

Houston Asian American Archive, COVID-19 Special Collection
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Anhlan Nguyen

Interviewer: Ann Shi

Date of Interview: 5/23/2020

Transcribed by: Ann Shi

Edited by: Kelly Liao

Audio Track Time: 27:51

Background:

The special oral history collection is created in response to COVID-19 that started in February 2020. Dr. Anhlan Nguyen, a veteran community member of Houston Asian American Archive, who was interviewed back in 2019, returned to speak about the updates of the three non-profits she's been leading, her efforts in supporting the elderly, the mentally needed, and the community in general during the pandemic; and her perspectives on the future.

Setting:

The interview took place via Zoom, a popular video conferencing app (and the official app for Rice University) during COVID-19.

Key:

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview transcript:

AS: Today is May 23 2020. And here with us on the Houston Asian American Archives COVID-19 Special Collections oral history interviews is Dr. Anhlan Nguyen. And thank you so much, Dr. Nguyen for spending time to speak with us about your experiences and perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic. [**AN:** My pleasure.] Thank you and to start, would you mind sharing with us how the COVID-19 has impacted your life?

AN: Well, I have about five or six speaking engagements. Now I had a very packed travel schedule in March. Actually, I just came back from Paris, right before the ban. Go to Europe. So it just so lucky like we, we had an event in Paris, France, and I came back here, March 9th; and March the 12th, President Trump announced the ban from traveling back and forth for Europe and, and the United States, so it's—and so basically, all the travel arrangements, conferences, you know, speaking engagement, they all kind of cancel. So that's the first impact.

But the nonprofit that I currently work with is an online institute. It's a civic education institute for civic education in Vietnam. And I'm also the executive director of Lyceum, which is a life skill and professional development for success. So with speaking, training, coaching, and of course, there's a portion of that is an online tool; and when coaching—I do coaching, online or virtually. So it doesn't affect those online classes, and actually, we got busier because then, you know, we realized that with COVID-19 crisis, everybody got so frustrated that emotional wellness is not there. So our organization is specializing in helping people to build that emotional wellness. So that is an urge of serving. So I actually call up a lot of my fellow speaker. I'm part of the National Speakers Association, Houston Chapter. And as you know, all of these professional speakers, they got cancelled too; so they, they free. So I asked them, “Can you come on board and help to serve by providing, you know, all kinds of workshops?” Like how to cope with anxiety, you know, what are the five steps to reduce this—to cope, you know, to speak through stress in 15 seconds; how to turn words into actions; and you know, how to communicate with the children, now you have to live with them 24/7 and you have to work from home. So all of these pressures.

So we became so busy, because like we organized a workshop once a week, in the past two months. So I have one just this yesterday, and then we will have one more next Friday. So nearly every Friday we have a workshop, online workshop, and helping anybody who want to benefit from it. So in one way, I feel that it taught me a lot in terms of how people react to crisis. And I observed because my, my communities, some are very vulnerable because they don't speak English as the main language. And so, we, so in that aspect, I also serve on another num—I have several nonprofit to serve—so the one is for the Houston community, is a Vietnamese Culture and Science Association. So basically, we partner with YMCA, and Houston Food Bank, and a lot of other local store to provide meals for senior who, you know, cannot go anywhere. And also, there's a massive PPE fundraising event, you know, in order to help to, to purchase the PPE for our healthcare providers, people frontlines.

And just recently, just like on Mother's Day, I was involved in a really meaningful project that—we partner with a healthcare organization called Van Lang IPA, and with the Vietnamese Pharmacists Association, Vietnamese Medical Association and our Vietnamese Culture and Science Association. So we, within one week, we actually put together COVID-19 free testing for seniors, for the people who lack a language and you know, the process of pre-screening is pretty comprehensive. Like you have to go online. And you have to fill in a whole bunch of question. And only when you qualified you got a number and then you know, you get into the driving and you wait like a couple of hours before you can be screened. So some of our senior—and there's a large Vietnamese community here in Houston, we have about 150,000. So the, a lot of seniors that they want to be tested, they spend three, four hours; and some of them who cannot drive, their children have to take them like multiple time without success. So that's the reason—

