was kind of fun because you know you are going to a better place. It’s not like you go to heaven but… yeah, it was fun, for a 12-year-old kid, so running around, kind of like going on camping.

HS: Which family members came along with you or stayed with you?
UV: Just my mom and I.

HS: Were you and your family in a refugee camp….? 

U: No.

HS: Okay.

UV: Boat people go on a refugee camp.

HS: But your father didn’t go to a camp?

UV: My dad, my step dad, he was a boat person, and he went to Palawan, the Philippines and he stayed there for three years in a refugee camp to wait for an interview for coming to the U.S. so eventually he did.

HS: Did you hear any stories about the refugee camp of your step-father?

UV: Yeah, but they are not like concentration camp, it’s refugee camps. So everybody has assigned a place and they live with each other in a small place and they do nothing. It is kind of boring, I guess. That wasn’t too bad. Most of them are boat people. Some countries are better. People get to Thailand, and you know, this is right next our country, and they get pirates. Thailand pirates they are very vicious, they kill and rape and steal everything. Then the government pick them up and they were in Thailand which is poorer country than Vietnam. But then they put them in a camp and those camps were not as good.
HS: Can you tell me about your first impressions and experiences in the U.S.?

UV: It’s cool because it was a better place. Houses were bigger and cars and everything is clean. I don’t get beat up. I met my family and uncles and aunts which I waited for so long to meet and living with them was very cool. So everything was just awesome when I was 12 years old.

HS: Where did you first settle?

UV: In Fullerton.

HS: Fullerton? And why did you and your mother settle there?

UV: I had to live with my grandparents, my uncles and aunts. All of them are there. Their house was in Fullerton.

HS: Did you move after that?

UV: Yeah, when my dad came over, he got a job and we moved to Anaheim until now we live there. About ten years. We lived in two different houses. At the beginning, we rented for two years and then my parents bought my house and I lived there for 3 years. Every two years I moved at least.

HS: So you moved out for your family when you went to college?

UV: When I went to college, it was Chapman, it was pretty close. The music classes are
small classes and it was throughout the day so I moved anyway. So for the first two years I
moved out. Then my dad got sick so that’s why we got a new house too. The day he died it
was the day that we moved to a new house.

HS: How do you feel about coming to the U.S. today? Because when you came here you
were following your mother but now, what do you think about coming here today?

UV: Same thing, I love to be here. It’s awesome. Getting out of Vietnam was a great thing.

HS: Is it more because you were abused in the family?

UV: Yes, because of that and it’s just a bad country. It’s a better country here, it’s so much
richer.

HS: What were the challenges that you experienced studying here?

UV: Most of my life has been being at school. English is challenging and then after, I got out
of school and I worked and the challenge is that being a musician is not easy to get work. But
I have business out of me and it’s doing ok. I’m not rich or anything but I’m much better than
other musician friends.

HS: How did you start your business?

UV: I started with just like, well I was working as a director for the church. People came for
weddings and everything. So people came for wedding, the word of mouth, passed around.
And for events need some musicians, they call me. And they invest on my lightings, sound systems and such as. I myself was a musician and then I made up the whole band. And a few years later, I started the music school. I was good at construction and overall I see “big pictures”, and I like that. So the school is doing pretty good.

HS: What other occupations you have had in the U.S.?

UV: It has always been with music. In high-school I started working too.

HS: Like part-time jobs?

UV: Yeah. Lunch time I worked in a cafeteria at school. And in summer I worked for the city. They put me in the lawyer office or one time I worked for the police department… And the last time I worked for a civil engineer because I wanted to be an engineer so I worked in the field and I really didn’t like this. And then I did sales like many other people did sales. I experienced it and I liked it because I like to be around, talk to people.

HS: Have you ever encountered racism? How was the experience like?

UV: Racism has always been there since school to work. That’s why most of my clients are Vietnamese or Asians… For weddings and stuff I have more Caucasians, but you know I get myself into the mainstream, but I always get those racism.

