

**Houston Asian American Archive**  
**Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University**

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Interviewee: Tammy Nguyen  
Interviewers: AnhThu Dang, Sarah Kong  
Date of Interview: 2/21/20  
Transcribed by: AnhThu Dang, Sarah Kong  
Edited by: Zoe Clark  
Audio Track Time: 55:16

Background: Tammy Nguyen was born in Haiphong, Vietnam. Traveling through China and Hong Kong, she and her family eventually moved to Houston, Texas in a unique immigration journey. She went on to study business at the University of Texas, later working at finance firms and expanding her family's restaurant. She also obtained a Juris Doctor degree (JD) and started her own real estate investment firm. In addition to a prolific career, Mrs. Nguyen founded the non-profit organization, KNOWAutism, from her own experience as a mom to an autistic child. KNOWAutism has increased autism awareness in the greater Houston area and has raised hundreds of thousands to help families afford autism treatments and resources.

Setting: This interview was conducted by AnhThu Dang and Sarah Kong in one of Fondren Library's study rooms. The interview lasted for almost an hour, where Tammy Nguyen shared experiences about her childhood, immigration to America, and career in the finance/business field. She also discusses her role as a founder for the non-profit organization, KnowAutism, as well as her own experience with autism.

Key:

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop  
...: speech trails off; pause  
Italics: emphasis  
(?): preceding word may not be accurate  
[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)  
**SK:** Sarah Kong  
**AD:** AnhThu Dang  
**TN:** Tammy Nguyen

Interview transcript:

**SK:** Hello, my name is Sarah Kong. Um today is February 22 and we are interviewing Tammy Nguyen for the Houston Asian American Archives. My partner is...

**AD:** I'm AnhThu Dang.

**SK:** And we'll get started. [**TN:** Okay.] So can you tell us when and where were you born?

**TN:** Um I was born in Haiphong, Vietnam. And um in '71, did you need to know that? [Laughs]

**SK:** Yeah, yeah. How would you describe the household that you grew up in?

**TN:** I have very vague memories of what it is like. So I'm going to try to describe it but I'm not sure if it is exactly what it is supposed to be. I think we live on a two story house and outside there is a, you know, there's a market uh there. And um I don't think we have full kitchens, we, we do have refrigeration, you know, we're very close to our neighbors, you know, so where we know almost everybody and I remember

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going to the market when I was like maybe four by myself, but people know who I am. And when I pick up something to eat, and I was always been mocked for it, and I always tell them just charge it or bill it to my parents, so and they already know my parents are. So you can see that is a very close niche community, at least from my recollection of it. So.

**SK:** Yeah, so how would you describe the community like very..?

**TN:** Yeah, like I said, this is very close niche where everybody know each other's name and, and at a time, you know, I always asked my parent I was like, you know, wouldn't, why didn't you worry about losing me? Like how did you even let a four year old girl run roaming around? And they're like, oh, nobody wants your or other people's kid in that community. Everybody have their own kid to feed, you know, so, you know, but it was a close community where you know, you felt like you have extended families everywhere. So, yeah.

**SK:** So what values did your parents teach you when you were growing up? Or how did they raise you?

**TN:** We are Asians. So I'm, I'm Chinese that was born in Vietnam. So my parents went from Vietnam, from China to Vietnam. And being typical most Asians, I think we're very close families, family values is really important. Um we always do everything as a unit um. And our parent is the authority figure. Everything we do, we need their approval. We need their blessings um. But we've always had to take care of each other um and we're really nosey. We're we're nosey, we pretty much want to know what everybody is doing. So the ideas of privacy, I don't think it was ever incorporated in our family at least back in the days. So we're very close family unit. We, my parents work very hard. So hard working is an important thing. And we're very proud, we're very independent people, where they wanted to always do things and never ask for... If they could do something, they would do it themselves.

**SK:** And so do you remember moving to America?

**TN:** Well, we are part of the boat people. [SK: Mhmm] So we we went to um we, we told people that we came from a boat straight from Vietnam to Hong Kong um. But that wasn't the truth. We have to tell people that when we when we arrived in Hong Kong because there was a political issues where they don't take people from China to Hong Kong. But in reality, my dad snuck a whole family back to Beihai, a city where my grandmother was. And at that point, my dad commissioned and bought a boat. It was a 42 foot boat and he paid for it. And he bought, like um, I believe it was 30 other people, we squeeze with other families, and we went from the boat. And we commissioned someone who was supposed to be a captain. It turned out that he didn't know how to navigate. So he only said that because he want his family to be able to go to Hong Kong. So what was technically take three days end up taking us 30 something days to get to um Hong Kong, but we eventually got to Hong Kong. And we were part of what was known to the world as the boat people. And we were instructed by everybody that if they ever asked, where is your starting point, your starting point is Vietnam. Because they were only allowed to take people from Vietnam as refugees. So now you know the truth.

