

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

Interviewee: Ninh Nguyen

Interviewers: Tiffany Sloan, Angela Hui

Date of Interview: August 2nd, 2019

Transcribed by: Youngbin Lee, Mei Leebron

Edited by: Gordan Liu (2/11/20), Helen Pu (4/22/2020)

Audio Track Time: 2:28:52

Background: Ninh Nguyen was born in 1948 in a city in North Vietnam called Nam Dinh. She grew up with ten older siblings, and a couple younger siblings and step-siblings. After losing her mother from childbirth at a very young age, Mrs. Ninh grew up with her many siblings and her step-mother. She and her family moved down to South Vietnam in 1954 once Vietnam was split into North and South Vietnam. There, she worked hard and was very talented and gifted, getting herself through high school as a class president and later getting herself into pharmacy school. But in 1975, as South Vietnam fell to the North, her and her family, fourteen people in all, decided to evacuate out of Vietnam in fear of the communists. The family found themselves a boat to board and was able to escape to Malaysia. Afterwards, they landed in Camp Pendleton in California, and a kind man named Mr. McCutchan decided to take their family in and put them to work for On-the-Job Training (OJT) in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Mrs. Ninh lived there with her family until she got married and moved to Houston.

Setting: The interview took place on August 2nd, 2019 in Mrs. Ninh's office in Houston, Texas.

Key:

NN: Ninh Nguyen

TS: Tiffany Sloan

AH: Angela Hui

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

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

Interview transcript:

TS: Hello! Today is August 2nd, 2019. We're here in Mrs. Ninh Nguyen's office in order to interview her. My name is Tiffany Sloan.

AH: I'm Angela Hui.

TS: And this is Mrs. Nguyen.

AH: Will you start by telling us about where and when you were born?

NN: I was born in 1948 in a city in North Vietnam named Nam Dinh.

AH: Had your family lived in Nam Dinh for many generations?

NN: Yes. That is my father's hometown. So we have—from my father and my grandfather and then my great grandfather come from Nam Dinh. So I'm truly Nam Dinh girl. [All laugh]

AH: And how 'bout your mother's side?

NN: My mother's side, her family in Hanoi. From an educational family, her father was a some— had some function, in the government. And then she went to school in Hanoi. I think some— something related to a nurse, but not really a nurse level there. But she knew something about helping people give birth. Yes.

AH: And how far is Hanoi from Nam Dinh?

NN: Over there they use kilometers. [All laugh] But I think last time and the only time I visited in June–2016, it take about 40 minute driving, but it's not like the high speed here, so yeah. It's about like 30-30 miles. Yeah.

AH: Do you know how your family was affected during the French colonial era?

NN: Oh, I was born around that time, so I just heard about from my ancestor– not ancestor, but from my father or brothers that even though war stop—ended in 1945, but my family in Hanoi, not Hanoi, Nam Dinh, have to evacuated and and then on the time we move, we return home, and then that's-that's why my mom gave birth to me. I don't have a good childhood. Normally they gave birth in hospital, but because we come home from evacuation, and the city still—I mean, very empty, so we pass by a flea market, but it's empty, so have to wrap around a small booth and my mom gave birth [to] me over there. [laughs]

AH: Wow. With just your father's help?

NN: I think the whole family, [**AH:** Oh, okay.] together and my mom—I am the eleventh child. So above me, we have eleven—I mean ten-ten siblings. So the whole family returned home. I'm pretty sure and my mom has some knowledge of nursing, so it helps to give birth [to] me. I mean, so I'm here! [All laugh]

AH: And do you know how else your family was affected by World War II?

NN: How old?

AH: Oh, how else your family was affected?

NN: Oh, we lost everything.

AH: In World War II?

NN: We lost everything. I know that my-my-my grandfather, working for the French people. Something related to the coalmine. So he— he does fill up his assets. And then we lost everything and we return, we had the home but it's been bombing, so we had to repair it. And I was so small at that time—I just born and then maybe one or two years later, but I—I know that we not very rich! But-but I think my father did build a hotel, printing shop for our family, so—and then he had good relationship with the French people. Yeah.

AH: So how long did you stay in Nam Dinh?

NN: I was born in '48, and I think we stay until this—the Vietnam have divided into the North and the South, so my family decided to move to the South, but left my—because of the communication, we don't have telephone there at that time, or email or text message [laughs]. So, I don't know what happened, but my—my grandmother, was left in Hanoi. I think the main thing is because [s]he doesn't want to move. She think that the whole family will come back, so she stay there, she stay there, and then she keep my sister there. So my sister stay—

AH: Your younger sister?

NN: Yeah the youngest, the one that my mother died right after the-the birth, yeah.

AH: And how much younger is she than you?

NN: Only one year. She was born in 1949. That's when my-my mom pass away, so that's why I don't have any memory about her because I was so young.

AH: I'm sorry.

NN: So small.

AH: Do you know what your father's occupation was?

NN: Before we moved to the South, he's a fine man. He played tennis with the French, and because he owned the restaurant, and the hotel, but when we moved to the South, we lost again everything. Yeah, bare hand, bare foot. Whatever the money they-they saved, they-they-they bury under the ground so it's been destroyed because of the moss and termite, so we lost everything. So we moved to the South, and I think at that time we do have some help from the government for the people moving, fleeing from the North to the South, and then we start everything again, but I think he somehow, he get the job as a clerk with the bank, the Vietnamese National Bank. Yeah.

AH: So was it the—

NN: So, yeah, so the whole family depends on his salary. Yeah at that time, my father already remarried with the—my stepmother and at the time we move, they already have three children born in 1953, '54, and '55. [laughs]

AH: So what year did you go to the South?

NN: 1954. Yeah, so early too. '55 is in Saigon. Yeah.

AH: So you moved from Nam Dinh straight to Saigon?

NN: Yes, yeah.

AH: And how old were your—how old was your oldest sibling at that time?

NN: I think my oldest brother, born in 1934. '34 and then '36, '37, '38¹, '39, and '40, '44, '43, [laughs] '45, '46, and myself is '48. So—and then my younger sibling that with the second mother, is two of them, '53 and '54.

AH: Wow. What was it like to grow up with so many siblings?

NN: Oh, those bigger one take care of the younger one. [All laugh] We very poor at that time because we lost everything and the whole family rely on only one salary from my father, so we just live in a very modest area—it's a small house for like fourteen- sixteen people. And then all my older brothers— I have a lot of brothers and sisters. I have only one sister older than me and all of brothers. So they-they tried to enter the army. Yeah, so none of them can finish college, because they need to find some way to-to escape the family so the family won't be crowded and they can get the money right away. So all of them joined the army, except the second one, he got a scholarship to Australia, but for four years. And before-before he returned, graduated, and returned to Vietnam, I don't know what happened to him, but he passed away over there, and then when he sent back to send back—send home, he's already in a closed casket. We don't know if he's in there or what happened to him. We just have no way to-to verify that's him in there, but the college—I mean the- in Brisbane I think they just sent us that, okay, sorry that he died and, while asleep. So we had not been explained thoroughly, or investigation, and then they just send a coffin home, closed coffin.

AH: That's terrible.

NN: Yeah, yeah.

AH: So when you were growing up did your older siblings play a big role in raising you?

NN: When we moved to the South, yeah the older one take care of the younger, while the step-mother still producing almost every year or every two years. That's only oriental, or only Asian family do that, not here, only one or two, but it's just produces, so-so it's— that's why I say that my childhood is very tough. And then we have to, like walk to the supermarket, it's like flea market, it's not supermarket, clean, like here, it's just each one have a small table, and then sell even meat, chicken, and fish and something some—I am the one who who go to the market and buy and I have to think, I think at that time I'm just like ten, ten, eleven. I'm not even go to the high school yet. So I have to think, “okay, what dish for today?” Because we eat every day, like breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and so I have to remember, and I have to-to think about what dishes for the day, and then how much we buy, because the money is still, again, only from my father as a clerk, only a clerk in the bank and then at that time, I think we have additional money from my— some older brothers that get money from the army. You know the Vietnamese way, they send all—most the money home, they just save enough for their life over there and

¹ The interviewee has indicated that '38 is erroneous.

then send home because they know their family need it. So that's why I know a lot of dishes and how to cook [laughs] and how much to buy. I learn it from, I mean, just forcing me in that situation.

AH: So what do you know about your family history before World War II for example? Do you have any stories passed down from generations?

NN: The only thing I know is from my grandfather that he has the coal mine. He works with the French, so he did, he did built up, some— not the dynasty, but some good things there, because he— he— he reserved a good size of the land for the family's cemetery, that's why when I come back to visit, first time, after the evacuation in 1975, I visit the family and I visit the cemetery. He get a huge tomb for himself, so that mean he has manage it with good money [**AH:** Wow.] Yeah, that's all I know. Further than that, I don't know. Even my mother and my grandmother I just know their place when I came back to visit in June 2016. I visit the family cemetery. That's— it's very emotional because that's the first time I can imagine, "oh this is where my mom is." Yeah that's the first time in my life since birth. Yeah.

AH: Did you practice any religion when you were growing up?

NN: Actually, my family—it's just like from the ancestor they passed down. And then we know that we are Buddhism. But we have a very busy life and I didn't think about it until like once a year we go to the temple because they celebrate the new year, the lunar new year. And that's all I know until my father pass away in 2003. I—maybe he just help me, so I did come back to the temple and then more often and I learned more about Buddhism and now I think I devote a lot of time to Buddhism. I realize how good it is, yeah, and can guide my life in a good way.

AH: When you were growing up, were most of your friends and neighbors also Buddhist or Catholic?

NN: Oh, the Vietnam is almost Buddhist nation, just like, not India, but Thailand—that's a whole nation is Buddhism. But when we moved to the South, a lot of around—people around me they are Catholic. Yeah.

AH: So growing up, what did you know about the conflict between North and South Vietnam?

NN: Oh I heard. I heard from my parents, my father and my brother, they are old enough, and my aunt and uncle, they all in the army, back there, with the French. So they know— that's the only reason that we escape because we see and after we escape from the 1954, we see the news, the movies that they dig the hole and they put the live people there and they cover with the dirt, to the neck, and then they had people in the village come there and then try to maybe accuse them for something that they didn't know and they left them there until they die. We see that, we see a lot of people like they took everything, from my family with my grandmother stay with my little sister. So, when it happen again in 1975, they win the South Vietnam, and then we fled again. We don't carry anything with us, we just want to escape. And what happened to us, we don't know. But lucky the whole family, been rescued and then came to the United State, the whole family. And then later on, some other brothers that I—it's a long story, but they stay back there, but somehow, they went here by boat people or by airplane because one of my brother worked for IBM, so they sponsor him over here. Yeah, so the whole family here now. We don't have any blood relationship back there, but still have cousins, and the relatives.