and we did it very successfully. So we did one in the South 45 (highway), which is a, as a church, a Catholic church called Vietnamese Martyr Church. It's one of the biggest church here for the Vietnamese community here in Houston. And the other one is at a Buddhist temple, it's called Vihara Temple in the Southwest area. and I was actually involved in indirectly to the traffic and you know, coordinate with the volunteers at the Southwest area; and it was, it was really meaningful seeing that you know. And we partner with a lab here, that lab, they got a grant. So they can provide like 500 testing kit, but they still have to call-collaborate with a lot of doctors, nurses, you know, the people who know how to do it, and you can imagine is outdoor, so it's very hot. And you have to be able, the whole PPE, you know, N95 mask, and then the protective gear, and then they have to wear the whole the gowns. And we were very lucky that the weather became very cool on that day, though. It's not in the 96 degrees. It's around 80. So it's manageable. It's still hot, but it's manageable. So it was successful. And, and I believe that this like today they're doing one more in the Northwest area.

AS: Yeah. Yeah. Wow, thanks to you being busy that the local community get so much help and support during this very difficult time.

AN: Apart from you know, [chuckles] that's the, I mean, the suffer is so much. We just try to focus on what we can do. And there's so many. You know, when you look into New York, for example, we think that we are very lucky that in Houston, the number of cases, the number of people who pass away, and the way that we react, I am very pleased to see the leadership of the city, the mayor, the judge of Harris County. They are very decisive and all of those measure helping us to control and you know, kind of flatten the curve. And we're not getting into situation like New York. Like Houston is a huge city. So I'm very proud of Houston.

AS: Yeah, we're very lucky. And I believe you have three nonprofits you mentioned, there's also one called the Institute of Civic Education in Vietnam, and any initiative that institution has taken during the pandemic?

AN: Oh, yeah, a lot. Actually, I just finished the class in the morning. So I teach a class on... And actually, it's not really just relate to COVID-19, it's a regular class, but in this in this pandemic, it helps a lot. The class is talking about the mindset, in the personal development class. And it teach, it teach the students how to look at things in a mindset that help them to be resilient. And what else needs resiliency then this time, right? So it's talking about, like say, you know, as we go through life, we always have certain values that we use as a guidepost in making decision in coping with anything that happened unexpectedly. And the guideposts that I use for that class is called G.R.A.C.E. It's that for the five values is gratitude. G is for "gratitude". R is "respect". A is "accountability". C is the "courage". And E is "engagement".

So when you practice "gratitude", it will help you to anchor on the joys that you currently have. Even you are in social distancing, you know, in, in the situation that we cannot go out every day or every week. "Gratitude" help you to find joys right now, even in the, in the valley baton right now. In—and instead of focusing on the people who die, you can focus on you and your, your immediate families still alive, and focusing on the thing you still have—phone, connection... Zoom! Wonderful tool! Right? So that, it brings up the joys in your daily life. And "respect" is like you respect yourself, respect other, but you also respect yourself by doing the right thing for your body. Because your immune system needs to be protected these days, right? But if you are occupied by anxiety, you occupied by stress, it will lower the immune system. By practicing "respect" to yourself, you would need to do some actions focusing on self care. How do you, you know, make sure that you good. And "accountability" is to take ownership of your life. So, you feel like you are victim like, you know, COVID-19 happen, you know, you cannot do much about it. However, you can still do a lot of things like, you know, stay focused, like practice gratitude, take good care of yourself, you know, and do whatever that the, you know, that the government says, okay, wear masks, we wear masks, okay, wash hand, you know, those are the things that we can focus on because those are still the thing we can do. So accountability is not just accountable for what your actions are, but also accountable for the respond to the thing, unexpected thing that happened to your life, that you have no control over. In this case, the pandemic is one good example. Right? But that kind of ownership is hard. So you need the fourth value which is "courage". You need to take a lot of courage to do the things that you're not comfortable to do, but you need to do and then engagement is it show that, even you're staying home within social distancing, connecting with the people within, you know, your close circle and in their family as well, connecting to phone or other tools to very important.

So the whole class is teaching about values and habits you need to build, to really build the muscle around G.R.A.C.E. And I enjoy teaching that. So today is our first class with about 40 students from Vietnam. I taught the classes, I'm teaching the class in Vietnamese, but I also have a talk show—a weekly talk show, sharing about those values on the local radio and also television. So, I have been running like crazy. But it's good. It's all the message of how do you stay calm, right? And grounded in this time of pandemic.