**AD:** I have a question though, do you have to stay back in Hong Kong?

**TN:** No, because we, we were part of the the boat people. So what Hong Kong did at the time was that they actually is, the United Nations as a group was going to help out this boat people. So we were locked in a refugee uh camp for over maybe over three months, waiting to see what the United Nation was going to do. And the United Nation, they have a system there to see who was best qualified for which country and my father worked for the French before. So they asked if we wanted to go to France, but he didn't

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wanted to so he wanted to go to US. So we sign up for being in US and we have to wait until the US have quota for us to come.

**SK:** So you said you spent, it was 30 days instead of three days. Was that all spent on like the boat?

**TN:** Yeah, so that was very interesting because we only had food for that three days that we were anticipating but we got lost in the sea. So we would try to park in islands wherever we could we you know, to get more supply. Well, we didn't have Chinese money because we were not supposed to be from China. [SK: Yeah.] But my dad was paying all these villagers with whatever he had, whether is gold or uh watch or jewelry. So we were paying these people food and supplies with jewelries, you know, and gold. So and then we, we just keep on asking people what to do. And I think toward the very end, he used the last of what he had to pay for really big um, I think it was a commercial boat. I mean, this remember, I was only six or seven. So these are from my recollections and from what I hear from my parents was we pay for someone to actually, to kind of tow like, pull us to Hong Kong, or to the where they they could and then we sail into Hong Kong, or else we would have been lost in the sea even longer, so

**SK:** And so, um, do you directly come to Houston when you move to America?

**TN:** I did, because my father had friends in Houston. So um based on that relationship, they, they took us in and we flew from, you know, from Hong Kong to Houston.

**SK:** And did you have a hard time adjusting like your whole family in Houston and yourself?

**TN:** Not for me. I mean, I was um, I think, seven. So it wasn't, it wasn't bad for me, but it was probably bad for my dad because he come from a very wealthy background, and to a point where he gave up everything just to get us to the sea and then come to a country where he doesn't speak the language because his second language is French, so he doesn't speak English um and so it was hard for him to learn, you know, going from a wealthy man. And his first job was to work for a paint company where he, you know, unload trucks, truckloads of paints. So a very rich man, working hard labor was tough. And then my, and then all my other siblings, was able to work for our relatives' um restaurants. And they were, there were three. I have three siblings, I mean, three siblings, two sisters and a brother. So all of them was working for the family's restaurant. Now they work 12 hours a day, they got paid \$10 a day. At the time, not because they was the family was slave driver. They were not slave driver. They were just trying to make work for us, you know, just to try to get us through and so they would work and so that we can pay for the apartment, which I remember at the time was a two bedroom apartment. It was \$400. So everything we did, and everything they work for went into the rent, and grocery was a problem too, because after you pay for the rent there's not much for grocery, you know, but that was like the first maybe three months of adjusting. And then after that they try to find employments in other Asian restaurant, right. So then then they get paid what the market price was and then things got a little bit better after that.

**SK:** And so I'm not really aware of like the history of like Vietnam was happening at that time. But what prompted your family to try to move to Hong Kong?

**TN:** Well, they call it at the time it's called like political, there was a lot of political um, um conflicts going on. So Vietnam believe that the Chinese that came over and take over their economies, and what they did was that they decided that they would have to regain their own economic power by kicking out all the rich Chinese there is there and by kicking out meaning they went and they confiscate everything that my dad ever establish. So they took our house, um they took our money, they took everything. But

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my dad saw it coming. So he did take some of the money back to China when my family was, but it was not, there's nothing like what they could have done. I mean, they literally come in with guns and, and search for everything. I mean, they search under the bed, they search. I remember them coming in and they were searching for at least eight, eight hours while my dad was gone. And I was a little girl and I was like there. And I mean that's communists for you right there. So they went in and they tried to search everything make sure that we didn't hide any diamonds or gold or anywhere in bed posts or anything else. So after they took everything it was assigned that we can no longer live in this country. So my dad took all of us back to China, where he was originally from. Now China did try to accommodate us, but they wanted us to go to the countryside and to be farmers and my father said that my kid is not going to grow up being farmers. So that's why he commissioned the boat to go to Hong Kong. That help? [SK: Yeah.] Okay.

