Interviewees: Nghi Nguyen, Nha Tu
Interviewer: Ann Shi
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Transcribed by: Ann Shi
Edited by: Chelsea Li
Audio Track Time: 1:33:09

Background: Nghi Nguyen and Nha Tu is a Vietnamese Americans couple in the LGBTQ community. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they donated to the Houston Food Bank, which was funded through the sales of their designed, hand-crafted masks. Their contribution was reported on the OutSmart Magazine's front page.

Nghi was born in 1993 in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and grew up there. Having tried out various disciplines and taking a gap year, he decided to come to Houston to study Fashion in Houston Community College to pursue his passion. While studying, he interned at local designer’s shops mentored by one of the most well-known designer in Texas, Chloe Dao; and later upon graduation, he founded his own online women’s wear brand “NEEWIN”. He started taking testosterone injections two months before the date of this interview, an important step of transition toward his true identity.

Nha was born in Vietnam in 1994. She came to the US with her parents at age 10 to join her grandparents. They settled first in Iowa, and then in Dallas, then Houston in 2016. She studied in Iowa State University first, then University of Iowa, then University of Texas Health Science Center with a bachelor’s degree in Nursing, which she obtained in May 2018. She is now a registered nurse serving at the HCA Houston Healthcare in Clear Lake, Texas. Her job nowadays includes caring for COVID-19 positive patients, for which she also shared her experiences of in this interview.

The couple shared their experiences of meeting each other first, their favorite dating activity —being the museum, as well as their prospects for the future.

Setting: The interview was conducted via Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key:
NN: Nghi Nguyen
NT: Nha Tu
AS: Ann Shi
—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop
…: speech trails off; pause
Italics: emphasis
(?): preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)
Interview transcript:

AS: Today is April 22, 2020. We're here with Nghi Nguyen and Nha Tu, who we discover thanks to the Outsmart Magazine, and they're on the cover page of the magazine for their contribution to the Houston Food Bank during the COVID-19 pandemic, which we are currently in the middle of—and we'll definitely cover that shortly. And meanwhile, thank you so much for your time and contribution for the Houston Asian American Archive. We'll break down the interview into three parts; and first, we'll interview Nghi, and then Nha; and then after that, we'll do it with the both—both of them.

Um, so Nghi, could you please tell us a little bit about your upbringing, where and when were you born, and the neighborhood you were brought up in?

NN: Okay, so I was born in 1993 in Ho Chi Minh City, and it's in the south of Vietnam. And I remember when I was living in Vietnam, I actually used to live in, like two different houses. So my first house is very poor, the neighborhood, most of the people was working class with the very low income in. When I was around the first or second grade, my parents we move to a second house, which very close to the first house that I lived. And by the time I think the technology start to growing in my neighborhood. So there's a school. They're more the internet. But, you know, around that time, it was very poor.

AS: And I read about your parents and your family had the sewing business back then?

NN: Yes. So, um, I think like they have been doing the business in fashion, even before I was born. And what I remember they told me is that, at the beginning, they used to make like some handbag or a bag, or like the luggage. And later on, we start on doing a lot quantity for fashion, and we export it to out of country.

AS: I see. So mostly for export businesses.

NN: Yes, export.

AS: Great! And what kind of values have your parents had instilled in you during your upbringing?

NN: Sorry?

AS: What kind of values have your parents instilled in you during your upbringing? Like what kind of—parents have your—what kind of values have your parents educated you to value most?

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NN: Yes. Oh, I think, um, in the business side, my mother she has more like affect in the way that I do my business. She always teach me on how to build a strong foundation before you can go further. For any goals in your life, in your plans, you have to make sure like the first step is the most important step.

AS: So kind of very— kind of foundation. Yes. That's great. And what brought you to Houston?

NN: So I remember like when I just graduate at the Culture and Art College in Vietnam, I had a conversation with my cousin. She's living in Houston. And she asked me like, "Hey, have you ever thought about, you know, study abroad in Houston?" And I said, like, "Mhm, I never thought about that. But just let's try it." So I took an interview. And luckily, I passed the interview. And I came to Houston in January 2016. When I came here, I always, you know, like, I'm very into fashion. And I decided to learn fashion again at Houston Community College. And that's what brought me to Houston.

AS: And before that, you were in Ho Chi Minh City's Cultural and Arts college. Right? Can you tell us about that?

NN: Um, so, um, after I graduate from high school, you know, like, the education system in Vietnam is like after you graduate to high school, you take a very big, like, examination to decide what major that you want to study, or what school that you want to apply for. And by that time, most of my friend, they had the dream, they had goals, they know what they want to become; they know what they want to do. Except for me, because I didn't know like, "Okay, what do I do, who I want to be in?" My parents, they were very supportive. They never push me or tell me what they want me to do. Then let me choose what I want to do.

So after my sec- twelve grade, so I took one year off. Yeah, to actually think about what I want to study. In the half month, the half second one of that year, I spent just most of the time you know, like relaxing. I went to the gym. I got like six months off in my education life. In the last segment, I decided that I want to study something about fashion. But I didn't know exactly that I want to study fashion design. So I went to school, the architect at the the architecture school, to learn about like drawing, my sketching, drawing; and while I was studying at that school, I realized that I want to study fashion. So I applied and I began my fashion education at culture and our collective in Vietnam.

AS: So before you moving out of Vietnam, would you tell us or share some memorable childhood memories or memories about your family? Or the city, the neighborhood?

NN: Yes, I remember like, when I was a kid. By that time, there was not much technology. So I always remember that. My childhood friends and me, we spend most of the time just, you know, hanging out on the street, cycling and, you know, do some like, skite flying. And some time like, we just camp in some store and rent some comic book and we shared each other.