AH: Were—okay, when— when you were a child, when you were still a child in Vietnam, what was your impression of the Vietminh and the Vietcong? What ideologies were you exposed to?

NN: Actually when— at that moment, I was very young. But later on when I went to school, I learned all of them in school history. So, we know Vietminh or Vietnamese communist is not good at all. Even now,

I can tell. Everybody—Vietnam, the refugees here, Vietnamese refugees here, every one of us, we are experienced. Whoever likes the communism because they don't know them until they live with them and they experience with them. They took everything we got. Yeah. A lot of Vietnamese people, they have money, they come back and they do a business and they lost. They let— they wait for you to build up. When it's big enough, they don't have any rule, so whatever they want to apply to you, they steal everything and you lost. They come back. They come back here².

AH: The Vietnamese government?

NN: Right now, yes.

AH: Oh, wow.

NN: Yes. Yeah, yeah. Whoever come back to do business, they will learn the lessons later. But we know it, so we don't do anything [laughs] with them.

AH: And when you were growing up, were there American—a lot of American soldiers that you would encounter?

NN: Yes, yes. I think they been there from 19—I think 1962 or '63 after they killed President Ngo Dinh Diem. So, the American people start to be there, but as a culture, we are not allowed as a girl, we not allowed to talk to the stranger, especially foreigner. So I never—I learned English in high school, but I never have a chance to practice because of that rule. [laughs] So and my classmate, they had—their family is better than my family. So they had money to pay for the private school just for English. So they practice English, but not me. When I came here, I was very broken English [laughs] in 1975. [laughs] So we do see the American soldiers and from Korea. I think I remember Korean soldiers and American soldiers all over. Yeah.

AH: And what was your overall opinion or other people's overall opinion of the American soldiers in South Vietnam?

NN: At that time, with me I don't have much opinion. With a lot of people that they like the soldier because they work for the big company that doing the construction RMK, back there, and they do because they have a lot of benefit from there. So they are happy. But the parents at home, if they see you, especially girl, come out and start to have the relationship with American soldier, oh, this is very, very just like the Middle East woman. Just like that, yeah. You will be punished, and then you'll be ground, not to going out. But I'm not in that case because, I— beside the time in the school, and then I'm busy to take care of the family, [laughs] my siblings and I never had experience for that. Yeah. But you can tell, but you can tell some like, some don't like. Yeah. Maybe they don't like more. [laughs] More than they like. [laughs]

AH: Oh, did you experience any that were not nice?

NN: Like, against, against...

AH: Oh, I see.

² The interviewee is referring to Vietnamese people in the US and other countries abroad who return to Vietnam conducting business. Then they lose their business to the Vietnamese government and ultimately return to the US.

NN: Yeah. Whoever can make the benefit from relationship with the American people, they really like it, they support it, but people thinking more they have an overview, they think that okay American come here. And especially in 1973, '74 when they drop us, they don't support. They don't provide us the weapon to fight. And then we have to—we have to lose. Yeah. Now, they still discuss, they still criticize about that. [laughs]

AH: So when you were growing up during the conflict, what did you think would happen in the future? What did other people think would happen?

NN: Actually, when we—before the evacuation in 1975, I just—I was a student. Highschool, and then pharmacy school. I focus in there because I cannot waste time. I have to graduate and earn money and help my family. So I commit myself that no boyfriend, nothing. Just study, and work. So I don't have mind for the politic. I am not a politic girl, and then in house more. But outside, a lot of people they like about politic they study about politic, but what I know is just from the TV and from the older people from my sibling from friends around they talk about it. But for myself, I'm sorry I don't have much knowledge about politic to have a correct answer, yeah.

AH: Could you tell us about the schools you attended when you were growing up? What kind of schools did you attend?

NN: Oh, now for the elementary is— is no special. You just go to the school near your house. But for high school or the intermediate, whatever, but from sixth grade, they do have about two or three big public and we divided girls and boy, you don't mix. And you have to take the test like they have a day, and they have few thousand people come and, do the exam and then they select like, the the one I go, is—they select only about 250 to 300 among 3000 people, you have to fight one per ten persons to get into there because it's a public. You don't have to pay and that girl high school they call Trung Vuong is very famous. Mostly North people, go to that and there's another famous high school they call Gia Long, most of the South. So I don't know why it happened that way, but all the people with Northern voice, we all go to Trung Vuong, and the people from the South they always go to Gia Long and first year, I fail. I fail. And then, second year I come back and I take the test, and I was number twenty-seven.

AH: Wow.

NN: So it's very famous, and very proud, whoever attend those famous girls school, very proud. Yeah.

AH: Did you have to study a lot, or do special preparation to take the test?

NN: For the second time, I did ask my family that spend some money for me so I can attend the private tutoring class that is the—close to my house. And I think maybe because of that I pass with the high score number twenty-seven. [laughs] If I don't have that, I may fail again, because the test is not easy. Yeah.

AH: Could you talk about some of the honors you received in school or some of the accomplishments you achieved while in school?

NN: Yeah, it's only happen in high school. I think starting from the ninth grade, you know, each grade they have about seven, six to seven classes. We have about 50 to 55 students in one class. And then, I have no help from my siblings, from the older siblings, because they already in the army. And then I have to study myself and nobody helped me and I don't know how to follow whatever the teacher teach that day and I didn't know that I had to go home and restudy about it. So, the test I don't have a good score, but I survive. I survive because—oh, you know that's another system in Vietnam. I think it's a French system. They collect like the first 55 among the 300. They call A for the English, and I choose English, so

A. B for the French. It's only three class for B and about four class for A, English. So the first 55 go to A1. The second 55 go to A2. And then A3, A4. And I always stay in A1. And I never have to move down. And every year they select the first 15 of the A2 to move to the A1 and the bottom 15 of the A1 move to the A2, so A1 always the best. And then lucky that nobody guide me, but I survived in the A1 until I finished the twelfth grade. And then I think at the tenth grade, they start divided A, B, C. A is for normal, A is general and B for the math. Whoever like math and good by math, they choose B. And C for the people that writing good, poem or story, they go to C. They have only one C, maybe two B, and the rest of them is A and I choose A. Again A1.

And then from the ninth grade, I start to volunteer, to be represent of the whole class. And then we go meeting and something like that until the twelfth. I campaign to be the president of the whole school, and then compete with about other two, but I win. So I be the president in 1967— half of 1967 to half of 1968, the president. So I represent my school, go out and then talk with—I mean deal with other school—they are boy too. So I'm very active when I was in high school. [laughs]

AH: What made you want to become the president of the school?

NN: I don't know. My urges just start to kick me. [All laugh] Before, I know nothing. Nobody tell me anything, but from ninth grade I start to want to join and then I think that is from my—it just appear. It deep in blood, but it's sleep the first four years, [laughs] three or four years, and then start to appears and then I just follow my gut to do that. Yeah. That's why, from the sixth to the twelfth, everyone knows me because I go to each class to campaign, yeah. The school allowed that. I go to each class in the afternoon, the sixth, the seventh and the eighth in the afternoon. They divide it in two half days. And then the ninth the tenth, eleventh, twelfth in the morning. So I have to go in the afternoon and go into each class. And then in the morning go each class to campaign. So people like me talking. [All laugh] And they vote and they vote right. [All laugh]

AH: So when you were in school, did you notice any political divisions between the students?

NN: I think we were very innocence, all of us. Maybe some of them stand out, and then the—but I didn't pay much attention. Only 1963 when the dynasty of the Ngo down, and then I think at that time it's kind of very, a lot of chaos and then I don't know why, but I was small, I think I'm on the seventh grade and I follow the people, go out on the street and meeting and do things, [laughs] and when I get home, I get punished from my father. [laughs] "Stop!" And so, I just again, I told you, I just focus to study, kind of, don't pay attention to politics.

AH: So were most of the other students at that school also—had they also evacuated the North, you said?

NN: Many of them. Because you know the Trung Vuong high school is most from North- they don't say anything, but most of the Northern voice, speaking people, get into that school, so their parents or grandparents, very experienced with the communist. So when I came here, and then after a while we kind of, go through, the Red Cross and searching for friends or something. You know what? Right now back in Houston, I have about twenty other classmates in same class.

AH: Wow.

NN: All maybe the A2 or A3. Yes, so I think most of us, and then every five years we make—we call international, reunion. Every five year, and 2020 is the coming year. And all the Trung Vuong high school students from all over, Vietnam too, came over, so we have about like 800— 1000 people, reunited. Yeah. So I know I have a lot of people, I come to North California, I visit South California, we always have reunion there when we have like 20, 30 people join. Very—my kids look at me, they [say],

“Mom! I don’t know how you can keep that long,” like, 50 year, we just celebrate 50 years graduated, graduate from high school last year in Tokayana, and we host about 50 in the same same grade, not in the same class, because it’s make English and French students; very, very emotional. Yeah. [laughs]

AH: So when you were still in high school—what was your dream job? What did you want to become?

NN: You know, it’s very funny. I don’t have a dream at all. I just follow friends. [laughs] And my family, they, you know, every family want doctor, doctor degree. But I took the test—we always have to take test, we don’t just enroll and get in, we have to take the test, so I take the test for the dental, take the test for the medical, and the test for the pharmacy, and I passed—I failed the dent- I failed the medic—not fail the medical. I think when I got a tour to the medical school, medicine school, and I see they roll up a casket, and there is a person in there, a real person, dead person in there, and you have to study on that person and—“Oh my God, no no no!” So I eliminate the medicine. So I took the test of dental and pharmacy. I pass both, I mean, selected both, but I see the dental that you have to open the mouth and all day long you work on their mouth. [All laugh] I don’t see any interest! So I follow my friend go to pharmacy school, no dreaming. But I think I chose it right because for that pharmacy background, I came over here, I took my license again, and then with that pharmacy background here, I help a lot of people that since they have—they start to have Medicare, with Medicare Part D, I’m the one to help them enroll and change the plan because I have the background in pharmacy. So I think I choose right. [laughs]

AH: Which pharmacy school did you attend, and were there multiple to choose from?