AS: Yeah, this is wonderful. Thank you. And just to touch on how, for some of the people that probably are experiencing anxiety and they channel out through a negative way by targeting the Asian Americans through xenophobia or anti-Asian... [**AN:** Hate-crimes, right?] yeah, hate-crimes, we saw so much of that. And what is your perspective on that and how we can heal this group of people?

AN: I feel sorry for those people. I can understand where they coming from all the people become so rude and because of the fear, you know. Our world is full of fear. And when people are full of fear, that is their reaction. You know. So from their perspective, I could see and I don't

believe that is the norm of America. America is not like that. America is the, you know, as a whole we always value diversity. We... and that's the reason why I became a bold person and I go here because here, it's freedom, justice for all regardless of the skin color, culture, age or background, cultural background, we are all in this together.

And I think in Houston during the—we have encountered disaster before and this is not the first time. So when because we have hurricane all the time. And the Harvey flood is so beautiful. It's so beautiful seeing the whole community regardless of the skin color, you know, it's, it's not that. So when I saw now—not many incident in Houston by the way. Like Houston has some but not as in California, because I have lots of friends in California that they experienced this kind of discrimination in what I call it hate-crime. Right. But for Houston, I think the majority the people are very friendly and they truly kind of melting pot, like we live together. And I have seen so many beautiful scenes of people, white people, black people rescue the, the Asian people, and vice versa. We, we don't see that the difference in the skin color or the culture as a barriers. But once in a while, I heard some incident; and I think all of those incident when people yell at you, they demonstrated the weak—their weakness, not us. Their weakness. Because they fear, they are living in fears. And when you're living in fear and anxiety, you tend to act, you know, based on the instinct and that instinct has no rational.

So if I am happen to be a victim because somebody asked me like, "Okay, if you treat it like that, what would you do?" Right? So I guess it depends. It depends on the situation. You can still stand up like if the behavior is like intolerable. You can, you can ask for intervention from the police for at least, you can stand—still use a very nice verbal to respond. Like you are, you are who you are, and you don't need to be rude back to them. But you, you find a way to neutralize that comment or whatever. And then you engage other people who are not in that. And I believe there will be a lot of other people who don't, who don't like that behavior either, regardless of you know where they come from. So isolate that person who create that incident. And, and never forget that, you know, we have to feel compassion to even to that person, because that person apparently lost their cool. They just don't think clearly. That's my perspective. I don't know whether it's so kind of like not... What do you say for that? Like too positive or not, but, but that's the way I want to look at all of this hate-crime.

AS: Yeah, definitely. And in terms of connecting with other people, how do you find your relationships with people around you has changed during the pandemic lockdown?

AN: Um, the first week is tough, because we used to go out and eat a lot. So I start cooking a lot. You know, we used to eat out, and now no going out. So I have to do cooking. But then, I call my sister more often to ask for how to cook this thing? How to cook the other thing? You know and so more conversation and then I found out, "Okay, why don't we do a Zoom for the family once a week?" You know, because my sister and my brothers are not living in the same town

with me. And we usually not talking a lot. But now because we all of a sudden we had a, an urge of connecting. Then I said, "Why not use them?" And, and it's great.

And for the folks here, I missed, I missed the volunteers. So there, there was supposed to be like this weekend, there was supposed to be a National Youth Leadership Development Camp in Washington DC. And it was canceled. So they're going live right after this. I'm going to join the hangout— they will have a virtual hangout for, for the staff, you know. So we learned the new norm, now to me, the Institute for Civic Education in Vietnam is the norm. Because we always use virtual, so it becomes—we become a strength for the organization. And, and so I asked myself, "How can I help?" So I approach other group that never use Zoom before or never use virtual, and offer help or services for those, so that they can, they can get up to speak, which for us is in a way is an opportunity to serve, to provide some more opportunity for others. Yeah, and I forgot I—we onboarding four interns, three intern from Vietnam and one from Germany. So they all going to have a summer project and we are, we are working on—we partner with two other health organizations. One in Vietnam and one in California to deliver workshops for parents with autistic children. Believe it or not in Vietnam, the—that at least 50,000 or 100,000 kids are impacted with autism, autistic. So that would be a few series of program that we will deliver throughout the summer.