AS: So can you talk about your experiences in choosing the school? Like you had, I guess a number of applications, I would assume. Like how did you decide to come to Houston Community College?
NN: So, I, my cousin and I, we actually did a research before I came to Houston. So we did a research of which school in Houston that has the fashion program. Yeah, and we actually found out that like, HCC was one many choice that has the fashion program. And by the time, it's what also like close to where I live. Yeah. So we decided to, you know, take HCC as my first school to study fashion in America.

AS: Did you know anyone? Like you said, there's a friend. Are there someone else that has influenced you, your decision? And how?

NN: Yes. So I... that's a friend of my cousin. Yeah. So by the time I think he's— were about going into public from the fashion major at HCC. So we talk a little bit through Facebook, and he suggests me that HCC, they had a very amazing professor and their project, their lesson is very good. For me to learn as well as try other experience in all the fashion competitions.

AS: So have you joined any of the competitions?

NN: Yes, I have like participate like so many, most of the competition that the school gave us. Yes, I participate most of them in and outside of school.

AS: Great. Did you win any awards? Or...

NN: Yeah, I won some. There's a very big like, fashion competition in Dallas. It's called FGI. FGI Dallas Scholarship Competition. And it happened like every April. Yes. So, so far, I think I had competed three time. Yeah, three times. For the last three years ago, I won the "Best of Sewing" Award, which I won an industrial sewing machine. Yes.

AS: That's great. So can you describe the circle of friends or the demographics of HCC?

NN: So for my circle of friends... Um, most of my best friend came from when I study at middle school and high school back in Vietnam. Even though right now we... I moved to here, and they like, very busy with their work in Vietnam too. But we try to keep in touch with each other by, you know, like Facetime, or like Facebook, or like, just like text message, to ask like, "oh, how you been? How's everything going on?" At HCC, I actually like have made and I made some, very like, close friends to me.

AS: Great. Did you know English before coming to Houston?

NN: I study English when I was in middle and high school. But when I was in college in Vietnam, they didn't have the English major. I actually didn't study any English school when I was studying three year in the Culture and Art College.

AS: Was there any culture shock when you came here first?

NN: Um, I think the culture shock properly the language. Yeah, the language. Like I remember, like when I first took like some ESL class at HCC, to be honest, I couldn't understand what the professor said.
'Cause even though you know, like in Vietnam, we study like grammar and writing, but we didn't actually have the environment to speak and to hear as well as to practice. So when I came here, you know, I heard like conversation, like 80% I didn't understand. So it was a very tough time for me to come back home and study like extra too, you know, do all the translation in Google on the vocabulary.

**AS:** Yeah, you can imagine. So has, have you received any help from any of the communities? Or someone who have been most influential in your life so far?

**NN:** Oh, I actually very lucky that I have a lot of my– my cousin, my uncle, my aunt here. And uh, they have been supporting me a lot with my life education; or in what, in the way that I do my business.

**AS:** Great. Are they also in the fashion and design industry?

**NN:** No, I think I'm the only one in the family that actually into the fashion industry.

**AS:** Mhm. So can you draw a new connection with first pursuing architecture and then into fashion? Because I would assume you need a lot of good drawing skills in order for both of these.

**NN:** Yes, so um, at first, I like to draw. I like to sketch. But like I didn't know what the, you know, was like what the difference between the architecture and life, fashion design. So that's why I took like, the basic foundation between the two major is about like sketching and drawing. And so from that, like, why drawing why sketching. And I just remember, like, we grew up in the, you know, like, industrial sewing machine from my family background. So I thought to me to, "Oh, maybe like, fashion is for me!" So I try out with fashion and I think like, you know, self-driving, I love it.

**AS:** Um, so who are your role models as a designer?

**NN:** As a designer? I think my favorite fashion designer is Zac Posen. ‘Cause I love like his technical and all the construction is, you know, it's like look very difficulty. And I remember while I was internship, we with one a very, like, popular local designer, Dao— Chloe Dao. And I brought her up some of my idea, or my question about like, “how can I do this construction like that person?” And she told me, she actually guide me some steps, some techniques. And I even borrow like a mini doll from one of her worker and to practice, from paper to fabric. Yeah.

**AS:** So can you talk about the internship experience that you've had around in Houston? I mean, is that the first experiences in your career?

**NN:** Oh yeah. Um, so I think I internship with Chloe around like 2017 to 2018, like around a year. So when I took my internship class at school, and I was always very late. And Chloe, she was very sweet and guide and fund me. You know, like, pass she– she taught me a lot. I have learned a lot from all the cut–cutting, sewing and especially like, draping on the mannequin from Chloe. And more than that, I think I learn more the like business side from Chloe company. She got me like so many advice of how to be successfully, how to run merchandising our retail store. So I think it was a very great way experience that
you know, as a fashion student, you should try out, used to reach out to any local boutique or local
designer to work as a part-time job; or even volunteer to learn more experience. It's a very important to
build your success for you in the future.

**AS:** So what— what are the challenges in becoming a designer you would say?

**NN:** I think the most challenging is you have to stay balanced between your creativity, and... I call it, side
of the real life. Know it's like when we in the studio, my– my mind, my creativity is very flexible, we– we
create something very beautiful, something that we like. But in the real life we have to create something
that the customer wants to buy. So it's like the two different direction, that for me I have to stand in
between to make it balanced, to make my creative life; but also make like the profitable for me to able to
sustain my business.

**AS:** So where do you draw your inspiration from?

**NN:** That's a good question. I think of inspiration for me is just come from... maybe my life. You know,
like with communication with people I interact with the like, um... the... like, social images. Maybe come
from like Instagram, Pinterest; come from any of like the runway; some like VeriFone Collection for
famous designers. So pretty much it come from, you know, like, everything around— around me that I see.