NN: No, only Saigon, only one school, it's called Pharmacy School, University of Saigon and I—I think Hue, the central, has one, but in Saigon, only one school. So everybody have to pass exam to be selected in that school. So it’s only one school and it took five years. And a lots of them, I mean, we’ve been—that school influenced by the French, so some courses is all in French. So, some good some they have to translate it into Vietnamese and then we have to study it and I graduate after five years, but when I came here, I tried to go back, but they ask—my first hometown is Albuquerque, New Mexico. But they ask a lot of requirement that I won’t, I can’t do it, so I forget it. After I get married, I move to Houston and then my friend in California they made connection with some professors in Vietnam, but they all also evacuated and they group somehow, they accept the [translation of] our transcript, and I have to connect with somebody in Vietnam and find that one from the school and send it to me, so that’s why I can go back here. Yeah.

AH: Did you enroll in the University of Saigon Pharmacy School immediately after you graduated high school?

NN: Yes, yes. I cannot waste any time. I know family is waiting for the money. [laughs] And you know what? When I practice my pharmacy there, the whole salary, the whole money I ship it to the family, so I go and tutoring other students and I get paid from there, and that’s for my own, but my salary from Pharmacy school is for family. You cannot find it here [laughs] in the United States.

AH: Did you have to pay for pharmacy school?

NN: No no, it’s a public, so we get help a lot from the government, but on the first year, I have to practice, and then I choose a good hospital. I think we have to pay, so I use my own money to pay for that. I never ask the family to— support me and at that time I’m not graduated yet, but I do some part time work and then I pay for myself, yeah.

AH: And what year did you enroll in the pharmacy school?

NN: 1968, right after I finished the high school.

AH: And did you live with your family while you attended school?

NN: That is the traditional in Vietnam. We live— doesn't matter even after you get married and then if you can work around and you stay—if your family need you, you stay with your family. So, even when I graduated, I was single, so I do stay with family, I take care of all the sibling. That is very normal.
[laughs]

AH: So I understand there was a temporary shutdown of all the schools in South Vietnam in 1972, after there was an attack from the North. Can you tell us about this time?

NN: That time I was in the fourth gr—fourth year of pharmacy school. And then they shut down and, you know, I'm very active even now. I cannot stay thirty minutes without doing anything. I'm waiting for somebody and I do exercise. [laughs] I always moving. And I say, oh no, I cannot stay home for the whole—we don't know—or when we can go back. They just temporarily shut down, they just shut down. They don't say two month, three months, so we don't have a certain time. So I just contact my friends, and I say, okay, I go to the school, I think that even shut down, but some—I don't know how I can contact because no telephone at that time. I don't know how I can contact all my friends, but I do group them. I do group them about the 30, 35, 40 people, I say, "Hey, who want to volunteer?" And you know what? I go to different hospital and explain to them that we are student from pharmacy school and we want to volunteer and whatever you need help with. They reject some of them. Yeah. I think that maybe they think, oh we don't have any experience, we go there, they have to train us and it just take more time. So they denied. But only one hospital, it's an airborne hospital, they accept it.

So we go all there, and then we come every day. Whoever don't— cannot make it, it's fine. Whoever can make it, it's fine. We come there and we take care of the soldier in—oh because we not from medical school, so we cannot actually do something serious. So like okay, they have to clean the wound today, take it off and clean it. We did this, they show us and then we do that. Yeah sure, all the patients love it because, oh pharmacy students. [laughs] And then we—one girl, she know how to play guitar, and she sing, so we entertain them by that or we told them the story or something. And then some some—I think one of them, asked, "Oh, I have some clothes that about to be discharged here, but I need it uh wash." Or something, so I say, "Okay." I take it home and I go to the cleaner, and I clean, I put it there and I bring it back for him neat and nice. That's all we can do about that time, yeah. Yeah we do all, but you know that, from the first group of 30 or 40 people it down, down, down until maybe about 10 or fifteen. And then we go we— we work to the end when the school open back and then we dismissed. [laughs]

AH: Were you also involved with the airborne parachute training program?

NN: Oh, [laughs] Who does this big story that my—you know one class in pharmacy school is about 200 people. We had to go into the big auditorium, and then because I don't have much money, so I have to volunteer in the committee that write notes from the professor and then they type it and then make it. They make copy and they sell it back to the students and then I get one free because I'm the one who copied. They all talk about me because I after I finish the the volunteer helping, I do have two brothers that came from airborne and then one die right after one year graduation I think in 1963. And he was the top graduated and so painful that he passed, he'd been, shot during the war when he so, I have him in airborne and another brother, younger than that, the first one and then he's in the airborne too. And he was captured in 1972 war. So I want to have the feeling of parachute, so I come to the top doctor of the hospital; I ask, "Can I get the training on that?" He say, "Are you crazy?" [All laugh] Because I'm not a soldier and I'm just a student. And I'm not a war reporter. They do ask the war reporter—they do allow the war reporter to get the training so they can jump into the war and do the reporting. I say "No," so I

told them the story that I have two brothers that one died, and then one captured that is still missing, in 1972, '73. So—so he say “Okay,” and then he make some contact and I went there for interview. And even the top of that training part, he say, that I- “Since you are just a student, this is outside of the guideline, so I have to send you to the higher, to the higher level.” I say, “No problem! Send me over there.” [All laugh] And I go over there, he ask me again, “Are you sure? Are you sure that this is what you want to do, because when you jump out and you don’t know how to turn the parachute, you may end up in—even die or injured because you may fall on the tree or on the cemetery concrete. And people already break their spine or break their legs! This may destroy your future!” I say, “I think I’m pretty sure I just—I want it because I have two brothers and I want to have the feeling.” [laughs] They approve it. They approve it.

So I have to go through the training, and with two other female soldiers, because I'm female, so they don't mix me with all the soldiers. And I went through the training and there, one of the most scare thing, almost at the end of the training that you have to jump out from I think it was about three story high. It's just jump out they call it's a bird nest. You just jump out from the [box] that height, okay. You just jump out but they do hook your something in the back, so you go like the zipline, but it's high, and you go, down, and then that one, even soldier, they scared, they don't jump out. I see it, I witness it over there at the door, he just hold [laughs], “no, no!” And then, the trainer, he just kick it, push him down. And we met several doctors and the staff of the hospital, they did go out there and they want to see if I've been kicked out or I just voluntary jump out. And then I did jump out by myself, nobody need to push me. I just closed my eye and then just jump out. [laughs] So, so after that, I have to jump a real three, they— they eliminate the jump at night, because it's during the war. They eliminate, so lucky I don't have to jump at night. If I do, I don't know if my family allow me to go or not. So I did have a certificate! Graduate together with all other soldiers! I have the picture! I carry it with me but I couldn't find it now. [All laugh] Somewhere in the house.

AH: So how long was the shutdown of the schools in 1973?

NN: I think it's about three months. Yeah, yeah. Three months.

AH: And then you were able to return to school as usual?

NN: Yes. Yes, mmhm.

AH: And after you graduated from pharmacy school, did you immediately begin to work as a pharmacist?

NN: Yeah, I have to work right away. Yeah to earn money for—to help my family. So I work right away until we lost the country. And then I come here. It take me like almost 20 years, before I can get back the license because I have to do other things just to work right away, while waiting the transcript come from Vietnam and do the translation and a lot of step to go, yeah.

AH: So in 1975, before the fall of Saigon, were a lot of people talking about leaving already?

NN: Oh yes, I left on May 1st, which is one day after they took over. But people start leaving since April because they know, and they have connection with the American people and then they can get on the airplane, they—but I wait, because I have no idea and no connection at all. So it's— it's suddenly after they took over, and then my family see that, “oh my gosh, we have to find way to get out.” But meanwhile we don't know yet, but I have several brothers in the army. You know that older brothers in the army so I say that, okay, I think at that time I was like 27, I take trust of the family, because all of my older sibling out, so I'm the one in charge of the family, whatever money I have at that time, I divided. I gave all for all [brothers]- for all male, few thousand Vietnamese Dong, it's nothing like here. Right now

it's one dollar equal to 22,000 Dong. And at that time I have 5000 I give one around and go, disappear. Only female left. So we hope that we don't we don't get revenge from the communist. And, and everything related to my parachute, I just destroy it, because I don't want them to know and they may revenge on me and I'm the head of the family right now. So just like on the May [1st], one of my brother went out and then I think he's on the way to Vũng Tàu, but we need to spread out of Saigon. And then somehow on the taxi, the taxi guy say, "Hey, I know there is a boat that they're leaving, around noon today, but you need to pay them the money." I say, "Oh okay," so he pay the the taxi guy the tip, and then he came home and he—the—all family: my father, my stepmother, and all the sisters from the second mother, from the first one go, it's only me. [laughs] So we just find a way transportation go to that.... it's not the big river, it's a small one and we went there, and we get on the boat, even though they require a lot of moneys to each one, and I don't have enough money for even one. But we load everyone in there so somehow I manage it and we left, we left with the boat. And it's a small boat, I think about 75 people there and and then we don't prepare anything for that, it's just suddenly we have the news so we left. I think we out of money already, whatever we have we give it to them and the boat already left, they don't throw us in the water. [laughs]

And then we floated, we had to go out and at that time the communists already took over the Saigon. I see them. I see them with the special hat and then special shoe from rubber [car tires]. that's what I know about the communists. And then because they just came over, they—I think they been guided doing nothing, that's why we can still going around freely, and everyone just go out the street to find a way to go. And then we left and one night over the sea that is [sighs] it is horrible because it's motion sickness and then we just line up right on the boat just like fish, and then people above me, they pee, it's all over me and I vomit, but when I vomit, I get—I mean out in the water [sighs] it it just dying. And then lucky that there is a navy ship. They all tried to escape. The navy ship is big. I—I remember it's a HQ533. So now I don't know whoever from that, from that ship they transfer us from that boat to them and they heading to Malaysia which is the closest one. And I get into that boat with them knowing that I see the helicopter on the boat. I got halfway in and halfway out, but I didn't know the story that the fan of that helicopter did cut the neck off of one doctor or something on the boat. I didn't know there's an accident in there. And my family stay in that helicopter. [laughs] We stay underneath and half of my brothers stay inside the helicopter and we stay underneath of it. And then went to Malaysia. And I stay in Malaysia and that is about the first group, or the second group went to that island, and that island is tourist island. And they have to take us. Because nobody know what to do with us [laughs] so we stay there about few months. And I did learn the Malaysian language there to communicate with the people. Yeah.

AH: How many of your family members made it to Malaysia with you?

NN: I think we have about 14 or 15, yeah. Including my parents and my aunt and my uncle, because we stay at their house before we—we went to the boat, so we take them with us, too. They have money. We borrow some money from them, to pay for the boat and we did pay back when we work in the United State. [laughs] So we clear. [laughs]

AH: Where did you stay when you were in Malaysia?