AS: It's wonderful. And speaking of Zoom, when you are touching about, everything has moved online, including social gathering. So how do you see as the new normal in terms of technology? How can it change completely our lives and the way people connect?

AN: Absolutely, because now, for example, I already work on like, we have a banquet now we're supposed to do in October. I already work on the virtual, the virtual banquet in setup, because right now we're not sure right? What if virus came back? And when, and when you booked a venue, because normally when you do a gala, you had to book the venue. And when you booked the venue, you lost money because right, the deposit; and with the venue, you only have a number of limited people who can attend. And you know, there's a lot of constraint in that, of course, it's a live event. Now with virtual you can, you can gather a large event, multiple countries, especially for our organization. We have members from France, from Germany, from Vietnam, from the United States, Canada, France, so they can all come and join in this virtual event. So it is an advantage and the only challenge So how can you create the experience that the similar way as the live event, and we are working on that, we are working on it. There's, there's a lot of different organizations that already work on the digital experience. So that, you know, they create the tool for us to use. Right now Zoom is pretty good for a meeting. I have attending—I have attended an event that have 1000 people, a dance party, and they all dance from their homes. And it's so much fun. People still enjoy, you know, they dress up but they stay at home and each of them you know, dance from their own home, but we have 1000 people and they just put everybody on the Zoom. Looking together. It just looks so much fun. Yeah.

AS: Definitely a lot of fun on bright side of the technology. And do you think there could be any potential danger to the way people connect with tech-technology, like everything being virtual these days?

AN: I would not say dangerous, it may be disadvantageous or advantageous, depends on the nature of the work that you're doing. Like for example, how do you do like walkathon or marathon, you still need that kind of physical and people together, that spirit you, you can do virtual but nothing can replace the really face-to-face kind of interaction that those events has. [AS:Yeah.] But again, our human creature is—is—is very good at adapting. So I strongly believe in that and I look forward to. And I already work on mine. So I have two events that at the end of this year, we already put a team together, focusing on, "Okay, what kind of experience we want to create." Can you do auction? And also fundraising, if you can tell the story you utilize more on digital; you, you build up the Facebook fundraiser, or Twitter account or Instagram, and just utilize the social media more. However, it could be a challenge for the community for the sector of old people, like senior people that never use social media, then how do you outreach them? How do you teach them to use the technology so that they can be connected? You know, so it's in itself is a project. That I never run out of project, I can tell you tons of projects that serve the needs in the—and that's what I'm good at, you know, like, like looking around and see where are the areas that need help and jump right in and create a project; and, and most mobilize people to volunteer and to help to make the project happen.

AS: Yeah, that's wonderful. Thank you. And I'm just wondering, has this pandemic, in a way inspire you to, for example, look at ways that the social structure works in—be able to step up and fill those, fill those gaps that, that weren't previously discovered before? Sorry, that's a badly framed question.

AN: Yeah, absolutely. Because I think if we remove the obstacle, because normally we tend to think the way we used to, right? So whenever we do a gala, we only focus on, "Okay, this is a way we did, so we willing to do this way." But now because of this pandemic, then it force us out, go out of that comfort zone. So we ask ourselves some questions we will never ask, if there were no pandemic. So because of asking that question, the beauty is that—when you ask a question you will find an answer. And that answer change your life, that answer change the whole, the whole world in terms of how we interact, how we organize things together, how we can mobilize the whole community even without being able to have live events. And from that you see the potential and I bet you after this COVID-19 things, the new norm is going to be different. And it's only better, it could be better, it will be more comprehensive. And, and I can't wait to see how the new norm will happen. You know, after this COVID-19 is over.

AS: Yeah, very exciting and lots of changes! But hope that it moves with the better. [**AN:** Yeah.]
And just want to, before we close, what is the kind of single restaurant that you would be waiting to go the moment it opens?

AN: Dim Sum restaurant! Dim Sum restaurant here, they have three venues and, and actually, I think they're very respectful for the law, and even all the restaurant already open, they're very cautious. But I know both of the owner personally, and they have been big philanthropist as well by working in the community. And, and their food is excellent.

AS: Thank you for supporting the restaurants as well as the youth community and the elderly...
In general the society. Thank you so much.

AN: Oh, my pleasure. That's, that's the reason why I'm living.

[Interview ends.]