

Houston Asian American Archive

Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Mr. Bob Nguyen

Interviewed by: Jonathan Hsieh

Date: April 13, 2012

Transcribed by: Jonathan Hsieh (Edited by: Taylor Ginter 5/5/17)

Location: Digital Media Center, Rice University, Houston, Texas

Audio Track Time: 1:30:22

Background:

Mr. Bob Nguyen was born in Da Nang, Vietnam in 1961. Born to a military family—his father was a Lieutenant Colonel —, his family lived a comfortable life in Vietnam. However, a day before the Fall of Saigon on April 29, 1975, his family had to flee the country in fear of being captured by Communist forces. His family found their way to America after being picked up by American troops, and eventually, after being discovered and sponsored by a group from Broadmoor Baptist Church, wound up in Jackson, Mississippi. With much help from the church, Nguyen adjusted to life in America. His military father found work as a maintenance man for Kodak, but eventually, with hard work, determination, and ingenuity made his way up into the ranks of management. Nguyen attended and graduated from the University of Houston after transferring from the University of Southern Mississippi. He graduated with a degree in Civil Engineering Technology. After working for his father's photography lab for one year, he got a job at HP and worked there for several years until he got a job at Rice University as a Facilities Engineering Project Manager. He has been married to his wife for 25 years and has three sons. Currently, along with working at Rice, he is helping to start up an ESL program for immigrant families in the Alief area.

Interview:

Throughout the interview, we talked about many things, including: the cultural shock that comes with adjusting to life in America, the importance of language, the role of race in workplace, the meaning of Asian American identity, and the work Mr. Nguyen has been doing in the immigrant community (i.e. the ESL program he is planning to start).

Interview Transcript:

Key:

Jonathan Hsieh (JH) Bob Nguyen (BN)

JH: Hi, this is Jonathan Hsieh from Rice University with the Houston Asian American Archive. I'm here with Mr. Bob Nguyen. So, I guess, if you can start off, do you mind telling about, a little bit about where you grew up and your background?

BN: Ok, my real name is Bao Ngoc Nguyen and I adopted the name Bob because Bao sounds very close to Bob, so that's how Bob arrived. But, I was born in Da Nang, Vietnam. It is a central part of Vietnam, and uh where predominantly it's a mountainside. And there, I was born and then I think I moved into Saigon, the South, the capital of South Vietnam at the time. Now it is called Ho Chi Minh City. I think it was 1969 when I moved in to the sou—the south. And then I left the country, my family and I left the country in April 29, afternoon of 1975 that's when the fall of Saigon hit the Republic of South Vietnam fell to the communists of North Vietnam on that—the following day. The official day was April 30, 1975. And the way my family left, well we got down to a port of Saigon and got on a boat with massive amount of people just run like crazy, you know get on the boats and get out to the sea, and we were in the sea—we were out in the international water, I think it was somewhere probably on the 30th, it was like 24 hours later. And it was then that—we were in a barge with like 1000 other people and so the barge itself does not have an engine, it does not have a cover, it just an open, it's like a transport barge to transport military equipment, vehicles and all of that. So when we got to the ocean, the tugboat that was pulling the barge detached from the barge and left us [laughing]. They went on their own and we were floating in the ocean for three days and four nights. Um, with—hardly any food, oh, and we brought a bag of rice each of us that was seven siblings

JH: So it was your whole family all together?

BN: Yes, my parents and the—seven siblings and my parents and we, we you know packed a little bag of rice but you know as you know you cant just eat rice like that. You *can* if it come to really, really survival, but it's not...we weren't that—we weren't there yet. But that bag of rice, you know, not having any water but fortunately there was rainstorms, that cooled off and keep you from dehydrating. So, we were there the fourth day, the fourth night or whatever, I can't remember, we got picked up by American naval ship. They were scanning the sea to pick up...refugee boat people.

JH: Where was this?

BN: This is in Southeast Asia, South Vietnam (**JH**: Oh, so then, OK). So, from there, they took us to Philippines. And apparently American government has somewhat

prepared for this massive amount of exit, I guess, the Vietnamese people gonna exit from—run from the Communists. And so, within that one night, we were just keep moving. You know, long lines after long lines, just non-stop. From Philippines, we flew—we were transported in a C130, a transport plane, to Guam. You familiar, Guam? The island there. And we stayed there, there was couple camps there, refugee camps that we stayed, go through the paper process, went through that, and I think we stayed there for a period of maybe a month, three weeks, or something like that.