**SK:** So, um, you worked in your family's restaurant as well, right?

**TN:** Right. So what we did was after um two or three years of my brothers and sister working in the restaurant, and they are my dad working for the paint company, so they earn enough money. One of the restaurants and my sister work for is called Timmy Champ. And it was a fast food restaurant. She was only 16 or 17 years old. And she worked as a cashier. She was a really hard working cashier. But the owner said, hey, we're gonna sell this restaurant. And, you know, the new boss may or may not keep you around. I don't know. So when my dad, she went home and told my dad and my dad realized that and say, well, why don't you ask them? How much is the restaurant you know? We can probably buy the restaurant and our whole family can work there, you know, so, and that's what we did. I think my dad, he took all the saving we have, and we bought that tiny little fast food that we have. And then all of my, my entire family worked there. We didn't have a single employee. It was everybody. So that's where I grew up, you know, was in the restaurant. So, you know, when I get out of school, he will pick me up and take it to our tiny restaurant and that's where we work.

**SK:** And so um, can you describe what high school is like, like balancing like working there, and doing school?

**TN:** Well it was, I don't have much of a childhood because that's my life, right? You go to school, you get out around 2:30 or 3, your dad will pick you up from 2:30 or 3, take you to the restaurant, and then you will spend your time there doing homework, right you do all the homework that you possibly could and when the restaurant closed, which is 10:30 then you go home with your family. The next day, you wake up again, that was 7, 8, whatever time that was who was supposed to be and you go to school in the days like that. So that's my entire childhood. You know, the bad thing is that I don't watch as much TV. So there's a good part of my childhood that most people my age know that I don't, which is like the American culture, like the pop culture. There's singers that I've never heard of, because I was caught in the restaurant working. And when I'm at home, I watched this thing called the Hong Kong Chinese soap opera, right? Because that's what my parents watch. So I felt like I grew up with the Hong Kong people and not really with American people until college come along, you know, but the pros in that is that my family become really close. And then that I work, you know, I always knew how hard they work. So I knew that that was a really important thing to do. And um because I have nothing else to do, but to study it made me 'A' student you know, that helped right, [Sk: Yeah].

**SK:** So what was college like at UT Austin?

**TN:** Well, college was great. You know, you can tell that I had a really tough not tough, but it was just you know, so when you go to college, it was away from home, you know, and UT was my first time ever

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away from home, right? So when I go there go to college go to UT my mom was like crying. It was two and a half hours away, right? So my whole family is crying because this is the first time that a single family members is being away from the rest of them. Right. So it was a big, big deal. My whole family go up to Austin to try to find me an apartment and you know, make sure I'm settled [SK: Yeah], you know um, you know, I was really nervous because it was the first time I was away, but it only took me a week to realize freedom is around the corner. So that was good. That was really good. Right? So, so I learned how to eat pizza, spaghettis, you know, anything I can think of that was not my mom's cooking. Yeah. You know, and um I really get to enjoy like what it's like to be a student. Right? So we, but I had a lot of good friends that was from the same high school. I went to Hastings High School. So I had several good friends that went at the same time. [SK: Okay.] So we were, that was the first time I get to truly enjoy what it was like to be a student, you know, and do enjoy life, you know um. So that was good. That was really good. It was um learning a lot more about the American cultures, learning a lot more how to be independence and balance school at the same time, you know, so.

**SK:** And you majored in Business Administration at UT Austin? [TN: Right.] What influenced you to choose business?

**TN:** It was simple, some anything that's easy to find a job. That's what my dad said, right? You go and you find that. And fortunately, I did was go to the career office, right and say, okay, what pay the most in business school. It was accounting. So you go to accounting, they'll guess that was easy to find a job, you know. And so I did accounting and, and finance and I think, certain part of it because my dad in Vietnam, he was always running. He was always a small business owner [SK: Right]. He run businesses, so and being in the restaurants and all of that, I think was actually in my blood and I don't even know it. You know, so but, but the real reason I thought I found business was because, you know, I was paid 28,000 a year by graduating or when I graduate. So, at the time was a lot of money. Okay, you guys probably don't know, but it was.

**SK:** And so after college, I think I looked online and said, like you worked at, like in a firm, [TN: Right.] like your company, but then you had to come back to your family's restaurant. And so how did you come back and like grow your parents restaurant into like a chain?

**TN:** Well, I interned with Pinnacle Gas, you know, so I was, it was funny, because my entire four years was to tell myself that I need to work really hard. I need to find a job if I ever want to leave the restaurant. My whole existence in college for four years is I got to be able to find a job, so I'll never have to return to the restaurant ever again. So my internship was amazing. It was right after my ninth grade. Normally people don't have internship until their junior year, right. But Teneco gas gave me the internship. And then after that I got offer um, you know, in New York and in other places, but I choose to come back as my family bond. Work for a firm that's called Alexander and Alexander. And it was, it was great. It was a beautiful firm where you do risk management consultants. And what's great about it is located on top of the Galleria. [SK: Wow] So what you do is you go to work, you come down, and you get to use all your whole paycheck, right. So that was really great. And then the view was great, everything was great, you know, but my mom um, I saw how hard they work. And then my mom was just not feeling well. And going back to the restaurant, you see that even though she was sick, she was still working, you know, and then my dad was also working. So when, when employees doesn't show up, you have to cook. And it was it was just a lot. And I thought, hey, you know, with my business major in my background, and you know, I was really young so we have tons of energy that we don't know what to do with. So a corporate job was just way too, it was not enough to challenge me, you know? So I took the challenge and say I think I can take on the restaurant and make it where things would be better where my parent would no longer have to work and that he would you know, they would be able to travel more and have more time.