**AS:** Do you draw any inspiration from the Vietnamese culture or fashion? Like the traditional dress?

**NN:** You know, like traditional dress of Vietnam "ao dai". And I remember when I was in culture in our
college, we actually learn how to make "ao dai". But like it was very hard. Actually like to be able to
finish the neck of the "ao dai" is the the most difficult part. And I actually don't take a lot of inspiration
from "ao dai" to my collection that I'm working right now I actually see. But I always inspire or pack up
the Asian culture in anything that I do.

**AS:** So how did you decide to found "NEEWIN"?

**NN:** So I always want to have an online store. I always do have my business in fashion in America. So
when I first came here, I think like every week, every month of every year, I need a little restart, of like
how to run a business. And like, year by year, I have more information, I have more knowledge. And it
just, you know, like the right time for me to, "Okay, it's time." And I came up with "NEEWIN" because
that the way that you know my friend here called me. By my name, so "NEEWIN" is actually like how
American say my name. [**AS:** Oh!] Yeah.

**AS:** That's a bit of cross cultural over there. And so how has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced your
business say?

**NN:** So before– before COVID happened, I sometimes like pass by some operation store to work as an
intern. Even back in the studio, or even in the front– front store, by cad light(?) of customer service, as
well as some tailor. And when I in the back, I have normally sewing, our main– main– main admin on
the— work of all the seamstress. And after COVID happen, most of the time that I've been staying at home, and, you know, that's, that's I think that's the time that I had the idea and came up with the mask project. Yeah, try something to help the community out there.

AS: Yeah. By the way, we haven't touched this— where is "NEEWIN" located?

NN: "NEEWIN" it currently just an online store. So basically, like, you know, every production is at my apartment.

AS: Can you talk about the efforts of fundraising through yourselves of the "55 mask" online, or you also call it by the "Solid mask"? Maybe you can also talk about how you decide to name those.

NN: So for the mask project, the mask project that, um, after the COVID happen, so people has more awareness of wearing masks to— as a tool to protect themselves and others. So I was like, okay, maybe make mask but with something new. So all the mask that I have right here, is a rarely like silky fabric, but also very like breakable fashion and stylish. And my mask, it comes with three sizes. Like it have like medium, a little bit smaller, then the large. So customer will have more options to choose. And also I have our different color as well, because you know like some girls they like pink; some men will refer like just solid black. And— and with like every mask that customer purchase, a percentage of the proceeds will be donated to Houston Food Bank. And by selling mask is also a step to help me maintain my business during this pandemic, but also a way to help the community give back to the community in what I can do.

AS: Sure. What's special about the Houston Food Bank, that you decided to work with them on this?

NN: So, because the pandemic, a lot of people, they lost their job. So they can't afford to buy food or they can't support their family. And with Houston Food Bank, they are very big help for people that can afford buying food. So that's why I chose Houston Food Bank as the place to donate my proceed of selling mask. We also read about some of the news regarding the disruption of the supply chains from overseas due to the COVID-19. Have you had any impact by that?

Not really, because most of the fabric and elastic I purchased from a local fabric store in Houston. So I'm, well I'm very lucky not to have any this postponed or delayed by the material purchased.

AS: Can you also speak about how the "55 mask" and the "solid mask" was named?

NN: So I inspired by, I always felt like silky, like silky fabric. So when I pick a fabric I just, you know, test out and feel a lot of different kinds of fabric. And I decided to go with the like the sachin fabric, because it's very soft, especially for like sensitive skin and also very, like wearable. And by selling mask we don't have now, you know, like, we want to came up with some like creating a name for the mask. So we came up with different like packages and different set for consumers to buy.

AS: That's great. Um, have you made much sales and fundraising so far?

NN: So far I actually haven't counted yet; but so far we have saw sale like many, many masks; and we're about to, at the end of this weekend, we do all the calculation and bring the money and went to the go to
the Houston Food Bank. Very exciting to you know, to be able to finally reach to the step in half out the people that need help.

AS: That's great. I'm sure they'll really appreciate that.

NN: Yeah. Thank you.

AS: So in what ways have you found a sense of community in Houston?

NN: I'm sorry?

AS: In what ways? Have you found a sense of community in Houston?

NN: What does it mean? Sorry?

AS: I'm just wondering, how would you call Houston home? Have you find any belonging— sense of belonging in Houston after moving here? Since...?

NN: Yeah, definitely. Yes. Now I feel like Houston is my second home. Because I've been living in Houston seeing 2016 so almost like four year, more than four years here in Houston. I have met so many, you know, lovely people, very creative people. And at Houston there's also a very big Asian community, and a lot of like Asian food too. So, so far I'm very happy to live in Houston.

AS: Yeah. What is your favorite place to go in Houston?

NN: We actually like Nha and I, we love to visit museum. So we went to a lot of museums in Houston. And even when we travel to another states, like museum is always one up on the list of where we go to visit.

AS: Which museums are your favorite in Houston? The MFA or...?

NN: My favorite museum in Houston is the Museum of Fine Art Houston. Yeah, I went there a lot because it's ... Some time we have the fashion show is called like fashion fusion, fashion show that the program is connected between HCC fashion and with the Museum of Fine Art.

AS: Great. Moving on, we might want to talk about the fashion industry, here and globally. Just want to see how you would consider the strong consumer market in Asia as a potential to create new perspectives on fashion. Because um, with the more, kind of, attention on Asian designers as well as Asian mainstream movies such as the "Crazy Rich Asians" that has brought out a lot of the models. Would you consider here in the US, there's a new standard of beauty and aesthetics?