JH: That's a long process.

BN: Yeah, you gotta understand there was like hundreds of thousands people going through. So, there my dad was, he was in military, he was a lieutenant colonel. So that's one of the reasons we ran anyway, cause my dad said that the Communists would go after him and his family. And in fact, that was exactly what would've happened, 'cause they went in and they have already have the list of all, for some reason, they have already infiltrated our intelligence and so they have a list of all the high-ranking officials and family location where they live. They were gonna go there and get us. We left, we were gone already.

JH: So your family was from South Vietnam?

BN: Yes. So that's the story that we got from our families, remember who were left behind and said that they, yes, that they did went in to the subdivision where we lived and looked for us. And those who stayed, we were in, we lived in a military, more like a subdivision predominated by military. So the generals that we know who were—who decided to stay was caught and sent to re-education camp and did not survive. It's pretty much, when you go to re-education camp, the survival rate is very slim. So they are there to rot you out basically. So we—in Guam, we went to, we had three camps, my dad chose the camp in Eglin, E-G-L-I-N Air Force base in Florida because when—when he was in officer training, he would—he trained in America. And he would travel in New York and Florida, so that was the only two states he was aware of in his day. So we go to Florida, but really, we didn't go to Florida as the scene that you would think right now. We were in the middle of the woods, you know, they basically just cleared this acreages of land—of forest, and put in army tents, like, hundreds if not thousands tents out there. (JH: Not sandy beach, Florida, huh?). No, not sandy beach. No, we didn't even see the beach [chuckling]. We saw nothing but trees all around us. It was hot and all that, but it was—we were fine with it because that's where we came from. You know, sleeping in the summer in tents, is not a big deal, you know, we're used to that. So, we were there for, I think, almost a month and then we were sponsored by a church...Broadmoor Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi. And so our first—so we arrived Jackson on July 1st of 1975. So you can imagine July 1st is very close to July 4th and thirty something years

ago the July 4th celebration was very, very big. It's quite different here than Houston. Everything I remember getting off the plane and on the way to the house that we were staying in temporarily there were American flags flying everywhere. It was like the season to celebrate July 4th. So we came to, we officially, if you will, taking a residence in United States in a natural home, not a tent was July 1st, 1975 in Jackson, Mississippi.

JH: And that, the church, was the one that brought you there?

BN: Yes, they sponsored the family for a year and that's where we—so from July to I think it was September or August, I can't remember but we pretty much start school, and we did not know the language at all. Nothing. It was very condensed process. So from there, I, you know, we began our lives as at home in America. In fact, that's the title of the book my dad and another writer from the church, he was, he was one of the deacons and played a big role in sponsoring our family, wrote a book called *At Home in America*. So, and then, life was pretty much normal after that I guess you can call it that. We go to school just like every American kid and study and do what you gotta do. That's the—fast-forward to where we are today, I'm now a father of 3. Our oldest son is at Texas Tech University, and the second one is at UT, University of Texas San Antonio, and the third one is a senior in high school.

JH: So, I guess like, what was life like in Jackson? (BN: Ah, I'm glad you asked) Cause I mean, the Deep South and the '70s? (BN: I am glad you asked)

BN: Yea, one of the things, let me just share with you my first impression of the United States. Even though I was born in Da Nang and I've seen a lot of countryside and then I lived from I guess '69 through '75 that's what, six years? or five and a half years before we left. It pretty much, you know, for the last six years, it pretty much in concrete, we live on concrete city if you will 'cause it's so condensed. You know, I'm sure you're probably familiar with what I'm talking about. So when I came to the U.S., especially Jackson, everything is so spread out. They have so many green grass, so many trees everywhere. That was my first impression when I was, I remember sitting on the bus. They were driving—driving us to our new home from the airport, and there was a lot of activities going on on the bus, because we had a, the church sent a welcoming team, there was about like half a dozen or if not a dozen people come to greet us. So, imagine this scene was people laughing and singing and just, you know, talking and me, this little boy, I was only 13 at the time. About 13 from Vietnam is not thirteen here. Thirteen from Vietnam to me, the level of innocence, if you will, is more comparable to like ten years old of American kids (JH: Really?). Yea, cause you are so, you're not exposed to too many things. First of all, you came from a Third World Country, so your level of knowledge of where you were at the time very limited, if you will. And there is a lot of age of innocent then.