HS: Can you describe particular experience you have?
UV: One school, kids said things like “fucking Vietnamese, go back to where you come from” or things like that. When older, I worked in churches and stuff, in a orchestra, I tried to do a big concert and stuff. When you do anything big with a church budget, people don’t like it, there are a lot of people there and some of them will say, they will comment like: “he and his Asian orchestra.” But you know, every orchestra has tons of Asians in it but this is how it is and the comments are racist.

HS: So how do you identify yourself in an American society? Like Asian, Vietnamese, Vietnamese American…?

UV: I’m Vietnamese American. For Caucasians, they just see me as Vietnamese. It’s how it is, for Caucasians, they just see everyone as minors and non-American. Even this lady lives here she is very into Asian. She is not really racist, but she is still like: “this is the American way,” and I am: “I’m American so sorry.”

HS: But you still identify yourself as an American?

UV: I am Vietnamese American. I carry with me a lot of traditions, I speak and write Vietnamese… but I grew up here.

HS: So you have your American part.

UV: Yeah.
HS: Do you have any experiences of culture shock that you remember?

UV: I adapt pretty well, nothing was shocking. As a kid, I just absorbed everything and learn everything because everything was so cool.

HS: Because you were still young.

UV: Yeah. But a lot adults, they have problems with language, that was more culture shocks. They were timid to go out things because of their English limitation.

HS: Were there many Vietnamese friends around you, at school…?

UV: When I went to school, there was a lot of Vietnamese. But in Fullerton, there was 80% Koreans. There was a Vietnamese guy and he is still my friend. When I went to school I was always in choir and bands, you know. So there were a bunch of Caucasians. I went to Chapman, which is a Christian private school so they were just Caucasians and then there were no Asian in music major either. Maybe in orchestra, but nobody in singing.

HS: Are you a citizen here?

UV: Yes, I am.

HS: And you became a citizen here by naturalization?

UV: I took a test because when my mum took a test, I could become citizen too but I didn’t want to change my name to my step father’s name because I don’t like him so I just did the
test by myself like two or three years later when I was 19 or 20. I took the test and I kept my
name. I care my mom’s last name.

HS: How was the test?

UV: It’s pretty easy. You knew enough English.

HS: Was it difficult for your mother?

UV: No, my mom memorized everything very well. Later, she got her bachelor in French at
Fullerton. She’s good memorizing. I’m not that good but I understand the questions and I
remember too.

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

UV: When I remember, I do. I don’t look forward to it like that. I don’t study enough about
my subjects and sometimes when I don’t feel enough ready I don’t vote. Want a pause?
Track 4 [00:12:56]

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

UV: I don’t really have anybody in Vietnam. I have one cousin, that’s it. My dad side I don’t know them and they’re living in Central Vietnam. I don’t want to know them, I don’t care. I took my steps, my route so… I know my mum side, which is all here.

HS: So you keep in touch with your relatives here?

UV: Yeah, we party a lot.

HS: Ok. Did you go back to visit Vietnam after coming here?

UV: Only once, last year, after a long time. I kind of tried to find my root dad to see if he has cancer or anything. Just to know, but not so much.

HS: So you didn’t find him?

UV: No, maybe one more trip.

HS: How was the experience when you went back to Vietnam after 30 years?

UV: People say that it’s very different and people are not that poor anymore but I think I expected that. Ok, after 30 years they are going to have new buildings and roads fixed and everything, it’s not a big deal. And I see that government people got richer but the poor people, farmers, are going to stay poor. And that’s what I expected and it was exactly like
what I expected.

HS: Are there any songs that remind you of Vietnam?

UV: Some were from my mom because I heard them when I was growing up. But not so much remind me of good life in Vietnam. I am not so much fond of loving it. I live in a city so it’s not that much like in the countryside. The sun looks different, you know, growing up in a farm, it’s different. But the city is just dirty. When I went back, there was a kind of program to go back to language exchange. Buildings and roads changed a lot and I expected that so.