NN: I think— I think recently like Asian, Asian we have like, more and we have achieved a lot of like my winning achievement; and also we are recognized more by the world. And especially in the fashion
industry, as you know, we have a lot of factory or industrial company that located in Asia. And I think Asia country is very peak part in the fashion market, and for the runway a lot of people say like, they want to see more Asian model. I think like that's a very good way that maybe like in the future, we have more Asian model to represent more Asian culture to the world.

**AS:** So how do you think is the way for the Asian designers to have bigger impacts? For example, we had seen Michelle Obama wearing Jason Wu's designs. Like how do you think people can raise more awareness?

**NN:** I think is still a very, not a very easy way to get more Asian designer out there, especially to reach more like, in the western custom of customer. But you know, like the more, there are more Asian design or Asian designer acting or compete in some fashion competition; or even go in some like TV show, reality show, fashion... I think like they will get more people to know them. And you know with a very cool of beautiful design, it also will make customer, no matter if they Asian or not, want to purchase their design.

**AS:** So, what do you think of the forces of the say capitalism? How does the money inside work in the fashion industry? Like what is needed to get, say, more marketing?

**NN:** I think marketing, marketing is a very powerful tool, but it is also a very... How do I say? I think like marketing, marketing to design a lot of important part in design. Like where your business will go on, you know like if you have the right marketing, you will reach more people, more people will know about your brand.

So, yes, I still I have worked in a lot of you know, to improve the marketing skill for my brand. But so far I think I have learned a lot through all the classes that I studied at HCC as well as a lot research that I do on the internet. Yeah.

**AS:** So how do you think the social media, which I think you, you have been primarily using influenced the fashion industry in general?

**NN:** I think it's a pick and pack in the fashion industry. Right now, like most of every people we have like, like our social network, you know, we use a lot of social app like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, or like Snapchat. And every time like we just scroll down the screen, we see a lot of the fashion image in runway or from a famous designer. And it's the way to also educate fashion to people, and also a way for you to “like” magazine your print. Yes also, you know it's very important for you to build up your brand.

**AS:** So can you also tell us about your choice of your own fashion? Like how you portray yourself, like your hairstyle and say, how do you choose it?

**NN:** Um, I, currently, my friend uh, focus on women's wear. And for me, myself, my style is very sporty and athletic. Because I work a lot. So you know, I need to be like flexible. So I just, most of the time I wear like a T-shirt with a jeans, and a little wax for my hairstyle, you know something quick and I'm ready to work.
AS: Is there any role model like a celebrity fashion style that you really appreciate?

NN: I don't have a model for me to look it up. But I'm currently I really like Tan France from “Queer Eye”, I guess he's very style-able and very fashionable, and the way his look, he is also very, you know, clean, but elegant and super super fashionable.

AS: So moving on. Can you share a little bit about your gender identity, like how do you identify yourself and how are there like, um, kind of milestones or the steps that you have undertaken?

NN: And the way he's look he is also very, you know, clean, but elegant in the pursuit of all fashionable.

AS: So moving on, can you share a little bit about your gender identity? Like how do you identify yourself and how are they like the kind of milestones or the steps that you have undertaken?

NN: My gender identity is a trans-man. And I just have started my transformation from February. So right now is kind of my two months on using testosterone on my body. Yeah, so far. I'm so happy, you know. I can become today as I always wanted to be.

AS: Congratulations!

NN: Thank you.

AS: So how have you come to this decision?

NN: I think like some time like my decision just commit when I feel is the right time. A few months ago, I decided to came to clinic, and has a, you know, conversation with a doctor. And she told me like, whenever I'm ready, just let her know and then we can start. So like two months ago, on February is the time that I decide okay, it's time for me to become what I want.

AS: Great. So what were the challenges that you have faced during your period of transition?

NN: Um, the difficult time, I think is letting people especially like my family, in my relative know about the process that I'm doing. It's not very easy, especially in the Asian culture. The culture that I grew up in like we don't share so many detail about, like how you feel, like what your thought. So it's, it's a little bit as well, a little bit hard for me to brought it up. So when the Outsmart Magazine published is when the time that I actually open and talk about it more.

AS: Great. Have your family been supportive?

NN: Yes, they, they, they surprised. They surprised us. You know, like during the COVID, we haven't been like seeing each other for like, two months. It's also the time that I start my testosterone. They surprised but they very, has been very supporting me on my decision.
AS: Wonderful. So have you received support from the local community?

NN: Um, yeah, I have—I have received some messages from like LGBT community when they read about my story in the Outsmart Magazine. So right now I have you know, like, make a going-to-meet more like, new friends in the LGBT community.

AS: Great. So have Outsmart Magazine reached out to you or how did that connection happen?

NN: Let me think. I think I think Outsmart Magazine, I think they found... Yeah, I think they found—found me through "NEEWIN". Yeah, and then they reach out, if I want to do interview about my mask project.

AS: Great. So coming back to social media. So how do you see social media has helped in a way to give more attention to like social justice and LGBTQ rights?

NN: Like social, like social media, it is very important to all the aspect with the fashion world or even with the LGBT community. I think it's a way to connect people. You know, like, especially during this pandemic time, people will use more social media to contact with each other. Yeah.

AS: Great. And lastly, I just want to— have you had to face any like prejudice or discrimination due to your identity—that you wanted to share?

NN: I haven't. I haven't had like experience in like discrimination. But like back then when I was in Vietnam, I used to hear some whisper that they, saying like, "Oh, is that a boy? Is that a girl?" You know, so, actually, like, I think like those whisper are like those common conversation still happen a lot. You know is it's not a good way to being talked about a person like this, especially in the public. But, you know, like, you can't never change the way that people say things. So you just have to change the way that you react to to them.

AS: So how, and what is the way that you have been reacting to those, say whispers?