JH: As a refugee though, you've experienced something that most people have no idea about (**BN**: Yes, no idea). So that's probably a big growing experience.

BN: Yeah I remember sitting back just like the window we're sitting right here and looking at the bus and I say, I see all the green that the bus is traveling through, just even on the side of the road of the freeway, just green grass. I remember that peace—peaceful feeling. I grew up in the war and there was fighting, there was some bombing, but we were not...we were more protected where we lived, so occasionally, you know, a rocket would fly into the city. They wanna hit whatever they wanna hit, you know. But we were not like in the...out in the country where during the day you had South Americ... uh South—South Vietnam forces goin' in and have control there and at night the Communists they're gonna, you know, just so it..So we were not in that situation, but I got a taste of it if you will. I got a feeling. So, one of the first impressions, first...experiences that left me this day was how green, how fresh it was. And then, I think it was sometime later in the fall, when everything settled. It seemed like you go through the storm, you don't even realize it, and then you out of the storm, but you still in the shock stage so you just keep going and then one day you woke up, you say, you just—you went through an aftershock if you will. You woke up and you realize, Oh wow, I'm totally in a different country, cause I remember woke up crying, not know where I was. And then, but, one of the best feeling I had was how peaceful it was. I remember just falling asleep outside, one day after school, just walked through our backyard, beautiful oak, tall majestic oak tree and pine trees. It was in the fall so the weather was very cool and I just fell asleep on the ground around, in you know, in the ground with all the leaves. I just slept for hours and did not want to wake up, okay it was so peaceful.

JH: That's nice.

BN: My impression, another cultural impr—culturally the impression was, now you gotta remember, since we did not know any English, so we couldn't we tell the difference, the South you know. But we do know that when we say, when we are not enunciate certain words, like 'brown', well some Southern folks they don't pronounce the same way. It's like, [with Southern accent] 'brown, brown house,' and 'how y'all doin'?' You know that Southern accent. With that drawl and couldn't quite understand, but we understood finally and then even like conversational questions. Very simple stuff, like instead of say 'How are you?' you know nowadays kids look at each other and say, 'Hey, hey, what's up?' Well, when you [chuckling] study correct English, 'What's up?' is not in the book [chuckling again]. But remember, we were new, brand new, so everything hitting us all at once, so we only know 'How are you?' But at the time, they didn't say 'What's up?' They say, 'What you doin'?' or I can't remember what. What was the common term at the time. But it was not as 'Hey, good morning' (**JH**: Proper) Yeah, 'Good morning, how are you?' It was not that, you know. So, we were learning on the fly basically. But it was

uh...it was very trying from a cultural adjustment for me, as a boy, because I was very hardheaded and very prideful, so I got into a fight quite a bit, 'cause they, the kids were making fun of me because of my language, you know. Broken English or a lack of understanding or whatever. So I got in, well I guess you could say in trouble, but you know...

JH: So, were you ever discriminated in any way? (BN: Yea, yes I would say I was) Experience?

BN: Um...One day, after school, this is 8th grade. I think it was 8th grade. I was still new, probably like, you've got the fall and then the spring. And my best friend, which is his dad is the principal of the junior high school, and we both walk to school. His house is like couple blocks from school, and my house is probably half a mile from school, so I would walk to his house and then we would walk together from his house to the school and then walk back the same way. Our game was we—as soon as we'd get to his house, we'd throw our books on the ground and then we'd start wrestle [JH laughs]. That's all we do, we wrestle until we tired and then I'd go home [JH chuckles]. But so he was really sweet, his name was Keith. And we were—we were crossing the road from the school, and we were in the middle of the road, you know how you go on one side the traffic and we're standin' in the middle of the road waitin' for a car to clear and I was standing right there, and I saw this car approaching us and this little boy, this little blond-headed boy was just screaming something, but remember, I don't know, if now, I would know what he was screaming. It could be something that was not very complimentary, you know [JH chuckles quietly], but he was leaning and...his dad, uh...I don't want to paint the appearance, but I think you can guess. Um... but, he was leaning outside screaming something at me, and as he got close to me, he threw a bag of trash, food, something. A bag of trash food and it hit me right in the face. And then the car kept going and they laugh. And then I remember just stood there and then we walk, we walk across to my friend's house. And that was the first time that we did not wrestle. We didn't even talk. I think my friend was feeling bad, and feeling awkward. He didn't know what to say or do, so I remember we didn't wrestle that day. We just went home. And then the next day, it was—everything was back to normal.