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So, I took a really bold step you know, and I quit a job that I was really comfortable and very happy and and came back and do what I swear that I will never do. And then from there it was just, you know, we just simple business decision one after another, implementing what you learn from school, what you learn from you know, then you take your past, right? And then you just grow the business.

**SK:** And then how did you make the decision to go back to school and get your JD?

**TN:** You know, I must have ADHD. I couldn't sit for too long, you know. So after a couple years when business was doing better, I felt like that I was doing a lot of physical work, but my brain was really not challenged. I was just not challenged intellectually. So I want to find something that I could do running a business and still do something that would just be intellectually, you know, stimulating. And I thought, well, let me find something less stressful than the restaurant. Let me just go to part time law school. So we-- so that's what I did. I went and applied for um I took the um LSAT and apply for different school. You know, obviously um, I did apply for school that was out of town and I got accepted, but at the end of the day, I always make the very Asian responsible decision, which is to stay back in here and go to University of Houston the law center there and do the part time so instead of for three years I finish in four years that's the part-time program so I'll be working in the restaurants and then go to go for four or five hours and then what we did and took us four years, and got a JD along with that, that was fun. Yeah.

**SK:** So um what was your degree concentration?

**TN:** Business Transaction, so.

**SK:** Oh okay. And can you tell us about how you started your real estate investment firm?

**TN:** Well, it was a natural decisions you know it's part of the the business um decisions you know, when you when you start a restaurant, you have to make financial decision whether you're going to rent or you're going to lease and it makes a lot more sense it's a lot easier with bank to get finance if it's owner occupied. So it started out with that you bought a restaurant it's owner occupied, you get the loan that you needed. And then eventually you just grow and then it's a natural process of um taking that and then making it an investment company and then you buy bigger land, and then you develop that land. And then you have shopping centers and and next thing you know, that's how it goes.

**SK:** And so how did you meet your husband? Because you started the firm with your husband, correct?

**TN:** Yes, yes. You know, so um it goes back to my ADHD, which I think I may have but not diagnosed. Also, after you do the business, you're financially stable. You get the law, then you ask yourself, God, what, what else is there for me to do, right? Because now I'm getting kind of good at this. I'm getting good at these things. It doesn't require much, right.[SK: Hmm] So I thought to myself, that is um a part of me is missing, the creative part of me was missing. So I decided that I'm just going to explore what I used to love quite a bit, which is photography. So instead of going out and taking pictures and traveling, I decided I wanted to open a photography studio. So it was doing my photography studio that someone solicited me to um, to help out with, you know, a charity that they're working on, and it was through that charity that I met my husband. And it was because of that, you know, so we fell in love and, and then he also have a business background. He says he's in finance. And um so that was just a natural match. And then with that, the business you know, that's how we started that company together after our marriage.

**SK:** And um how is working together?

**TN:** Um, of course, every couple right, it has its challenges and it has its reward. The good thing is when you work together, you always know that you can always count on this person. You know, this is your partner for life. This is your business partner, and that you are always on the same boat, you guys is always working towards the same goal. Because the same goal is to strive for success where you can maintain your family, and that this is the same family, right? Well, the hard part will be is that when you make a decision, because you're not two of the same person, you have different ideas. In a typical business environment, if you don't agree with what your partner is, it's fine, you go away from the meeting and you go back to your home. Well, you kind of have to see that person that you just argue with at home. Right. So that's the challenge is to how to balance that, you know, but it's been 16 years, I think we're okay with that. We'll find a way. We found a way.

**AD:** Okay, and so I guess we're being now dive into a very important part of your life based on what we we find on the Internet. And so we know that you are the founder of the Know Autism, a nonprofit that provides educational resources as well as increases autism awareness. So could you tell us about the backstory of it like how you came to a decision to make this nonprofits?