NN: Um, I just I didn't say anything. I just, you know. Like, they say whatever they want, you know; and I didn't mind their business. You know, like, I just move on with my life. I'm going to have a lot of things to do and I know I'm going to be very successful. So I think that's the more important thing than thinking about what they say.

AS: And how about, during the COVID-19, we've been seeing more like targeted racism, like the current President's call—calling this the "China Virus" and the "Kung Flu". Have you experienced any say, similar targets, during the pandemic?

NN: For myself, I haven't actually any, you know, those kind; but I knew I read a lot of newspaper that a lot of Asian community, they had affect by being racist of, you know, like, people think that like Asian
people is the one that who brought the virus in U.S. So I think it's a, is what a bad way to call it's a Chinese vir- virus. 'Cause it make people thought the way that they shouldn't. And which is not right for the Asian community.

**AS:** Great. Yeah that's the part of my questions for you. Maybe next we can move on to Nha, okay? I'll let you take a break. Thank you. Yeah. Well thank you for joining us and very... Yeah, it's very appreciated that you're taking your time out. Yeah. [**NT:** Thank you.]

So can you start by telling us about your upbringing and your childhood memories?

**NT:** Yeah. I was born in Vietnam, as was born in a different part in Dallas. And I, my family and I moved to the United States, I think in 20.... 2004. So I grew up here in the United States. And childhood-wise, I think most of my memories are actually from here. I don't remember too much from my upbringing in Vietnam, but I do remember the old house that we used to live in. And the communities there the parks that I would be I used to go to in Vietnam, and those always— those were the ones that stood out in my mind because they were really happy memories.

**AS:** I see. Did you say you were born here or in Vietnam?

**NT:** In Vietnam.

**AS:** In Vietnam. And when did you move here?

**NT:** In the US? In 2004. I actually moved to a different state before moving to Houston.

**AS:** I see. Can you describe the neighborhood that you were brought up in?

**NT:** In Vietnam? [**AS:** Yes. Or if you remember, or here in the US.] I remember that we lived far from the main street, you had to go down an alley that would eventually split— split into smaller alleys. And I remember, you know, and then on, you would use the motorbikes to get everywhere. So I remember my dad or my sisters would have to walk the motorbike up this tiny hill to get to where our house was, and the house was located. In one of the small alleys, and it was just a row of houses. I remember the house that we had back then was, it was a smaller house. I can't remember we have one or two stories, but I remember that we had a big, big backyard. My parents love to garden. So back there was, you know, all the trees that you can imagine. And it was very green. Very beautiful back there.

**AS:** And did you move to the house with your parents?

**NT:** Yes, my whole family moved. In 2004. We moved to be closer to my grandparents who were here first.

**AS:** And what was the reason for the move? I guess...
NT: We just want to my parents want to give us better opportunities. You know, my grandparents had been living in the U.S. for I want to say, 5 to 10 years at that point. So they knew that there was so many options for us as children that maybe we wouldn't be able to access from Vietnam.

AS: Do you have any siblings?

NT: Yes, I have two older sisters. And one of them live here in Houston and the other one lives in Maryland.

AS: I'm just wondering, since you're more like, kind of more, spend longer years in America and your parents were more like, first generation. Do you see any cultural gap between you and your parents?

NT: Yeah, for sure. I think there's still a big cultural difference. My parents spent most of their lives in Vietnam, you know, so I have a big impact on them. They still hold on to very traditional beliefs. But I'm really appreciative of them because they've— I guess the word is probably— assimilate to the Western culture a lot more. They're very understanding and pretty open to the culture here in the West.

AS: So what kind of traditional values that— like Vietnamese values— that your parents brought you up to treasure?

NT: They, I think with all Asian parents, they value hard work. They believe that you have to earn everything you have. And they also believe that you know, family comes first and that those values for me as well has always been top priority.

AS: Great. So can you tell— tell us about your education experiences. I read about you first had a degree and University of Iowa.

NT: Yes. I started off in college at the University of Iowa. Actually, before I was at the University of Iowa, I started at Iowa State University, which is another school. I started off with a major in graphic design. Eventually didn't... it wasn't the right fit. So I switched over to a science space major at the University of Iowa, where I kind of went into health sciences. After about one or two years there, I moved on to Houston, where I pursued my nursing degree.

AS: So what have been your favorite subjects and your education that has led to health sciences?

NT: I guess I was, I guess I would have to say anatomy and physiology. I remember it was one of the hardest courses in school and everybody was dreading it. However, it was a good challenge because I you had, at one point, we had to memorize all the bones in the body. And it was just something so difficult that I challenged myself to do it. And at that point, I could do it but now if he asked me if I couldn't.

AS: So can you also share some experiences about studying at the UT Health sciences?
NT: Yeah, um, I signed up for the pacesetter program, which is a 15-month continuous program to basically graduate with a bachelor's degree. It was very, very intense. It was one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do. But no, I made it though. And it was such a good learning experience. It was, you know, learning all the time you had to learn so many different ideas and how to work together with your peers. And during school we also got opportunities to work in the local hospitals and medical center. And it was an amazing experience because Texas Medical Center is such a huge center for care in the United States, and you got to see all sorts of people, all sorts of patients and wonderful health care workers.

AS: So, are you living in Houston? Do you have any family besides in Houston?

NT: I have a sister. My little sister also lives and works in Houston. My parents are still in Iowa, where we first moved to so she's my only family right now.

AS: So how did you lead to a career in nursing?

NT: I don't think I was something I ever thought I would do. I honestly, my both of my sisters went for the health-based careers. And I thought I would be the one to do the opposite. But eventually I found that, you know, I was most compatible with who I was and what I wanted to do. So I think a lot of people think that you had to choose a career that will make you happy all the time. But I think it's more of a career that is worth doing and something that you feel good about, about what you're doing.