BN: So that was my first, my first experience of discrimination, but I get discriminate while I was in school too.

JH: Do you have any funny stories, any embarrassing?

BN: Oh, many!

JH: Culture shock stories?

BN: Many, many stories. We have time? (Both chuckle)

JH: Your—favorite story.

BN: Well, I remember that one of the interview, the junior high school, they interview me. They ask me what's your favorite food? And I say, dish, or something like that. And I say, 'cow.' [Both laugh] What I meant was steak or beef, you know. But...I like to eat cow [laughs]. So that was on the paper, but they (JH: straight off the ranch), yeah I know—I think they, there was a line that said, 'this is what he meant' and all of that. So that was one. The other! The other was, I don't know if it's embarrassing. I don't get embarrassed very easily. I mean I do get embarrassed but I'm pretty thick-skinned about things, you know. But when we came to the U.S., we didn't have any clothes. I mean, we really didn't, so the clothes that we had was from the refugee camp. That was donated from all over the United States. You know, so you just find what you could have. And then, so by the time we arrived in Mississippi, we really didn't have a whole lot. I think I had one pair of flip-flops. That was it. And a couple pair of short and t-shirts and all that. So when we got to—to Jackson, people bringing stuff for us. Clothes, you know, and so that's where I would get my clothes from. And then they would take us to go shopping, some families with a big heart, they would take us, just take us the boy to go shopping, and all that. And I remember one of the donation package, you know, with the used stuff. Just real cool looking pairs of shoes. I like it a lot, so I wore that. And, but the shoe doesn't have the liner inside, it's missing—one of the shoes. So the nails from the bottom of the sole, you know they nail it up into the shoe, you know what I'm talking about? They didn't sew it like they used to. You know how the shoe, you have this thread that's sewed to the frame [BN demonstrates], the fabric of the shoe. Well, this one they used they just real short nails, so I gotta be careful how I walk because I would step on the nail [chuckling]. But it's funny. (JH: Oh they have nails, oh) But anyway, I wear that shoes a lot. I like it. And one day, we were at a pep rally and I was just, you know, a football pep rally every Friday I think, or Thursday. Anyway, like about the third or fourth pep rally of the year, then I realized something, that I have something in common with the cheerleaders. They wear the same type of shoes I was wearing, unfortunately. [Both laughing] They were girls' cheerleaders [continue laughing]. So I was just wearing those shoes—so I was wearing cheerleader shoes.

JH: No one said anything to you?

BN: Well, of course not. I mean, you know it's like awkward. Seeing people, I don't know, you know. (JH: Yeah, that's true). They don't know how to talk to you, they're not sure you know, so they don't wanna hurt your feelings (JH: Don't wanna offend you). Yea, don't wanna offend you, especially they know that you've always been in fight because [laughing] somebody offended you. But...another one is funny. The church

people would come over, and sometime they would.. no, most of the time they would help us study English. And then we would take a break and talk and they would ask, I remember one time, they would ask my sisters. Now this was still very new, OK? They ask, say, do you have any boyfriend? Oh, no, do you go out? Oh, that's mean go out on a date, OK. And we didn't understand. We just don't understand. 'Do you go—do you go out?' So, we translate for what it is, what the word, what the sentence ask. Do you go out? We kinda huddled, we talk in Vietnamese to each other, say, 'I guess they ask do we go outside?' You know? And these were the girls were asking my sister. And so my sister said, 'Yes, we go out ALL the time.' [Both laughing] 'All day... We go out at night too, all the time.' In broken English. So, I think that was a shock for them, that we were that outgoing. Or my sisters were. And then they asked my sister, say, 'Do you have boyfriend?' And again, when you translate for what it is, you think friends as boys, 'Yes, we have MANY boyfriends' And then I jumped in, I said, 'Yes, I have boyfriends too!' [Both laugh] That was awesome.