NN: Oh in in in the island they call Pulau Perhentian. It's a tourist island. But after we've been interviewed by the United Nation and then we—all of us out, I was belong—I was among the first few group left first. So after they finished all of us, and then I think they—they closed out and they make it back as a tourist it's... I google it, it's so pretty now. [laughs] Don't have anything in my mind—the Pulau Perrhentian before. Yeah. I stay there from May until August. August and then we left—I think we—they transport us to the capitol, where they have the airplane, so we came to the United States and I remember that's Camp Pendleton. Yeah. They have some camp, but mine is Camp Pendleton.

AH: And when you were in Malaysia, were you also staying in a refugee camp, or was there a different shelter?

NN: Oh, they don't have shelter. They don't have shelter. But they do have some—like cottage and I let my parents and the small kids stay in a cottage. But, I have to stay with somebody else, some other family because my family is too crowded, we cannot squeeze in one cottage. So we spreaded. Some of my sisters stay with some other family and I. So we spread around. They don't set up a camp there, but because they had promise from the United Nation that they will receive some aid, so they do give us food, every day. Otherwise, we would be died of starving. [laughs]

AH: What was the process of getting to the United States like—getting to like Camp Pendleton for instance?

NN: Oh yeah, after the United Nation come and interview, I think our family choose the United States other one they choose, maybe France or Australia, but my family want United States, so they transport us to Camp Pendleton. Yeah.

AH: Do you know why your family chose the United States?

NN: Oh, I think at least they speak English, and none of us speaks French and and then Australia, I think we have a bad memory of my brother who died there, so we just say okay, go to—I think the majority choose America. Yeah. So we just among the majority. [laughs]

AH: What was life like at Camp Pendleton?

NN: Oh, Camp Pendleton. You know everything in the United State is the dream of people, so even for the refugee, they do—the camp is for the army before, so it's already organized, they just make it ready for the refugee and they do cook breakfast, lunch, and dinner. So every day, we just go there and go to the dining hall and get line and get breakfast and good food compare with cam—not camp, compare with Malaysia. I remember that they use the rice that a long time ago. So it has the worms in there, yes. And then we have to sit there and every day, we have to select and put all the worms out and do that. So when we eat it, we still smell the old rice, yeah. And Malaysia don't eat meat. So we don't have meat. It's only fish and dry fish and some vegetable and we eat that for same day, same day. [laughs] And the—that's why when I get here, I see fish in a can, I get sick of it [laughs] I get tired of it. But in the United States, yeah they make eggs they make—just like the breakfast here, bacon, sausage, and toast, oh and coffee and milk and orange juice. Oh that is a dream come true. [laughs] So we eat, eat, eat good food, yeah. And then I go to the office and I volunteer in the first aid unit.

AH: And when you were in Camp Pendleton, did—were people generally relieved to be there, or what—how did people feel to be there?

NN: Oh everybody feel relief, because it's first they know that they escape the communists. Secondly, they know that they don't have to stay in the re-refugee camp that is... under average [laughs] at least here it's average. And that's just new to us, everything is new to us. The thing is just wide open, so we have to open eyes, open ears, listen and then try to adjust to the new life. So we all happy. I don't see anything complain about it. [laughs] Three meals a day, don't have to cook, don't have to do anything, just know that get line and eat it so I think everybody happy. And then the American Red Cross they do come there and volunteer and they talk to us. If they—we feel missing home, or something, they are very helpful, yeah. I always remember the ladies—see, I even forgot her name, it's too long ago. But I do appreciate what we get from Camp Pendleton, yeah. Actually, I do appreciate the camp in Malaysia, too.

They rescue, they accept us in there and they feed us even though it's the food is not good like here, but—but they feed us and we survive until we get to the America.

AH: How long did you stay at Camp Pendleton?

NN: I think about two months, because in October, it's about the cold weather, they don't have enough facility to pass the winter, so they have to close the camp before the winter. And they told us by October 31st, everybody have to go, and then they start to open door for all the companies or even individuals come and look at us, and select us and sponsor us, because I know some of them—some of us went to Iowa, and then work in the farm, and then—but my family was lucky because there's there's a man, he's a director of of a company that so he come and then he interview us and then I think he's a good man so so I say, okay, New Mexico. So we—the whole family went to New Mexico, Albuquerque, yeah.

AH: What was life like in Albuquerque?

NN: In Albuquerque, he—Mr. McCutchan is head of they call it National Alliance of Businessmen, that's is his business. And he does have some program from the government, and he took us, but he also a businessman. He has many apartments for rent. So my family stay in about two of his apartment and only myself and my girl, and my sister, my younger sister, we—he sponsor two of us come out first. I told my family stay here. Let me go out first and see how it look, and then the whole family follow. So it's only two girls come out, and we stayed in his home, and with his family. Actually, his family is only husband and his wife. Him and his wife and then two childs, two boys, there and I think they are original German people. And we stay there, but later on, I feel regret because he's very kind, but because we only two girls go out first, and I kinda missing, so I cry every day. [laughs] Make them feel bad because they feel that oh what they are doing that is make us cry every day, and when I eat, they have good food, but it's American food and I miss rice. [laughs] And I dare not ask him, I want rice, so I just eat American food and crying every day. So—but I feel okay, so I ask my family, okay, all of us get out and then stay in his apartment. **[AH:** What were—] So we settle.

AH: What were some of the biggest adjustments you had to make in when you moved to Albuquerque?

NN: Okay, the weather. When we came out, it's a problem. It start to be end of the fall and starting the winter, so it's cold. And in Vietnam, it's tropical, it's hot all year and raining, but here it's cold. And then transportation. How—from his apartment—lucky that he put me to work at his office, because he does need someone who knows the Vietnamese and work in there. But because I stay with him so he drive myself to his work, so I take care of that. But—and then the rest of the family when they want to go somewhere and then we need to go by bus. But when winter come, you know, they have a lot of snow in Albuquerque. It's snowing and we so cold, so we try to stay inside, but my brother work in the refugee program, so we never want to file with Medicare, Medicare, Medicaid welfare. We, none of us apply for welfare. We try to be self-supported, so he worked and I worked and my other siblings just go to school because they still young and even my father, I put him to work in the company, they just do the jewelry, you know the turquoise that's a very famous in Albuquerque, so what he do he just, they train him and he just sit there—he doesn't need to talk to anyone. So he worked it's only the step mothers never work. [laughs] So we try all adult go to work, and the young go to school.

So we okay of that, but adjustment? I can tell the very first group people get out from the camp to live together with American, that's very, very tough. No transportation, no speaking English. I have very little carry with me from high school. And because I don't have special training, go to the private English school like my friends, so I really struggle. And secondly, we try to figure out where we can get the rice and the fish sauce. That is the main thing for us every day. I cannot eat American food every day. [laughs] It's too bad, and then I can tell that we just like blind and deaf and dumb, because whenever they speak

English, it's too fast! You know that Americans, they swallow the word and I don't understand, and when I speak my broken English, they don't understand either. So it's no communication between the two— a lot of misunderstanding. [laughs] So it's very struggle for all the people come out in 1975 and '76, but people come out here and get here now, oh we already put the red carpet for them. Everything is set, they just take it, and they still complain [laughs] because they look at us now after 30, 40 years we do build up and we do settle with house and car, but they come, and then they start like us, but we do help. They do get help from us whoever come first, and then know the situation and help them get the driving, driver license fast and then speak English—they have church, English school for them. It's a lot of thing and many, many supermarkets here, they don't have to worry about it. [laughs] But with us 1975, I just feel that I'm blind, I cannot hear them, I cannot speak to them. Very, very tough. So English is the one that's urging me, I have to study it—studying it but at my age, I cannot go to school. It take too much time. So I have to do something like fast and instant [laughs] to adjust it, very tough. Very tough.

AH: So when you were in Albuquerque, your job was finding jobs for resettling refugees. Were you able to choose this job or was it assigned to you?

NN: No, oh the job? It's my sponsor. [laughs] My sponsor take me to his office. It's really favor. And so I have the job right away. And then I help them too, because they have nobody speak Vietnamese with the refugees. So I'm the liaison back and forth. So they have to bear with me, bear with my English. [laughs] Sometimes I have to repeat it several times to make them understand, and the—they have the National Alliance Businessman they do have some project with the—from the government. It called on the job training, abbreviation is OJT. They pay half of the wages and the company, the employer pay half of them. So they really love that program. And then they are willing to take all the refugee there. And then I provide—I do provide, I ask some student—they did they do have the Vietnamese student come before the 1975, study in the University of New Mexico- they call UNM. So I recruit them to help us translate, so they go when I place a person to that job, they go there and translate. If there is nobody, then I'm the one who take them there and translate. So we have very—we were very successful in that program. You know why? Because I stick in my mind, none of us, we apply for welfare. I tried not to, so 95 percent of us go to work right away and later on they did blame me that I didn't let them to go to the English class or something. [laughs] But I just don't want us to be a burden to the government. So—and then I'm proud of it, but maybe on on the other angle, they miss a chance to study like three or four months in English. But the job—at the job, they have to practice English with people around, so they do learn English from work, not from school. [laughs]

AH: Did you take any English classes?

NN: I don't have time. And then too old for the school, so I ask my sponsor to improve my English: “Can you help me? How can I get to the schooling, maybe at night? The school to learn English.” So he know there's a language lab of the University of New Mexico, so he did talk to some high level there and they gave me a permit. So I do have an access to the language lab and I have to choose whatever textbook or the tip so I go every night because I have determined in my mind that in order to improve my work, my English skill I do have to study it, and it's free. So I spend about two hours every night after work. After work at six, I went straight there because my sponsor helped me to buy car and that's another experience in driving the car. So I study every night and it does help me to communicate better, not in grammar or something, but at least I can talk. [laughs] I can talk with American accent. So, still have accent, but communicate much better than when I first started.

AH: Were there many Vietnamese refugees in Albuquerque?

NN: At that time, we received the refugee from the camp every week. Every weekend, I have to—we do receive a fund like \$500 per person, but we have to take care everything for them. When they get off the

airplane, we have to find a place for them already, and fill the refrigerator if they have children, we need milk, and diapers—children that small, diaper and milk and then food for the family and every week we give them the money before they go to work and then earn the money by themselves. We have to feed them, with \$500 per person, one time only. And then very, very stressful for me that I have to take care of everything. And then train them—driving. [laughs] If we don't have—if they can't drive yet, and then we ask the volunteer to carry some of them to work, and then when they finish work, go there and take them home. And I have to do it myself too. We try to be self-sufficient, not on government's welfare. [laughs]

AH: How were you treated by the local community in Albuquerque?