AS: So what aspects of nursing do you think it's worth doing?

NT: I think the advocating for my patients. A lot of times when we when I see patients, they don't know what's going on, and they don't, they're not and especially if it's their first time in the hospital, they don't know what to expect, how things work, and what the doctor do, what I do as a nurse. So I try my best to educate them with everything I do, about how the process is and what we can do for them. And I use my knowledge to kind of fight for them, when sometimes things shift should be done, but they don't always get done.

AS: So, besides your sisters, who are your role models, or who are the people who influenced you to get into this career?

NT: I guess, my friends, you know, I have, I've made plans through school in the work that encouraged me to do what I do every day. It's a lot of people say, you know, nursing is a hard job and it takes a special kind of person to do it. So I kind of attribute that to my support. Some my friends, my family, they kind of encouraged me to keep doing what I do because it's, it makes such an impact for me.

AS: And what are the challenges in your job?
NT: Challenges? There's a lot of different personalities that I work with. Sometimes when patients are very, very safe, they're not at their best, they will act logically because of the disease process, for example. So it's kind of hard to communicate with them when that is the case.

AS: And so, is that the moment that it would get pretty stressful?

NT: Yeah, I would say so. I think communication is very important. So when you're not able to communicate With your patients effectively, sometimes it does lead to stress. And I remember, with their family members are also very helpful, they also want to see their family member improve. So we can spend a little more time to reach out to those people and see if we can get clear answers and help the patients cooperate with us, for example.

AS: So is there a specific kind of patients that you work with? Or is in general, any patient?

NT: I work with a lot of older adults; I would say like 40 plus years. A lot of our patients also have long standing history of heart problems. We see a good variety. There's a lot of disease processes that we see on our floor.

AS: So during the current pandemic, do you have to deal with any COVID-19 patients?

NT: I actually have, at one point, was for a short period, I got a chance to work with patients that were suspected for COVID or positive for COVID. So that was definitely something to adapt to. I know that during that time, personally, I saw that there was a lot of changes going on to our healthcare system, and to how we care for patients. As with anything I think adjusting to it was the biggest challenge.

AS: Can you share with us those experiences of changes... Or I mean, if you can share?

NT: I think just to speak broadly 'cause just to speak broadly, there were policy within the hospital to accommodate, you know, those patients and policies that help protect us as workers as well, so that we're not putting ourselves in unnecessary, risky situations.

AS: So yeah, we've all read about all these shortages, and all these people, who actually haven't graduated fully from their degree, are actually taken to the frontline for help, because of the shortages. [NT: Yeah.] That– that has also been something you've been witnessing?

NT: I haven't witnessed it personally at my hospital. But I have also kept up with the news about that. In other states, I know that they've been kind of waiting the requirements for licenses, so that we have more nurses to assist and care for those patients. But I know that even before you're fully licensed, or before you take the examination, some states do allow for nurses to practice like post-graduation. So I think it's just an extension of that.

AS: So, can you also share some stories, like inspiring stories or memorable experiences that you want to share during this pandemic?
NT: Yeah, I think the number one thing I've noticed, is that we— the people that I work with are very good at working together and supporting each other, during COVID and responsible for a certain amount of patience. And we work like a mini team within the unit that we're on. Into the restrictions and for safety purposes, only the nurses who are taking care of the COVID patients are able to go into those rooms. So for example, if you're in your PPE and you need a certain type of equipment that you don't already have in the room, and I would call my fellow coworkers and they would kind of pass that equipment into me; so I don't have to gown up and waste PPE. I think that's the biggest thing, you know, working together to get everyone through this. It's hard time because it truly is.

AS: Um, did you have to witness any of the patients, like... leaving?

NT: Oh, yes, for sure. And we've discharged several patients to self-quarantine. And that way they can recover at home. Fortunately, most of the people we saw had very mild symptoms. So they are able to go home. And just have a rest.

AS: How about, have you witnessed any of the patient's passing away?

NT: I have not. The unit I work on is not intensive care. So we watch I see a lot of patients who are relatively stable.

AS: So when you come back from work, do you have to have a certain procedure that you follow in order to protect yourself and your loved ones?

NT: Yeah, when I was taking care of the coma patients, I would wash my hands very, very thoroughly before I go home. I try not to touch anything that I use during that day before I go home. So I just kind of leave it all at work. And when I come home, I also wash my hands again, make sure that I try not to bring anything home.

AS: Well, thank you so much for the reaction that very special experiences. You're actually one of our first interviewees who are actually on the front line and making all those sacrifices and providing all the help that we all need. Thank you. So coming to Houston, like, what kind of community are you involved in?

NT: Um, I guess I'm involved in the community of nurses in here in Houston. I try to keep up with my friends who have graduated and gone to other hospitals to work. I've also spoken with them about their experiences with the pandemic and COVID-19 and all that. So it's very interesting to hear what everyone's experiences are like.

AS: So how about your sisters, do they? I mean, do they also have to help on the frontline as healthcare workers?
NT: Yes, one of my sisters work as a pharmacist. Fortunately, she is able to work from home, help in, you know what she does. My other sister works for a company that does research for like medicine and approves research and all that. So I understand, you know, they're we're all fortunate enough to have our job still and to be able to contribute in any way we can to help find out more about COVID and how to stop it.

AS: Um, I've always heard like for the past few months, like how unprecedented this has been. And is that something that you would also agree? Like?

NT: Yes. Yes, for sure. You know, for a lot of people losing their job for the first time that they thought was stable. And the economy, we've seen a lot of changes their stocks have fallen, you know, people are losing faith and, and how stable our economy is and how it's able to grow. And even in the medical system, you know, we're almost we're changing policies almost daily, you know, at one point where we were changing it hourly, because we were so behind on all the information on COVID. So we didn't know what was best practice. So it's just, it's been a lot of changes. So I think everyone's stressed out about that. And it's at such a big scale, a global scale that we've never seen before.