**TN:** Well, we have our daughters, and then our son was diagnosed, after that it was a son. He was diagnosed with autism at the age of two and a half. And that was a very difficult time, because autism was not a word that I even know. I mean, this is back in 2011. I didn't know what it was. And a lot of people didn't know what it was. So I thought I know Houston, like the back of my hand, because I grew up here, I've been so much. And there was a lot of challenge even for me to go find the right doctors that will do the diagnosis. So there was a lot of challenges as well as dealing with school, getting the resources, and to to help him, and to understand that. And I've always been a very strong business person, but because of his diagnosis, I have to stop everything. I have to stop all of my work. Everything was placed to my husband's responsibility. Now he had to solely run everything because I'm here with something the most precious things of my life, which is my son. And I have no idea what to do with them because no school, no school wanted him. No, none of the, none of the - What would you call that? The Pre pre K? K-er? They don't understand that. So it was like I said, it was a very challenging time in my life. And as everything else, we find a way. We find the resource. We finally realized what it was. And then once you, once you learn that you realize, oh, there was a simple path to this. I didn't have to run around like crazy to find these resources and I didn't want other families to, to have to go through what I went through and I say, Well, what if I just take everything - all the researches that I have are the right way to get to something, or at least a map how to get there. It would really help other families. So my idea was just why do I just write a website, share these informations. And, you know, and hopefully that would help some other parents. And of course, one thing led to another, right? So then the website led to a fundraiser, and a fundraiser led to a 501(c)(3), and led to the birth of Know Autism as a 501(c)(3). And since April of 2013, is when we started.

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We have done quite a bit of work and been seven years now. And I just recently, like I was telling her two days ago, have that for another fundraiser, which is our highest record. We have over 420 people that attended. We raised \$378,000, which mark that in seven years we raise \$2 million to help children with autism. So it started out with just something that you wanted to share. And then of course, through the time I met a lot of amazing people that that was there. And we brought awareness to the city, you know. So in addition to letting other people know what is autism, how to deal with it, and to educate, you know, teachers, caretakers, all of them, to see what is it that our childrens are going through that they couldn't tell you, and how to communicate to them. So those really important work that we did, and I put all of that as part of what I call autism awareness, just knowing what that is. And that's the idea. The name is called Know Autism, right? So I'm playing on word, we wish that there are no autism. But if there is, if you don't, if we couldn't do that, at least we hope that everybody will know what it is, which is K N O W, and then autism. So that's the reason for the name of Know Autism, right? And then since then, we we did a lot of programs where we provide direct financial assistance. We provide diagnosis. We also do what we have a special interest program. So these children sometime they are, they have so much workload - I call therapy workload - they they don't get to do what they love. And because it's so expensive that parents don't have the resources to to take them to the music class, to the swimming, and to things that they love, but even like sports. So the special interest is to see to support families or children that actually have something that they love, and that the parent can afford for it, and then we we pay for that. Like my son loves swimming, right? So that is something that we can help and is a life saving skill. So part of our program, if you want to take the child alone, a special needs swimming program, we will we will support for that. And then I mean, I'm so proud of Know Autism that I just beyond word because of the work that we do, and that the fact that we are able to reach out to big organizations like tots (?), like ballet, the ballet, the river. We work with Texas Children Hospital, Baylor's, all of those organizations that have a lot of resources, and we want to make sure that they know what autism is. And because of those partnership, that we're able to reach out to so many people, you know. And just the funding that we raise alone, we were able to provide art and dance classes to 60 different public school. And we have helped over 1800 children that alone, not to mention, money and direct financial system that we provide to other family. But the key is, we provided awareness. Now, almost everybody in the city know what autism is. And when they have a child, that they suspected that there is something that is not quite there, that they know what the symptoms are, and then they're able to search for help. So when I first started my goal was to say, to do this, and I said that when you see someone that is struggling to sneeze, right, and your body's aching, and you're not quite well, you're like, I think you're coming down with a cold. Well, I want everybody to see and know the symptom of autism just the same way that you know the symptom of a cold that is coming up to you, and what you need to do with it. Because once you know that, you can get the help that they need. And then that the early you know, the better it is to help the child succeed.



**AD:** So I find you have done a wonderful, wonderful job at raising awareness about autism in the Houston community. So how would you say about the changes that your team have been able to introduce to the family that have children that are diagnosed with autism?

**TM:** Well, like I said, you know, so, what you do is, it always starts out with the first state, right? It's awareness. Like after you two leave today, you will know what autism is, because that is my goal. And the fact that you know that, hey, if a child is not making eye contact, a child is not speaking at a certain age, or if they're a certain way. And once you know that, you will be able to make that, you know, you're able to say, hey, these are the symptoms, you know, and you will be able to tell parents and other people, and that, in itself is a very important thing that we have to do - is to be able to bring that awareness to family, and to get those diagnosis. And just that alone, you can change someone's life. If you see, let's just say your neighbor's son is not quite doing exactly you're like hey, you know, just by that, hey, maybe, then they will be able to take them to a formal diagnosis, pay more attention to it, and get that child help that he or she need, that will change the family and the child's life. So that's the one impact that we do right? The other impact is like what I said, you know, we help them financially. We help them directing to whatever resources that they need.