NN: I can tell that that city is very friendly. I do have—I do have some here that slightly say redneck [laughs] in Texas. I yeah, I did encounter some of them, but I understand who I am. So I just swallow it down and patience. Swallow it down and trying to prove myself to stand up, and then live together. But they are very friendly. Right now, I still coming back there to visit. I still have two member of family stay there. They don't move. I move because I get married. Most of the people in my family move because to get married and the rest of them stay there. Yeah.

AH: So, how long did you live in Albuquerque?

NN: I think from October 1975—I get married Christmas, '79. So, that's when I left Albuquerque, yeah.

AH: How did you meet your husband?

NN: Oh! This is a very, very story. I mean— [laughs] I am very classic type. So, I don't go out and search for boyfriend or something. The classic type just sit there and then wait people. I mean, I believe that. I *believe* husband and wife is already fixed by God. Just like the pot and the lid. This pot need that lid. So, we kind of waiting to the right man. But before I left Vietnam, Vietnam have the tradition, special young girl, we always curious who will be the husband—things like that. So we go and talk with the—not a matchmaker, but the people who read your palms, and then they also ask for your birthday. And then they make the chart and then from that chart, so you have to tell them the correct date of birth. In lunar, they check back. If I tell them the date of birth American way, they do have the way to change it—convert it to the lunar lunar year. So, they make a chart. From that chart, only them can read it. When I read it, I don't understand anything, but he can tell who will be my husband, and about my children and my brother and sister and what year you may have a disaster. And from what year it may be improved, something like that.

So, the man who made the chart for me, he told me that, “you don't get married early, as late as you can. And if you're married to someone already have problem in the family like divorce or something, that's better for you.” Yeah, he told me that. And this stick in my mind, and when I escape Vietnam, I still carry it with me it's in my purse. [**AH** and **NP** laugh] So, I did meet some people from Albuquerque but i-it not match. The pot and the lid not matching. And then I—on one trip to Houston, I take vacation, and I visit my friend, the same classmate in high school. And her father is a very famous fortune teller, very famous in Vietnam. And then I carried the chart with me always in my purse. I said, “can you read this?” And he said, “oh, I know a man that match you perfectly. A plus.” He say, “A plus.” He even know A plus. [**AH** and **NP** laugh] Only thing that he already divorced. And he got two childs—two children. I already have in my mind, I don't need a single man. I say, “That's fine. That's fine with me.” He kind of surprised. [**AH** and **NP** laugh]

So, he matchmaker for me. [laughs] Only six months, I say, “okay.” “Give me your phone number and you allow me to give it to him, right? So he can call you.” I say, “Yes!” And then he called me. He called me and then he—we start exchanging letters and picture so we can know each other, how we look likes.

[laughs] And the most thing—that a *first* impression from, for me from him is his lettering. Very *nice* and very—yeah, it’s—that’s is my first impression is make me like his lettering. And then when I see his picture, yeah, he look—he’s a—with a Vietnamese average, he's above average [AH and NP laugh] and he’s tall too. He’s not short like me. I’m only 5.2, but he is 5’ 8” or something. So, he's a good—good height of the Vietnamese. So, that's two things. So we start to meet and then because he already got two children and he divorced. So, I want to meet the children because I want to make sure I get along with them. I don't want anything happen later. You know, I'm classic. I don't want to change things. So after I met the two child, I fell in love with them because they—one girl—the oldest girl and the boy. So I say, “okay, I think I'm okay.” Six months later after the first contact is the wedding, and that is the Christmas Day of 1979 and make me move over here. And I take care—I stayed with his two children. Actually, he have to work two jobs. That's why I feel he's a—he's a family man. I—and then he already bought a house. I don't married him because of the house. But it showed to me that he's a *family* man. I look at that angle. And then that's why I—and then two children very cute and very—not like active and then cannot—[coughs] I can tell that I fit them. So, I move here. I get married, and I move here and then raised them. And then one of them now is the heart surgeon of Memorial Hermann. And he graduated from all fame—famous schools. Rice. He’s a Rice, alum—alumni. And then he went to Johns Hopkins, for medicine. And then he still—he interned in call—what was that? Stanford in California, seven years for surgery. And two more years in Columbia, New York, for the heart. And then one more year in Emory in Atlanta for the new way to fix valve and replace the valve. So, he's the top one in Memorial now. [AH: Wow] That one of them. The oldest sister, she’s a nurse, and I'm the pharmacist, so we all [AH and NP laugh] healthcare—health career.

TS: And then we're going to kind of move on and ask some questions about your life in Houston. Yes. So, what were your first initial impressions of Houston when you came here to start your new family?

NN: When I came here, that’s my first and only marriage. So, I think I enjoy the marriage life. It’s different from the single life. [laughs] I always have somebody next to me. And then he’s the one—the—over here is is a lot more than Albuquerque. Albuquerque is kind of, right now is not but at that time is kind of the city for retirement people. Is a very calm, very easy. Only two highway. I-25 and—I don't remember. I-40 and I-25. That's it. Very easy, but when I come here, it’s a little bit crowded. And when I came here in 1979, I think we have a good size of the Vietnamese community of Vietnamese people here. And driving. Driving is different. So, it’s a lot of experience when I move here. But I kind of stay home a while, because he doesn't want me to continue to work as a social worker, like I work because in that way I have to communicate with a lot of people and he wants—his life is like just around the family. So, *my* style is like go out and associate with people. So he say, “no, no, no.” He—he won't let me do that. So, he trained me—he’s a piping designer, he worked for the oil company. So he trained me how to do the spoon drawing. And then he led me to that oi—oil industry career.

TS: So, I understand that your husband actually trained you in your new career. [NN: Yes] Can you talk about what that process was like and your experience in that job?

NN: Oh, actually, I didn't know I was a quick taking things that I never utilize before. [laughs] So when he trained me, I think a few months I get out and then I apply for a job and then you know the Fluor Daniel? It’s a *big* oil company here. I got a job there. Yeah, so I'm very satisfied but then, then I get pregnant with my own son. And then I have to take maternity leave when I come back, just a short time and they lay off because of the crash of the in—of the oil industry in 1982, ‘83. Yes, since I laid off—I get laid off so I have to move around a lot of things, for us to be survive and get some money with my husband. [TS: Mhm.] Yeah.

TS: And prior to the financial crash, were you planning to go back to Fluor after you give birth and recovered?

NN: I did but only a short time and they lay me off. Yeah.

TS: And so how did the financial crash end up pivoting your career? Where did you end up going after that?

NN: I have to—I think that just—oh, first I get the real estate sales agent. [laughs] I think because I have the skill of talking with people. I choose that and then—you know, the real estate, you don't have—you don't earn right away. So, I also searching for and then finally we bought a sandwich shop and I do with the sandwich shop and in the weekend we close that sandwich up and we close—we open only for lunch. We close early. So I held both of them until I don't remember when—until 1990. I get a broker license. And then when it crashed, the reason I go to the real estate sales agent, because a lot of houses being foreclosed. So I take that license, and I go in and buy, I buy and I got my commission for myself. And because the house foreclosed, so you buy it very cheap. So I buy several of them. I invest in them. And then, the sandwich shop and I think 2000 I don't remember exactly. We sold it. And then I start to look for how to get back to the pharmacy career. [laughs] And I finally got it. I think late, like 1993 but—so the sandwich shop sold, and—and then people told me, “Hey, the car self-service car wash is good one. So, I invest in that one. Invest in that one. I owned it for a few years. And then I sold it again. And now I have only pharmacy and real estate broker license, yeah.

TS: And so how long were you working in real estate?

NN: Since 1993 until now. Now I don't do much but I do search land for Bamboo Village for this office. And then also for my family needs. I don't have time to take people around and search for home anymore but if they want to buy it with the builder, I do represent them to do the contract and helping them. That's why I keep it active [chuckles].

TS: And then you said it took maybe a process of 20 years to finally get a pharmacy license in the U.S [NN: Yes] just the timeframe. What was that moment like for you when you finally got that?

NN: Oh, a—again I follow friends. [TS and NP laugh] All of my friends that—from high school, I think from high school, go to pharmacy school in Vietnam. I think I have a group of very—five of us, very close. And then over here when I get here, we contact all of them. And, and all of them already got back the license except me. So, I just feel bad and then I say, “Okay, show me how to get back.” So, I follow their path. And that's why they get back like 1987, '86, '88, but I don't get back until '93. Yeah, five or six years behind.

TS: And so you hold a lot of different jobs throughout your career and you take on many different roles, do you think they usually take them on by seeing an opportunity or maybe seeing a need in the community that needs to be met?

NN: Actually, I don't feel it's a need. I don't pay that to that attention. I just say, “okay, I'm capable to do something, and I do it.” At the time for the real estate because there's a market there and I want to grab them, some of them at that time, you know, to invest in one house, I should save about \$3,000. Yes, and now I just sold the last one. I bought it like \$33–34,000. And when I sold it is—but it's in 1988. I bought it and I sold it for \$110 (thousand). That's is the discount price. Yeah. So, if—one is because of the opportunity come and the pharmacy because I follow friend, all of them have it, why not me? So I [laughs]—I didn't pay attention to the need. But fortunately, that pharmacy license, my pharmacy career, help. Because of that I can help a lot and I—and I'm the only one here in, in this office to help the other people here. Whoever need to enroll in Medicare or who need to Medicare Part D which is a prescription drug. And because of my pharmacy background, I can do it very fast and very careful in selecting a

company that pay for their medicine—for their drug. Other people, they even have the license, you have to be a license to do it for commission. I do it free. I do it volunteer here. I don't need a license. But I'm even higher than a licensee because I have the pharmacists license and then I help them much more effective. And I have a radio talk show every month and I whatever—we have a program here that is very useful for the people. I announce it in my program. And I help a lot—few thousand people already since 2006 when they start the Medicare [Part D] program.

TS: And so when you came to Houston in the early 80s, what was the Vietnamese community like here?

NN: It's a very, very at the beginning. It won't be more until 1980 mid of 1980. When I get here in 1979, the Midtown is the beginning of the Vietnamese community who do the business there, from Midtown. And then later on when Midtown become hot, they try to kick all of us out at the end of the lease. No more renewal. We been kicked out so we all moved to the south, to the southwest area. And now Southwest area is the heart of the Asian communities, yeah.

TS: And so how did you first get involved with the Vietnamese community in Houston? And how did those connections come to be?