AS: So, have you also been helping with the “55 mask” making?

NT: I've had a very small part to play with that. Um, I think when we had the idea was as supportive, you know, because I wanted to see and be successful and to strive as well, working from home as a struggle not to be confined to your home every day. But the matchmaking project I think it's such a great idea because, as you brought up the PPE shortage is still very relevant. I see a lot of just regular people walking around with supplies that you know, sometimes I think that will get us in the hospitals; and sometimes it's... it worries me that we don't have enough because we're in... We have no choice but to be in close contact with positive patients sometimes. With the masks, I think donating to the food bank is a great step because food is like a basic necessity, you know, for everyone. And I think it's something that no one should have to worry that much about.

AS: Great. So how do you see this will change our lives after the pandemic is over, fingers crossed?

NT: I think I hope it"ll... the changes we see during this and then make will hopefully extend to years ahead. You know, the things we learn about making sacrifices and prioritizing the important things as well as working together as a nation. I think if we can maintain that and use that in the future, everything will be a lot smoother.

AS: So I got to asked this one, to Nghi before too— like, have you experienced any prejudice or negative responses for being Asian American in the country during the pandemic?

NT: Um, yeah, I don't think either of us have experienced that personally, which is something we're both grateful for. And I know that there's a lot of it going on in our community. Even here in Houston. The other day I was reading about an article about one of our, one of the restaurants that we actually go to, they got, they were vandalized, [AS: Oh!] in the middle of COVID so I think it's definitely a big problem.
AS: So moving on to gender identity, can you also share some, like progress or how do you identify yourself?

NT: I identify as female. I– I am a part of the queer, the LGBTQ community. I think when– when I came out to my family and my friends it was also a challenge. As with anything, I think my family was supportive you know, they prioritize family over everything. So I was thankful for that. It was. It was definitely something new though, as new to it myself and kind of discovering it and accepting it myself. I am still getting used to it every day, I think.

AS: So what were their biggest challenges?

NT: Biggest challenges was I think getting enough courage to say it out loud to my family. I think I was just so worried about what I think they would say that kept me from– from actually saying out loud and see what would happen.

AS: So how has the LGBTQ community differ in Iowa and Houston?

NT: At the time that I was living in Iowa, I wasn't very aware of it myself of my sexuality and my preferences. So I'm not too aware of community there. But once I moved to Houston and I, kind of, was more open to reaching out to different people. I saw that the community here in Houston is very, it's– it's big, and everyone's very supportive. There's different centers for LGBTQ use in for their health. I know and I was there's also the celebration every year during the summer. I think Iowa, in general is pretty accepting of LGBTQ people as well.

AS: Yeah, learn about there's— besides the Outsmart Magazine, there's also the Montrose Center, are you guys part of that?

NT: We're not actively involved. But we've been to the center a couple of times here. The one they do is amazing.

AS: Great. So, if we can imagine a time machine like how would you say to the younger self to encourage her?

NT: I guess, I would say that, I guess I would say like, everything takes time. You know, you just gotta try to live in the moment and take it one thing at a time because when you try to get ahead of yourself with thinking too much, for example, it will just drive you crazy.

AS: Yeah, how about you, Nghi?

NN: We would just say, you know, like, even for myself like, it like, took me a long time, actually, like, come out and open up with my family, my relative and also to, you know taking more interview about my gender identity. Even to younger people just you know, enjoy yourself. Take time in you know, think
about what you love. Invest in yourself in like when the right time you know your heart will tell you what to do.

**AS:** That's great. And can you share a bit about how you both meet each other?

**NN:** [Chuckles and looks at NT] So, when I first moved to Houston, I–I only have my relatives here. And I was living with my aunt at her house. So I didn't have any friends outside that. And my language isn't that good at that time too. So I tried to find some app that I can make more friends in Houston. I found an app called "her" so it's a actually a dating app for the LGBT community. So after I download I just you know, like looking for people who are currently living in my area. And at last I saw Nha profile. And you know, it's like swipe left or right, you know, to like the people that you saw. Yes, I like her profile. [To NT:] Right? Or you like me first? [NT: I thought I like you first.] Oh, well, I think that by that time like, yes, also using that app too. Yeah. So yeah, so she liked me first; I liked her back. We...

**NT:** Yeah, I think I message first. Yeah. And I was trying to make some small talk, and then eventually we went out for lunch, I think.

**NN:** Yeah, for lunch, we had a Pho, Vietnamese Pho. That's our first date. And then after that we went right through the museum.

**AS:** Oh wow.

**NN:** Yeah that's happened in our first date, the Museum– Museum of Houston.

**AS:** How long ago was that?

**NT:** That was four years ago? Almost four years.

**NN:** Yeah almost four years.

**AS:** And what was your first impressions of each other at that time?

**NN:** First impression? So I remember when we were just like texting, and Nha said she like, like blue color. Yeah. So I remember. So I when I just parked in the parking lot, right, I saw a blue car. Nha stepped out from that car. I remember she wore a blue light shirt or blue blouse, and with a blue flip flop; having a blue... Yeah, so I like to, I think that's my first impression. That I know you like blue, but you know, like, all set to the outfit. Yea impression.

**AS:** She's not wearing blue today. [chuckles] Yeah. How about you Nha, what– what was your first impression?
NT: My first impression of Nghi was that he was kind of quiet. Honestly, I felt like we were talking. He was a great listener, but I wanted there to be a little bit more talking. As I was probably nervous so I think I or I was I felt like i was talking more. Yeah.