HS: What traditions or customs you try to make an effort to preserve it?

UV: What have I done to preserve the traditions?

HS: Yes

UV: I don’t really try to preserve besides my language that I try to keep. But like spotlight school, we get the students out there to perform and I teach my kids Vietnamese. That’s more for work too, but at the same time it preserve just like Dr. Vo Dang. It’s her work too, but she is so passionate for it. She is preserving and I am kind of doing the same thing. I teach my students the music part of the culture and put it in Youtube.

HS: How has the Vietnamese community changed here? Based on your own experience,
having been here for 30 years.

UV: Vietnamese are known for being very hardworking and kind of artistic, and detail oriented. As Asians, Asians are generally not open up to develop like Caucasians or Japanese maybe. They tend to stay in their comfort zone. So the Vietnamese here they develop small businesses, they grew up a lot, for example. That has grown over time and it’s more apparent and there are people like doctor Vo Dang, those smart one, and they can become a doctor. But we don’t know them so much. Throughout the U.S., there are also many nails shops that belong to Vietnamese workers. That is the mainstream of Vietnamese. And it is true. Small things like that I see a lot. We work hard. But the newer waves they are here and they are lazier. There are more a lot of kids, they are government people here. They send their kids over here with a lot of money to buy houses and stay here. And those kids just spend their life here and few of them are smart and become doctors like stuff. Most of them are just spend their parent’s money like crazy.

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

UV: Yes, besides spotlight schools students and I take them to Dr. Vo Dang one of her last things, my students sang for her for example, in her events. I go to VAALA, Vietnamese America Film Festival. I just come and take the tickets. I buy a t-shirt and stuff so I support
the Vietnamese American events. Last year, I have been focus on Spotlight so I haven’t done such much. I am kind of in back more. But I go and support those events.

HS: Do you visit little Saigon?

UV: Yeah, for fun, for food pretty much because I live 15 minutes from there. My school is 10 minutes from there. I’m pretty busy so I eat out a lot.

HS: What do you think about little Saigon?

UV: Quite a bit, for fun. Foods, pretty much. Because I live 15 minutes from there. My school is 10 minutes from there. I am pretty busy and I eat out a lot. The people that have those businesses they are good, they keep trying. They try to catch up the opportunities and they work hard. Most of them it’s in Westminster, the city. The city itself is very messy because they have too many small businesses and they don’t have many laws on how many parking spaces per restaurant, for example. It’s just too crowded. It’s the opposite than the Irvine community. But it’s easier to spring out a business there because it doesn’t require a lot of. I support the last mayor there, he was the first Vietnamese American mayor in the U.S. I supported him since he was a councilman because I really like him, he is a good guy. Since he was a councilman, I was like “Hi!”. He supported Spotlight at first. So I go to people and have my selling, “hey, would you like to buy a ticket for the spotlight events?” He bought
like 4 tickets for his family and he came. So after that he got me and I was like “Ok, anything you need, you got it, you are cool!” To have a councilman to support, that’s great. When it was a voting time, I helped him to sign. We talked, I said, “hey, I don’t have a lot of money to contribute to your campaign, but I am a musician and I can play music and I have a truck and drive anything you want.” So I helped out the sign. Last time I put it on my facebook saying “hey, look that” I really didn’t do that for anyone because I don’t really like business and politics because there are bad people in two but somehow I got involved in both so I have to do the good part of it. I just support him and I’m not the only one that supports him.

Eventually he got elected mayor so hopefully he will do some good.

HS: What are the most important things that future generations of Vietnamese Americans should remember?

UV: Language. Because Vietnamese traditions are heavily influenced by the Chinese and French and stuff. Besides that, there is not a lot of traditional stuff. But the one thing they should keep is the language. That’s a cultural thing because no matter how much the country changes or how much people come here change, the language will be there, remain the same.

HS: Are there any other stories or memories you want to share here?

UV: Not that I remember now.
HS: Ok, so I think I’m done with my interview.