NN: Actually, I didn't think about it until m—somehow my husband—oh, I think we start with the voting. We see that *voting* is the strong weapon of the freedom country. Communist never have vote. They told you to vote and hundred percent voting is just because they forced people go and vote for the people they want. [laughs] Not freely like here. So, I can see that is a very strong weapon for voting. And then we start setting up the VNTeamwork—it's a nonprofit. And then we see the need of the people, the refugees still coming. And they come by the orderly ODP program. And then by the sponsorship program of the—the children sponsor parents or parents sponsor children. So they're not by boat anymore. So when they come, they—they just like new people, they still need the—the help. So we established this program and this office to help them and then we see the voting is a *very* important. So we campaign for the voting by doing all the billboards, and then billboards cost money. And so we have to ask the business owners around Houston sponsor for it, and I do have it but- I mean picture. But it take time to search for it so I don't have anything today.

TS: Can you kind of talk about the original mission of VNTeamwork and how you got it off the ground?

NN: That's why we feel that we need a nonprofit so, we study about nonprofit and [inaudible] we do it ourselves but to apply for the paperwork, but we do have friends who is a lawyer they look over it and then they fix for us and we apply it. We don't spend money to hire someone to do it. *Everything* we do it by ourselves. [laughs] And then we know that for nonprofit do need to be neutral, no bias. So, but we just say, get out to vote. Your vote is your voice. I learned it from American. Your vote is your voice. So we install those billboards and then we stay in front of the convention [George] Brown convention center because that's a big hall to us, to conduct the citizen—citizenship ceremony. Yeah, few thousand people there. And we recruit the volunteers and we get all the registration voting cards, and we distribute to them and we try to fill it up only the citizenship, you can do it. So this is your benefit, do it! [TS and NP chuckle] So, we do it. And then, you know, at that time, we don't have computer, we don't have software. You know what I did? I tried to mail it to them. So I go to the Harris County, and they have the—what do you have, you have the screen and then you have the microfiche I do that. And then I make a list of all Vietnamese last name from A to Z. And then I go there, and then write down. Yes, I don't even know how to make a copy. So—and then we have a list, it's a public record. So I have the list and I mail—mass mailing it to them. I—we do a lot of things at that time. Yeah, because we have energy now. Energy is almost run out [laughs] by the age.

TS: And since you were so focused on mobilizing voters, what do you think were some of the main issues that kept Asian Americans from the polls?

NN: From, from the poll?

TS: Mhm.

NN: You know, even we campaign that it doesn't mean that a lot of people listen to it. Elderly people, they are lazy. So, we have to tell them [laughs] and also they don't understand English. And at that time, we don't have voting in Vietnamese yet, we just have it maybe about six, seven years ago. Back into that time is everything in English. So, we—it's very hard very hard for the elder—elderly people. It's only the young people, or mid-age like me and that time until we have voting in Vietnamese. Yes, we can campaign more. Even this office, we need to go to the training and get deputized [**TS:** Mhm.] to enroll them right here. And then we are going to have—I think in August, we will have a training from Harris County voting department right here to train people and we campaign for that. We have the—we have announcement every week, we have to pay for it. But whenever we have any special event, we do announce, and then I have talk show, I talk about it. Yeah, to *rally* the people. [laughs]

TS: Do [**NP** clears throat] you think that different politicians or maybe political campaigns aren't really *pursuing* [**NP** clears throat] the Asian vote very well?

NN: Yes, they do. They do. Yes. They connect—here we have the Vietnamese community, which my husband was elected for two terms, as a president and that's why we get involved in a lot with the city level, the county level, and that's why we—this be a teamwork work a lot. My husband at the time he was a president he did work with Council member Gordon Quan and Annise Parker who later on become the mayor and he liked the bus at the bus route from village that a lot of Vietnamese staying there at the Allen Parkway. Yeah, so we start to have the bus route to Midtown. And then the trolley to help people get out from work and run fast to eat without moving their car out of the space. But, you know, because we are nonprofit so we cannot bias but we do conduct the forum and invite all the candidates. Doesn't matter Democrat or Republican, go there, and try to talk. And with a Vietnamese community, we do that. But that's why my husband still holding the community. After he step out and he focused in this company in this office, other people, they do vote they do voted every two or three years to select the new leadership. But I didn't pay much attention about it anymore, because there's a lot of work in here. And then we try to expand it. [**TS:** Mhm.] Yeah. Let somebody else take care of that. [laughs] [**TS:** And so—] We're not allowed for politic anyway [laughs].

TS: And since you are a nonprofit organization, do you mostly get funding from grants or supported from the local community?

NN: Yeah. When we started, we don't have any grant yet. So, we have to contribute by ourselves to pay for the rent. We start with a small office on Bissonnet, we pay like two or three-hundred dollars per month but—and then later on, my husband have to recruit people that in good English and have some knowledge and we do rely on grant until we start to get into the housing, affordable housing for senior. So we get some money from there to support this one. And grant, you know, is not there for you all the time. So you have to search this way and you have to search this side—all around you to get enough grant. And then one of my—one of our big program is VITA, we file income tax return for low income people. So, we get grant from them, but for the first ten years, we don't have any grant and then later on they see the result from the effort from this com—this office. And they start to have grant. Yeah, so lately we do have grant for that program. And other grant too, small grant like State Farm give us \$10,000 for a couple years, but we have to open the class for economy and finance classes. And then later on about three years and they cut off and—and right now we have a fund from MD Anderson for the education people, how to

prevent cancer, that the first class will be in—in next month in Au—yeah, this month, August next week will be for class. So, we do have some small grant but if we just have some small grant like that, we cannot survive. So, the main thing right now support this one is grant, the revenue come from the housing, yeah.

TS: And can you talk about your husband's involvement with the VNCH? So, the Vietnamese Community of Houston and Vicinities?

NN: Oh, yes. He been elected the first term in 1998. And oh, this only two years haven't done anything and then let's go to the campaign again for the second term, but after the second term, I advising that there's a lot of fighting. Even though it's free, we don't get any grant. We don't have any payment. Mo—all of those we get fundraising from the community, and then we have to chip in our money, chip in the money. But it's a lot of politic fighting, and if my husband that will go to their way, I mean, Vietnamese people not American politics. If we don't if we don't follow the way they *want* us to go, and they start to do bad things about—they even took him to the court. Very bad experience. So, after two terms, I say and I was behind him 101%. Yeah, he can't find any wife that support a husband like me. So, he listened to me and then he set aside that community, but we didn't—he did a lot. He got a lot of connection to the city, to the county that later on it helped us on housing project. And also [clears throat] we did—there's a picture out there that's there's a some communist we have inside community and do some things that he has to conduct a meeting that is like thousands and thousands of people in Hong Kong, but that's one is for Vietnamese people. So we don't violate any politic here. A lot it's so many thing that...the VNCH... I just feel blank—because we have a bad experience about it. And then we do the parade every year. And we have the first prize several times. The parade in downtown and the parade here in Bellaire after we all move to Bellaire, and then, I couldn't think of anything else. It was just too many activities. [laughs] But lately, I remember from VNTeamwork more than the VNCH, yeah.

TS: Can you talk about your involvement in developing affordable housing in Houston and how those missions came to be?

NN: [clears throat] What I know is when my husband alive and then I was his right hand and his left hand. [TS and NP chuckle] So, I know the staff when we involve. We start the Golden Bamboo Village one first because we have a population here double the Chinese people, but Chinese people already have two villages they called Rainbow. So, we talked at home we say, “this is really unfair! We have a two, more than hundred thousand population and how come we don't have any village for the senior here?” So, he start to study, to dig and study about it and his fan is Gordon Quan. Yeah, councilmember at large Gordon Quan. So, we go through that channel. So, Gordon Quan knows how much we do here. We serve the community. And finally, I think 2005, he saw grant coming. He say, “Michael,” It's my husband's name. “Michael, we gave you this grant. Okay. Do it!”. [laughs] So, that is easy for us. So, we follow the Rainbow. We talked with the people who do the Rainbow who develop the Rainbow. So, we use the construction people we—he was an architect, the designer there. So, it's just like a box. Three story, one [bedroom] unit. Everything the whole thing is only one [bedroom] unit and for 62 and up, low income we started it, and they fill up right away. And then now every—every co—village is always have a waiting list about five or six-hundred people. Yeah, so we involve by that.

After the first one—you know my husband. He's very ambitious. So, he say, “We need to do the second one.” [laughs] But it's by accident because it's not easy to find a way to go into some areas that people already dominated. [TS: Mhm.] And one time, I think we get an invitation of a company that they build all kind of government program. We got an invitation for the grand opening of one of their program in Houston. They built all over the nation is a big company they call NRP. So, we went there. And that's for a church. They build a village for the church. So, they always have they are profit—for profit. They always have to tap with a nonprofit, so they can follow the guide of the nonprofit. So we went there, and

then that's why we met them, and we talked to them, and they know that we already have one program, Golden Bamboo. So, they sit down and talk to us. And they found that this nonprofit is a good one. It's not the one that build and then left—I mean just left it abandoned. So, we start number two, Golden Bamboo two in the northwest area. It's a community, it's a family. So, it has one, two, three, and four bedroom. So, no age limit. It's only the legal income limit. So, we build it there. And from there, they see us good so they start the Bamboo Three with us. And he signed it off. He signed off the contract to build Bamboo Three.

And then something happened. He passed away. So sudden, and then at that time, business start to build Bamboo Two and then he pass away. And the company, the NRP, really in panic, because the Bamboo Three not have—not started yet. It just sign the contract. So, who will be take place of my husband to continue the work? And then here we panic too because he—because of heart attack so he doesn't know he have that. I am the wife and I don't even know he has that. It just collapse. Within three days after his funeral, and the board have to meet, we need to find some interim *right* away, to have things still going. We closed this office three day for his funeral, because nobody here everybody at a funeral home. So, we closed three day. And then when we come back, we have a meeting, urgent meeting. And then his son, our son, he been trained by him for almost a year. [TS: Mhm.] And then, because he want to pass down to him, so he trained really careful, *very* intensive. He need to go. He has his own family with a little child like ten months, not even ten months old. Only a few months old. He moved from Austin over here to take this job. And then my husband train him. Every weekend. He needs to go to my house, spend a half day and my husband train him, whatever he needs to train. He's kind of *exhausted*. Mi—Mike Jr. exhausted because he's not used to that intensely. But I think that's—that already planned by God. Because after eight or ten months training here, he suddenly collapsed. The whole thing collapse. But Michael—Mike is the only one who get trained. I follow him, but he never trained me. So, I know what some—something he asked me—opinion and I know the matter, but I don't know everything. Especially the housing, how to deal with the tax credit, I think I know nothing but Mike has been trained. And he's the only one. Even all the staff here, even they are here for ten years or eight years. None of them have the knowledge. So, I bring it up with the board. And then all of us 100% vote for him to be the interim, executive director. I think for ninety days—for three months, let the board know how he's doing.