**AD:** And so how do you relate your personal experience as a mom with a child diagnosed with autism to a founder of a nonprofit that assists hundred other families?

**TM:** Let me hear that question.

**AD:** So how do you relate from your personal experience as a mom to like other hundreds of families that have child diagnosed with autism?

**TN:** Well, I understand what they go through, maybe not in the same exact path because everybody's unique. Everybody has their own situations, you know, but being there, it allows me to have that personal relations, understanding the struggle that they are. And because my child, I rediagnose him at two and a half. And as he grow, that we will be facing with more challenges. And I'm able to carry and take those challenges that I'm facing and say, and they will change. My challenges will change. And that what I feel what I'm going through, will also impact what Know Autism and will pay attention to, because those changes will bring my awareness to it, right? Because at the time, we went through something, what we call an early diagnosis, because he was young. But now he's 11 years old. Now I'm starting to think about something else - what happened when he's aged out, when he's 18? Or what I need to do, or as looking at him as an adult with autism. So it help Know Autism as far as having an insight of what someone's going

through, because I'm living a life, and I'm raising a child with autism. So my organization will have that insight.

**AD:** And so your background allows you to understand middle class families, and especially ones with language barrier from the Asian community. So do you think that Asian families with children that have autism face distinct barriers?

**TN:** Absolutely. There was one of my very first thing that I did. And when we first started out, that was the first issue that I address. My joke was when Reagan was diagnosed with autism, I looked at him and I said, What are you talking about? Asian doesn't have autism. We don't even know what that is. Autism is a is a disease for for rich people, rich white people, you know. And I made it as a joke not as in the racist in any form of way, because we as Asian, we're very traditional, and, and we we tend to keep our problem to ourselves. So there is a big stigma in in admitting or in accepting that the child have autistic, is autistic. So we would find a lot of different excuses to say he, you know, oh, this child is late; he's a late bloomer. He doesn't, you know, he does, you know, he will learn how to talk. His sister doesn't talk until she was ten. So he's just fine. So those are the things that I wanted specifically to address that problem. And I wanted to, that's why I spoke louder when it comes to this, because I want them to see. I'm Asian and that's okay. I go out there and I will tell you it's okay because that doesn't, being autistic doesn't change, who I am doesn't change, you know, what people think about me or my child. It is a disorder that he was born with. And it is a problem that we - it's something that we need to deal with. If you have a toothache, you go to a dentist. You have autism, you're gonna have to go get early diagnosis. There's no difference in anything that we face. And I wanted our community to understand that, there is no, there should not be a stigma when a child have autism. So we did reach out to newspapers, TV stations, a lot of like, we even have news anchor, Asian news anchor, as our ambassador, because we want them to speak out. And that's why Know Autism every time we have a gala, we have, each year we have ambassadors. And these ambassador is, they are - Their job is to be the voice of our children. So when we, so we specifically pick certain people, so that they will impact that organization. So that was my goal when we first started. But then you also know that autism doesn't discriminate. It's not just Asian, right? And this can affects to anyone, any race, any age or any - It's - I always said autism does not discriminate. So we realized that our work should not be focusing on just the Asian community and the language barrier. So we - That's why we went very mainstream. We want everybody to know what we have and the resources that they can access.

**AD:** And so based on your experience, can you tell us about some of the most difficult cases that you have dealt with and how you managed to deal with it?

**TN:** Cases meaning family I meet or the case, the challenges that I have with my son?

**AD:** It could have been from your personal experience or your experience with Know Autism.

**TN:** Well, our grant applicants - I'm very fortunate to be on that committee, where people would send in the applications, right? And they would asking for financial assistance. And they would describe their circumstances. And the circumstances are things that sometimes as a committee, when we read it, we look at that, we look at each other and we're like, this can't be right. For example, we would have a family of seven. And because the mom or the dad couldn't work, their income will be like \$15,000. And the average care for a child with autism is \$60,000. So before the Obamacare come along, autism was not one of the covered, one of the covered conditions. So they are on their own with that. There is you know, there is no government program out there that can help a child with autism. So the family is truly on their own as far as how they navigate and how they help this child. And chances are you have that many childrens and your income is is not enough to pay for your rent, and then that will probably be the least of your concern. You know, so that's one of them.