NN: Yeah, I was quiet.

AS: So you've always traveled to museums, like visiting museums during your date back then?

NT: We all made it like a thing between the two of us to explore new museums, because we both like to take pictures. Museums was a great way to kind of just spend time together and reflect and take pictures of the cool parts there.

AS: So what other hobbies do you both share?

NN: Eating? Eating. Yeah, we both like, you know, like trying new foods, you know, support like local business local restaurant, and yeah. At weekend and when we're not like busy with our schedule. We always like you know, hang out in, you know, buy food to go or enjoy food at the restaurant. You know, sharing food with each other is our hobby.

NT: Yeah. I definitely think sharing a meal, it lets you bond and get to know each other. And...
[inaudible]

AS: So what are the places that you travel together?

NT: We've been to... we've traveled late to Austin, Dallas; we've also taken a couple flights to Maryland where my– my oldest sister lives. We visited Washington DC and all that. So we also like to travel together a lot because you see a good difference between all the museums located in different areas of the country and the kind of art that they portray. And yes, we should we share a love of art as well.

AS: So who are your favorite artists?

NN: My favorite artist I think, recently, I love Vincent van Gogh. Yeah, Vincent van Gogh and inspired by one of his artwork called the sun painting. From that inspiration I actually made a gown. And I competed in fashion fusion is a com– fashion competition, that organized between Museum of Fine Art Houston and Houston Community College. So I got a lot of inspiration from his love of flower. Yeah, to my design. That's great.

AS: I remember there's a lot of kind of hybrid between fashion and art these days that people are wearing art like artworks. And a lot of museum shops are doing that too, which is... Yeah, really interesting to see.

Great. So, what is your opinion on dating apps? Since it's been like a kind of a more and more mainstream culture these days among the, like young people; and technology-wise, it's definitely blending into every
aspect of our lives. Like what would you say is the future of like relationships and people getting to know each other?

**NT:** I personally think that like getting to know people in person is a lot more valuable because you see their little quirks you see their body language and the tone of voice. I prefer that over dating apps. However, I think dating apps are has a good, like initial point of contact, kind of to reach those people that you wouldn't normally reach in your daily activities. I think it's invaluable for that.

**NN:** I think I agree with you and also a little bit not agree. I agree with you that you know I meet in person meeting new people in person is more valuable is true; because like you get to talk with them directly, and you can show your expression, as well as like know the expression. So it make the conversation is more exciting. But however I think dating apps a very good way for you to be open to yourself for you know, studying or meeting more people. Because like for me myself, I was and I think as still a shy person. I don't just you know, well walk out see somebody and just come in come in and say hi. You know, as I've been like dating app is a way to me, easier access to make more friends. Well, I think that's a, you know, like 50-50.

**AS:** [Chuckles] If there's any like danger to like technology and dating apps, so would you say? That might be... might be sounding like one of the Black Mirror episodes.

**NT:** [Chuckles] I think I'm now like even in Black Mirror shows the dark side of technology. I mean, with– with the benefits of dating apps and on and technology, I think there's always a drawback to it and just not being able to see that person, you realize sometimes the people take advantage of that, for whatever reason. So I guess that one drawback.

**NN:** Yeah. Because, uh, you know, like, in all the social media or in a lot of dating app you know, there's a lot of like fake people, you know, a lot of scam and even a lot of people that is like under ages. You know, like some people asked you to photo or picture is not done a lot of like fake information in you just have to be really really careful what you see or what you about to, to explore.

**AS:** Mhm. Do you see the Vietnamese culture, like that cultural roots, play a big part in your relationship?

**NN:** I think, I think so. Yeah, we share the same hobby is Vietnamese food. Know we have the same taste in who in what we love to share; also in Vietnamese music. And also, for us to communication in Vietnamese is very helpful for me, but also like you know like bonding us together. And Nha also like be able to explain or like teach me, word or in like thing that I don't understand in English; so she'd be able to explain it in Vietnamese for me. I think that's a, you know, a big, important part in our relationship.

**NT:** I agree. I think that's something that bond does a lot. And I was previously in a relationship with someone who wasn't of the same background as me, I think there were certain challenges there that I don't see here. So I think grateful for, for that.
AS: Do you have any plans for the future? Together?

NN: Plans, I have a lot of plans. And I think I'm a plan person. You know, I have a lot of plan to, to think about to play with. In the future, I-- I want, I beside us like, maybe definitely having a small house. I love kids. I love kids too. You know, I love to work a lot. So maybe like figured out my schedule better and more with my work life; and you know spent time with the family before we ready to have kids. Oh, that's been pretty much like part of future planning.

AS: Wow. Sounds exciting. Yeah. Um, is there anything else that you guys would like to share?

NT: I just wanted to say thank you for having us and you know, asking us these questions. I think during our conversation, like I learned more about myself as well and bring back those old memories about living in Vietnam, and whatnot and diving deeper into my roots. I really enjoyed it.

NN: Yeah, I'm also very, like thankful for this interview thing like for the LGBT community, you know, like this interview, we'll reach more to be able and get more people to understand about like the LGBT community. You know, a lot of the more story we share, you know, the more they say, the value of our community to– to help other people know, so yeah, very thankful for this interview.

AS: So, I want to thank you for so much for sharing all your stories and life experience, especially having, yeah, like you two step up and help out in the COVID-19 pandemic, as part of the, yeah, Asian American, and as part of the LGBTQ community. And yeah, we're so lucky to have your time and be able to discover you through the front page of the Outsmart Magazine.

NT: Well, yeah.

AS: Very excited for, yeah, your future as well. And yeah, and congratulations to Nghi for having to go through that step. And yeah, thank you.

NT: Thank you so much.

[Interview ends.]