And then, just a few days later, after the funeral, the top man from NRP—their hub is in Cleveland. He flew over here, meet with Mike, he, the interim [laughs] and interview him and see if he can be capable to continue the work. And after interview him, it's a big relief for him. He see how much Mike know about housing and that he has no problem with English like my husband. My husband still have accent. We still refugee, but Mike was born here. He's American so he can carry out better. [laughs] So, we continue on that. So, Mike—until now Mike Jr. is still running the VNTeamwork. God fix it because Mike refuse first several times. He asked Mike to come here and then he doesn't feel like the job. But I don't know at that time why he accepted, why he accepted to come here and then you know what? My husband is very, very straightforward. Everyone who want to work here he asked two weeks trial no pay, no get pay. So, try to see if you fit this work and if we accept you to work here, we apply to Mike to work without pay. As a mom, I know he need money because he move his family here and stay in the apartment. I say, “Mike if your—if your dad won't pay it, I use my own money, pay you.” So, he okay right away [laughs].

TS: And so one of your son ended up taking over the company did he finish the Bamboo Village Three and Four as well?

NN: Ye—no, not four. He's working on the four very hard. He finished the two I think celebration. I mean, grand opening ribbon cutting say ceremony is happen about, almost a year after my husband pass away and then but while when that they started the Bamboo Three already. So, Bamboo Three's are followed finished the follow year. And then from there, we have three Bamboo to manage. Actually, the two and—and three is managed by the NRP, by the builder. Not from us, because of the way they get the

fund. But Bamboo One, we have the total control of Bamboo One, and that's why we get the revenue here but the other one, they run it, they just share us when they have a cash flow and for the next few years, no cash flow, so we don't have anything. [TS: Mhm.] And Mike is trying hard to get the four. We start from 2011 to now. It's eight—been eight year. After we finish the Golden Bamboo Three with being six year, we couldn't move. Because the fund is not available. And the guideline is kind of tight, more is harder to get enough point to be reviewed by the committee. If—you have to have enough point to submit your application, you don't have enough point, you waste your time. So, it's harder and harder. And also the land, it's not easy to find the land. When I use all my free time to look for the land that they accepted and somebody else already jumped in and get a contract. So, very hard.

TS: And do you think that you've experienced some negative reactions from the Houston community when you started developing affordable housing? Or everything mostly positive?

NN: Oh, oh when I first do it, when we first do it, I say, “oh, no way!”. [laughs]

I do have a fundraising because the number one the funding it—they asked us we have to come up with our own money about \$300,000. [exclaims] So, we do—we have to have the fundraising. And they say, “Uh I don't believe you can do it.” So good fundraising, the fundraising, I think we got like, I can't remember how much. This may be \$100,000 something but a lot of criticism, because they don't believe it. They say, “No way you can build a village for the—not for the Vietnamese but it's for low income people.” Yeah. But mainly it happened in the Vietnamese community, the heart. That location is the heart of the Vietnamese community. So we do struggle like our own family. Besides my own family, I mean, I have to put it there for people to look at it. Okay, even myself, I have to put my own money there. And then I also asked my children [laughs] chip in, chip in, for the fundraising, and so we asked, we asked all dow—Houston endowment the—the girl who write the grant, she has—she had to serve all of that and just throw it out. And then finally, we got enough money yeah, mainly from the outside of the community. Community only about a little bit over \$100,000, yeah.

TS: And so, how have you seen the Vietnamese community in Houston change over time?

NN: I think we grow bigger and bigger and we're contribute to give back to the community, more because a lot of more business around if you see on Bellaire is the main boulevard. The east side of the Beltway 8 is mainly for the Chinese. The west side of the Bel—Beltway 8 is *all* most—all most Vietnamese and we expanded. This location before when we move in 2000, it's almost empty. We are one of the first—one of the few first move in. And because of the service, we *draw* the people. We draw the people in the center and now is all filled up. And they even go to [Cook Road then] they go out to Eldridge and [inaudible]. Now they go to Eldridge. And I think, soon they will pass highway six. [laughs] So, they grow and then now nobody criticize us anymore. Now they see the effectiveness of the Bamboo One and then they don't know much about Bamboo Two because it's outside of the area. But they know Bamboo Three and they always, “How come you don't want—you don't build more Bamboo Village because we have to gather in line waiting—waiting list.” But I say, “It's not that easy. [laughs] There is a need but it's not that easy to build.” Yeah. So, now they understand how well we are [laughs].

TS: And so what are some aspects of the Vietnamese community that you think still need to be improved in Houston?

NN: There are always—you mean the Vietnamese community? [TS: Mhm.] Always we have something to be improved. The—I think the morality the—for the education, the younger generation, we have no problem. We have a lot of people—I can't remember the—but the top of the high school graduation valedictorian? [TS: Mhm.] Yeah, every year. We have few of them. And then they are very good in GPA, more than four, easily. So, but morally because I still see the crimes, even within the Vietnamese

community and the Vietnamese people. I don't know how to do that because I know they are in the prison and the Buddhism and the Catholic try to get into the—into there and then help. I know some monk, the Buddhism—the Buddhist monk. They did go into there. They teach them meditation and they do change. So, but I don't know how to campaign that to have *more* but everything, for the live here, every time I see a crime, within the Vietnamese community and *by* the Viet—Vietnamese people, I feel heartbreak but I—I just don't know how to improve it. And then also, you know, even in the Golden Bamboo Village, sometime it's happen. They come and they take off the wheel and the rims and they break the window and they—this is just—they take the things inside. It's just because you leave the things inside. If you don't, you may avoid it. But, taking off the wheel and the tires. [laughs] How you can prevent it. So, they require us—the resident ask to get the camera around. We have a camera inside the building, but not outside but it costs so we are thinking about it. That's—I don't know. This is out of our control, out of our hand. We want to improve it, but about the business, the economy I think is booming in Houston. Yes, a lot of places that young people, they go there and always get line. They like bamboo—boba tea or something. I try and say, “Uh, how come you like this one?” but all the young, even my grandchildren, they are twenty now. They say, “Oh, that's good, grandma.” I say, “No, I don't—I—it doesn't sound I like it.” But they always get my [inaudible]. It's booming. Yeah, the—the businesses booming. Like, this one is all filled up. And if I move out, somebody fill up right away, yeah.

TS: And in the Vietnamese community in Houston, do you feel as though there's a lot of internal division within these groups?

NN: Internal division? Can you make it—I cannot imagine, what it—

TS: Whether that be people who have come from North Vietnam and resettled in Houston and also people from South Vietnam resettling in Houston. Do you feel as though there's still conflict [**NN:** No!] between these groups?

NN: No, no. With the people come from 1975 or ten years after that. We still know that those refugee is come from the south. But people come from the north, a lot of them come here because of the sponsorship or because they pay money to do the business here, I don't know, a million dollars? And then they can get a ten years green card or something to do the business here. I can recognize right away by the voice, that people—those people I think keep the distance because I don't know who they are. But all the people come from the south we are easily, deal with and associate with. But I can tell a lot of them here now [**TS:** Mhm.] from different way they get here, yeah.

TS: And do you think there's a role of the next generation of Vietnamese Americans in promoting unity in the Vietnamese community and even promoting the Vietnamese community to Greater Houston area?

NN: For the next generation, when *this* generation die out, [laughs] this generation still talk about the communist because we experience. But from—even from my son, he is about thirty-eight now. He born here so he only know that—he only know the Communist through us. So sometime, because he had to connect with a lot of people, he always check with me. “Mommy, did you know these people?” because he's still afraid that he connect with some communist person. And then if people know they say, “oh!” [exclaims] They criticize you hard, so he always check with me. But when I die, I don't know if he can rely on someone else—someone else or he will *learn*, by the time—by that time. But he always be caution. We—every one of us be caution, because we still cannot trust. They are influenced by the communist, or maybe they come here by some special mission. So, we don't know. That is always still the war between us.

TS: So, whenever you started taking up more roles in the Houston community to help the surrounding Vietnamese, what motivated you to do this and do you think you had particular role models that inspired you to volunteer here?

NN: Since we built this one, and I feel that I have the duty to overlook—to look for—look after it, it's just like a child from us. But I kind of phase out, so my son can take over because I need to retire. Right now, if nobody else can do what I'm doing here, I tried to look for someone that I can trust and I can train them to do it. They cannot do exact like I am because I have the pharmacy background, and then they just a worker here, but I know times come. I will go down [laughs] to the dirt. [laughs] It has to be somebody else. And I kind of phase out, with my age. So, I don't take more role for me. I have to phase out and build up the new, the new one to take care because I still want to expand the work here—the goal here. Now for *that*, if you talk to my son, he can talk *much* more because that's his goal. I'm kinda downhill. [laughs] So, no role model for me.

TS: And can you talk about how the Michael CaoMy Nguyen scholarship came to be and who was eligible for the scholarship?

NN: Oh, yeah, you know why we set it up the scholarship? Because my husband is well known in the community. So, he passed—when he passed away so sudden, everyone's shock. He contribute too much to the community. So, everyone, you know, the parking lot is *huge*, and it's fill up. People have to park in the church parking lot across the street. And the room, it's a big room, is always filled up with people and they want to condolence, condolence in money. And for the first day I didn't think of it and then the staff here say, "They donate a lot, you have to do something about it." And then we sit down. "okay what we do?" So we think open—I mean to do the scholarship. So, *all* the money, we put it and we announced on the radio that place all the money put it scholarship for CaoMy Nguyen scholarship. And, you know, that funeral, we collect about \$16,000. \$16,000 and that's why we decided to give out two scholarship. \$1,000 each. How to select it, we have the website, and they need to enroll, register online, and then after they register and then we have guideline for them what they need to submit to us. And we have a committee from the office here. They eliminate some—they select the good five or six, and they give it to the family, which is myself and my three children. And now we add the two more grand—granddaughters because they are twenty already. So, they can join the committee. And then he might—he set up, I mean, the committee here, they set up some standard. And then we need to go by that standard by that guidance and then point them out. And we select the high—the highest point—the highest score, but it has to be both academic and activities. Someone with a good score, but no activities. We don't say like that. It has to be—and they have to have an essay, they have to write an essay about one page, why they apply for this. And so, they have to have some volunteer in a bit—in their blood. [laughs] Not just to go and grab \$1,000 and gone. No, we want to select something with good heart, yeah.