And then we have other cases where you look at it and say, we have a veteran, you know, who who have fought for our country. She came back, you know, she got married and her child was affected by autism. And it affected their marriage. And her husband left. And now she's have to be responsible for the care by herself, understanding that finding help for a child no one wants to understand, and take care of the child was difficult, so which caused her to only able to work as a part time. If that wasn't bad enough, she was diagnosed with cancer. So that's why she asked us to help her child, despite all of her circumstances. She wanted to put her child in school, in a special needs school. I'm sorry I'm crying. [SK: It's okay.] I can't believe you guys made me cry. Okay. So we try to help her, by helping, you know, we gave her a \$5,000 grant so that her child can continue on with the school. But it doesn't last well. That will probably only cover for half a year. Then she has to start all over again. I need two minutes.

**AD & SK:** Okay. Take your time.

**TN:** Okay. Just ask a funny questions so I can get out of this.

**AD:** So, um, I think I'll start with something like practical with numbers. [TN: [laughs] Yeah I can get out of it, right?] Okay, so we saw from the Houston Chronicle that Know Autism got to raise a record breaking, like you mentioned, around like \$400,000 into 2018. So, have you seen the growth of Know Asian, oh Know Autism over the years?

**TN:** Well, like I said, the the, when we first started was 2013. And the awareness was not there. The awareness wasn't as, you know, the number is different. Right now, the child is 1 in 59. So

chances are a child is affected by autism is 1 in 59. And that means that, because of that, that we are able to see that there's a need for the awareness. There is a support for an organizations like ours, because there are families out there who are affected there. And you know, sometimes the, our supporter doesn't always come from the family because I just cried over mom that can't support. But it's people around them, you know, like the grandma, and the friends, you know, so. So when they see those struggles, they will support and I think the growth is very natural. There's a lot of hard work on our team, obviously. Fundraising is never ever easy. But it is easier for us to connect to our community, just because so many people know about it. And so many people are affected. So many childrens are affected.

**AD:** So you mentioned there's like a stigma against speaking out about autism in the Asian community. So have you tried motivated, motivating more Asians to like being involved with Know Autism?

**TN:** We have quite a bit like I said, our - We were very grassroots. So we started out at the Asian community, right? So we, our very first fundraiser before we even have a 501(c)(3), was at Tony's restaurant, and it was to help launch the Light and Salt Association special needs group. and that organization is in the Asian community, in the Chinese community center. So with, we were able to raise, I believe, \$32,000 to help them launch that. And in addition to that, we also work with the Southern News. We also have spoke persons. One of the news anchor, Tiffany Lee, was our ambassadors. So we were started out with the Asian community, and because we, we we promote that, because of her, and because of a lot of people that help us. We promote them in Chinese, you know, and - But it was not just limited to Chinese. We also work with the Vietnamese TV stations, so they will also bring that out. So that that was eventually become less and less, you know, urban issues, and with me being an advocate and, Houston, you know, we are big city, but you know, we - our community is small. People are very connected. So the fact that I've been, you know, pounding the pavement for the past seven years, I think that parents now realize that it's not, you know, hopefully that I help, that I have impacted in some way to see that autism should not - the stigma; should have lessened the stigma then.

**SK:** And so, moving on to some questions beyond to your involvement with Know Autism. How has being like a mother changed you, and how you see like the world?

**TN:** I think, just changed me the same way as you know, has every woman have, right? Before, you only responsible for yourself. And once you become a mother, now that you're responsible for a different life. Your success, you know, everything about them has become - So your life becomes second to everything that your child's need is, you know. So, and I think that having a child on the autism spectrum make me do see the world differently because Asian, we're very driven. We're very driven, and we, we have certain things, right? So every mom would tell you

that they want you to be a doctors or lawyers. But now I realized that, because he let me see the world differently. But you you celebrate different things and success mean very different, you know. So, at home, you know, we would have, my daughter, she's a music prodigy, so she could come home with competitions and get a trophy. We're like, yeah, hey, that's great. And we turn around and my son would just say, Mommy, and we're like Oh my god, that's even better. You know, because he's starting to talk. So we realized that, you know, triumph can mean many different things, not necessarily by the, the, the standards. And it helps us learn how to accept things, you know, accept people for who they are, accept people for, you know, for what God given, their God given talent. And it doesn't always mean a doctors and a lawyers. There are so many things in this world that made our world the way it is. And all of that take talents and unique individuals come together to build this. And that helped me see that you know, so.

**SK:** And how do you identify yourself? Do you see yourself as Vietnamese, or Asian American, or somewhere in between that spectrum. Or Chinese?

**TN:** That's a tough questions. You know, it's a very tough one. The standard answer, well you always say, No, I'm an American, right? Because Americans is a melting pot with all heritage, you know. So I would say that I will come myself, you know, Chinese American, because I, even though I was raised in Vietnam, but my, my parents are 100% Chinese, so. And I've been here my whole life, so Chinese American it is. Thank you for asking that. Now I know.

**SK:** [laughs] And do you have family back in China that you still talk to or know of?

**TN:** I do have families. I don't stay in touch as much as I should. My grandparent was very instrumental in our life. She helped raise some of us so. But since they pass away that our communications have become a lot less, and I don't visit as much as I wish I could.

**SK:** Mhmm. And have you ever suffered any discrimination whether in your years growing up here, in your career, or as the founder of your nonprofit?

**TN:** I - You know, the reality is, I don't think I have. I really don't think I have. I mean, I'm very blessed. I'm very driven. It's just because, maybe in my head, being an Asian female, that I know that I have to work harder. I have to prove myself more. But I think that it's just innate. I don't think is from my environment where I felt like there are discriminations. I do have challenges sometime as far as connecting because I spent my entire childhood working, so I don't know who is the football player. I don't know who's the, you know, at the time, I didn't know who was the, you know, the pop singers and so on and so forth. So that I struggle in in trying to, to connect but that's the same with any, any community you go in, you know, it's not discrimination that I've,

I've felt.

**SK:** And did you imagine that your life would be like this when you were younger?

**TN:** God! No, I don't think any child born in Vietnam would think that she will start a nonprofit in the United States. I don't think so. But that's life, right? Yeah. And I wouldn't know where I'd want to be in 10 years either. I know you guys probably have that written somewhere. But...

**AD:** For job interview. [All laughs]

**TN:** Yeah, right? Honestly, I don't, I haven't, you know, I just realized that, you know, you take your life one day at a time, you know, so.

**SK:** And what changes would you like to see in your community, beyond like, already so much that you have done, like this could be about autism awareness, Asian representation, or anything else?

**TN:** Well given this interview for, you know, the Asian community, are you referring to the Asian community or our community as a general. Because sometimes you say community, I've looked at Houston as my communities, you know.

**SK:** Both. Either way. Yeah.

**TN:** Well, I felt that, You know, as far as the Asian community, right? They, I do have some struggle when it comes to fundraising, you know, because Asians, we are raised in, the majority of Asian, we are raised in where we are very, very loving, but to our family, right? Because we always struggle, we're very loving. I felt like we do need more and, what's the word? That we probably, you know, has to realize that, beside our family, there are other people that need help, you know. So, in that area, I think we needed more awareness. I don't even know what the word is, you know. So I hope that will change. And I see that, you know, your director, Anne Chao, is by one of the most giving person that I know out there. So, there are a lot of role model out there. But I do think that we need to do more in community work. We need to be more giving, you know, so that is something - it's a very Western culture that I wish that we can all learn from, you know, but as far as our community in the Houston communities, this, we're known as one of the most giving communities in the country. So they're pretty wonderful. You know, you have to work for it. But they're very wonderful in that way.

**SK:** And you've done so much for the community over your career, and you're starting your nonprofit, what do you wish to be your legacy?

**TN:** God you guys come up with really hard questions that I've never even thought of [All laughs] So, um, I I don't know. I mean, I haven't really thought about that. You know, I think legacy is such a big word. I think it's something that we should let history write for us. I think that all of us should do what we felt that is, is right. Right now this moment, you know, is this, you see something is wrong, you know, Stand up! Do something about it. And then let history decide whether or not you're right or wrong. So I'll let history, I'll let my children decide what is my legacy? So...

**SK:** And do you have any advice for future generation?

**TN:** Again, like I said, Are you referring to the Asian future generations? Are you referring to it as a general thing, because, you know...

**SK:** Both.

**TN:** I think that, you just - I really don't have a lot of insight. I felt like I'm still learning on my own right now. But my my thing will always be is like, no matter where you are, no matter what you do, just do the best you can with what you have. You know, and if you ever think that you can't give, Yes you can. You can give a little bit more, you know. Always give a little bit more. Care a little bit more. And then just, you know, just let life direct you to where it needed to be, you know.

**AT:** I guess is there anything you feel like it's important to you, but we haven't covered it yet in this interview?

**TN:** You guys asked really hard questions. You made me cry. So... I don't know, you know, believe it or not, I've been interviewed by news anchors. Nobody ever made me cry. [SK: Oh!] So that was really good. [All laughs] No, I mean, you you cover a lot, you know, and I'm very proud of what you guys are doing - is to to recognize, and to documents, how Asians is impacting the community, and where we are, you know, so I hope that as a young generation, that you guys will, like I said, we'll do more, you know, and make, you know, just do more for the community. You know, besides just just yourself, of course, you get a start with that, you know, yourself and your family. And once you're, once you're comfortable, then it's really important to help others because then by helping others, that other person have the abilities to help and then they just keep on going, right? What is the American people always said? My American friend always say, Pay it forward, so.

**SK:** Okay. Thank you for sharing your story today.

**AD:** It was so wonderful.

**TN:** Well I'm glad you enjoyed it. [laughs]