TS: Yes, can you talk about the mission of Radio Saigon and the work that you did with them?

NN: Radio Saigon, 900. Actually, I am the—not almost a founder, but not Radio 900. Before, is a Little Saigon, but when they have the problem here, they close it down and they open a new one. And because they are—they are—they from California, so I'm here and I don't know why God does take me there and then help them to find a channel because they've been kicked out of the old one. And they want to be survive. So they need a new ch—a new station, the new channel and then I don't know why I found them one. And then they want to sell it to me and I did. I did put the earnest money in there, but—and then have on the training, on the takeover process, I just feel it's so hard and my husband is so busy with his work, and then he cannot help me there. And then I'm not capable to run a radio show, a radio station. So, I let somebody else though but actually I initially. And then they invite—they asked me to work with them. I don't get paid as—I host, I host some program and also because VNTeamwork, pronou—have the pro—have the annou—announcement every week. So, we are the loyal customer. So, they reserve one

talk show one hour for us every month, only once a month, that's free. And then also they asked me to talk for them free too. [laughs] One hours a month on the health area, in the health area because I am in the health area. So, since then 1997. Yes, long time. And so now, I'm well known here because people recognize my voice. Even they don't know my face because it's not TV. I was on TV for a while, but then it required makeups and time that's too much. So I drop no more TV. I just stay with radio. It's simple. And so, people sometimes I go to shop and I talk and they asked if I am Ms. Ninh, I say, "Oh, are you listening?". [laughs] They say, "Yes, yeah. I heard you on the radio!" Things like that.

TS: And so, I'm gonna start asking some more general questions about your identity. [**NN:** Yes.] So, what would you consider to be your cultural identity now and has it changed over the years?

NN: What do I consider—?

TS: Your cultural identity whether that be strictly Vietnamese or Vietnamese American or fully American?

NN: Oh, by the look, it's more Vietnamese. [laughs]

TS: Or just how you identify?

NN: I'm a Vietnamese American. [**TS:** Mhm.] Yeah, the root is Vietnamese and the time I live here, the period—the duration I live here is more than I live in South Vietnam. South Vietnam I live only twenty years and then here it's already forty-four years. It's double time. And, but I'm sorry. The English still not [**TS** and **NP** laughs] as I expected. It's just enough for me to deal with the people. And then for the life, it's more Vietnamese. So, I trained my children and my grandchildren, the Vietnamese way. Actually grandchildren don't live with me they live with their parents so they are *much* more Americanized. But when they are with me, I try to teach them the Vietnamese way, just like when they see even the two, three, four years old now, when they see the older people, I asked them to do like this: bow. Yes. So, I like to do it that way. But they say—they stay with their parents so their parents is very—a very Americanized. The way they talk to me is Americanized that I never talked to my parents that way. [laughs] So, I can tell that seven—seventy percent, I'm still Vietnamese. Whenever I go to the event that Vietnamese like, New Year or the temple, I wear my traditional Ao Dai, big event. And then normally when I work a lot and then they wear the American ways. 30% American. Yeah.

TS: And so, do your children and your grandchildren know about any of the stories of your life back in Vietnam?

NN: They don't know this much. After I write that, I may be send it out to them. No, they don't know. They heard about I do the parachute, but they never know why it come to the reason or how do I—my fath— my mom gave birth to me in Vietnam. No, they don't hear that story. [laughs]

TS: And so just kind of generally, what would you consider your proudest accomplishment?

NN: Generally, everybody who knows me, they know, I'm a hard-working person. I put people's benefit first. And I don't care of myself. Since high school, they already knew that, all my friends. So, if somebody tried to criticize me about money or something they say, "that's wrong. This is wrong person" because I'm very straight in money and things like that. So, I always, for my life now and my life in Vietnam, even though I have a very tough childhood, but for recently, I always, not recently, but when I get to here with all the tough road I have to pass, until now, I am very appreciate gratitude to what God given me, to have me now be able to help people and be able to raise my children to be a good citizen, and my grandchildren. Mm, I try to get any moment close to them so I can pass down my passion. And

then I teach them Vietnamese. The two, the two granddaughter, granddaughters, now nine and ten years old. I teach them Vietnamese at home, because it's so intensive to go to the Vietnamese school on Sunday. They squeeze too many things in there. I feel sorry for them. So, I take the book and I teach them at home. More relax. And then I tried to pass down the culture [TS: Mhm.] for classic way. [laughs]

TS: And then I have a final question for you. So, if your great-great-grandchildren were to watch this interview decades from now, was there any wisdom things like to pass on to them?

NN: I think the only thing that is in my blood, so I don't know how much percentage is in their blood. But my first one is passionate. Yeah, think of people. Don't think of you first. I see people think of yourself first. They don't think of other people they don't want to help. They just try to achieve for themselves first. And if we have a *whole* community like that, so who helping who [laughs]? So, I think the first one is a passion. Try to think of people, helping them at whatever level you can help. Don't put your take yourself first. No, don't take your—last one is it's not good. It's not moral. I always put moral. [laughs] So, go to the good way. I think that's—and then me, be patient. And maybe keep follow the old way, which is good for you. Like respect parents, respect the older people, don't talk back to parents. Oh, that's one I hate it. I see on TV. And I wonder why they make those TV. It don't good. It don't bring a good impact to the children because they do *exactly* what the TV do. Yeah. So, I say that. Never talk back to your parents just like I don't want my children talk back to me, sometimes they do. [laughs] But for the grandchildren, I told them, “Be nice and think of people first.” Yeah, I think that's real—number one. As soon as that they can do it, it will lead to everything else. Yeah.

TS to AH: Do you have any more questions?

AH: Yeah, so earlier this year, news broke about some Vietnamese refugees being at risk for deportation. Was that an issue that the Vietnamese community in Houston had to deal with?

NN: I think it's some of them. It's not a lot and I think because they did something wrong, they commit some crimes. And it's only the family can help. They do pass around some petition. But I don't know how much people in a community respond to that. Because the thing is that that person already committed crime. But I also have some relationship with the monk who get into the jail and talk to them. Those people, they do regret what they do, so they rese—they deserve. If they regret what they did, and now they want to improve themselves, and they want to be a good person, I think those people really, really those people not pretending, they deserve a second chance to build back their life. And the way the Buddhists monk help them, I think that's is really good and I hope that we have more monk, more fathers from the Catholic, look at that field and get into that and help those. Yeah, even though *if* they have to be deport back to Vietnam, I don't know if they get any danger from the communists or not. But at least they become a good person already. Yeah, it's just too unfortunate that they cannot stay here. But if they ask for petition, I even have to look at the individual. Not just close my eyes, oh, petition. Sign, sign, sign it. And that's a lot of petition around so I always have to look at and weigh and it is worth it. It's really good for us to do it. And then if it's a good case, I'm willing to do it but if not a—not a good case, not strong enough and it's just because people—one people sign it and then I may have to think twice.

AH: So, you're a very outgoing person. You laugh a lot, smile a lot. How do you think you've overcome all this hardship in your life and with other Vietnamese refugees do talk to each other about those times or how do you cope with them?

NN: Oh, yes, they still—all the elderly people and those people, they are like, eighty something. I'm about close to that eighty. But they always think back, the time that they will call the golden time, and then they still complain about what happening here. With me, I because I put in front of me that I appreciate this chance, this opportunity. That I'm above a lot of people—look at people who stay in

Vietnam and they've under the communist regime. They don't have enough food to eat and they cannot look good, cannot go to school, look at that. And here we have everything. So when people complain about here, I say it in my mind, I cannot say, I say, "Why you come here and live here? Don't complain. You got everything here." And then I have a talk show. I did mention about it very, very general, that the government here, they take care, look, they take care for the Medicare people, sixty-five and up. Before they don't have it but now we have Medicare. They take care of everything and the people have Medicaid. I tease them I say, "Hey, you guys drive Lexus or Mercedes? I drive Corolla." [laughs] Because they have been taken care of by government for anything.

So we do, we do still have people and—but young people they don't. I don't think so. They—they *enjoy* life here because they know that they have freedom. They can do ev—most of everything, except something that now parents ground them because they have [fouls] [inaudible]. But they enjoyed it. I—I think when the second generation and the third generation grow up, we don't have the problem like we have here from 1975. Thing will change and the picture will be more clear. The only thing that because they born here, they've been raising here, they don't know much about the communist. So I'm not sure how they think about that. But right now, whatever I can tell them it's never trust the communist, whoever want you to join something, stay away from that person. This is the life witness of the communist so whenever think about communist, think about parents first, why we come here? Why we left everything back in the country and just escape from the boat and know nothing about the future? We still risk everything. And then just for the freedom, always remember that. That's what I teach my children and my grandchildren. [chuckles] But I think the picture will be different, twenty years from now, yeah. These people already gone. And then all of my children and my grandchildren, they think different. Yeah, I cannot tell them, "Hey, you have to vote for this and oh, no." [chuckles] I vote whatever I want to vote. I never do it. But I see other family, they do it. The children they know what they do. They don't let the parents tell them what they what you do for me. No, they say, "uh-uh." [laughs] So, things will be change I think for a brighter—bright future. Right now is just complaining it doesn't help. Complaining and criticize doesn't help. So, I always look positive. I have a hard life. But I put it aside and I appreciate whatever I happened here and I just go from there up. Yeah, I don't look back. I look back to change, to change to better, but I don't look back for complaining and just nothing help. Yeah.

AH: Okay, last question. [NP and AH laughs] Do you think the youngest, the younger generations or future generations of Vietnamese Americans should remember and think back to the difficulties faced during the war and faced by the refugees, or do you think they should try not to dwell on that time?

NN: Oh, no. I always—I always want them to know about it, because this is a lesson. Don't forget. Don't forget everything and just enjoy the life here and forgot all the sacrifice that the parents and grandparents did. So, things I this is have to either library or something they want to search, they have somewhere to search. And then they know the story if they don't know by now, and then they will know I always want them to study—I mean to remember the hardship that the ancestor went through to be not a model but to be a caution. Yeah, and to be to learn about it. I do—I don't want them to totally forget. Maybe I'm old fashioned. But live in America and still remember how your ancestor went through. Just like the Chinese now they remember hundred year, two-hundred years ago, the ancestor have to do the railroad. It's the life is very miserable. They have to remember it. Just like my children have to remember. First, why we are here, yeah. If they remember that, they will remember forever, yeah.

AH: Thank you so much.

TS: Yes, thank you for your time. This is great.

NN: You're welcome. I hope I helped some. [All laugh]

TS: You're amazing.

NN: Thank you.

[End of Interview]