JH: Did they realize at that point that maybe there was a little... (BN: Yea, yea I think so) something lost in translation. (BN: Yea, I think so)

BN: That—that's from a language standpoint. I think I covered on clothes, clothing on shoes. Oh, there's so many, I just—I don't remember all, you know. But those are the ones that stand out.

JH: What about like, how was the sense of community? Did you feel like you had good support or like did you miss—obviously you probably missed home.

BN: Yea.. Do we have good support? Absolutely. I'll say the successful...the success that we have to this day, don't get me wrong, we still had to work hard and earn it, but a lot of success that we got, you know subconsciously it's planted in our head that from the people at the church who helped us so willingly. You know, they...helped us in a way that is hard to describe. You know, giving up their own times and come over and spend up until like 9 o'clock at night every night, you know, teaching us English and all that. So yea, we had a real good support system from the church. Now from a community standpoint, generally community, we don't, we don't have that, we didn't have that, because everybody's very busy, you know. We didn't have that, let's just say we didn't have that...specifically if you asked me was there any social workers show up and you know did that...no, the answer is no. And perhaps that is in part because we were sponsored by a church. In general, as a go out to public, yeah, I mean people respectful, but who knows... they could've said bad things too. Hey, sometimes it's good for you don't know understand the English at the time. Whatever, if they say things that are not complementary, you just you don't know, you just move on. And sometimes that's good because you don't need to know all that, you know. The silliness in people that, no need



to spend time and energy on it, you know. Yeah, we have. As a boy, I think, it's always to get poked at. I don't know, well for me it, I was out more so I received that more than my sisters. They were more like homebody and study and all that. I kinda did both so I experienced more of the ugliness in society, if you will. But in general, yeah, we had a great support system. Did we miss the country? [sighs] To be quite honest, I think we didn't have time to miss the country 'cause, well I mean, it's like two months in and we are getting ready to go to school and it was like non-stop. You know what I'm saying? I'm sure there was moment that, like I said, there was time I woke up and cry and I realized that I'm in this total strange land. But I think in the second year, we just move on, I guess. Yeah.

I think part of it if for me when I was, when you were kid, you were more receptive to change. You accept and you move on real quick. As you are an adult, you tend to linger, some of the memories behind. You know, like my parents' generation. It was tough on them because they have to go to work like everybody else, but it's so different like where they come from and then you still have so many, you know, you live for—my dad was early forty at the time. So take all that forty years in one country and then you gonna have to make a switch like 180 (JH: Yeah), switch you know overnight. So yeah, I think it will be harder for them.

JH: Yeah, what did your parents do when they came to America? Like, how was the transition for them?

BN: My dad was a lieutenant colonel, so he was I guess up there...and he had side business, a farming business or something like that, invested over the years, so we were very comfortable, very comfortable. In Da Nang, I remember we had a house not far from the beach and we had a couple maids taking care of us. So...I don't know 'rich' is the right word, but comfortable's probably best description. We didn't have to do a whole lot. So my dad, when he... and one of his hobby was photography. So if you take a military experience in Vietnam and you come to the United State, you got nothing. So, through the church membership or members who have members, you know, who were able to get my dad in working for you know this company they not as popular as they once were, Kodak. (JH: Oh!) Yeah. And Kodak back then was huge. It was like nationally, it's still nationally known but it's not like it once were, you know. And so he got—they got my dad into working at Kodak because they said he, they found out he had photography in you know—photography as his hobby. That was just taking pictures. But he started out with basically maintenance guy, lifting and moving, basically just wear different hats, moving trash or whatever in this...big lab, but it's more like a manufacturer photography lab. Huge. And so he start out just lifting material—lumbers, moving around doing whatever they need, so I remember he came home and he cried to my mom. He said, 'I cannot believe all these years. I'm here, 40, and I'm going back to do laborer's work,' you

know. And it was really tough for him, but he didn't had a choice, so but he was determined. So then, and my mom was—through the church member, got a job in a hospital. Now, remember we lived in Mississippi, which was and still probably one of the poorest State in United State. So the salary wasn't very big or very much then. So my mom were working in a nursing, I mean a nursery wing. I think, I don't know what they had her do, you know, nothing special, you know, just probably trash or whatever. You know, could be custodian work. But eventually, they got her like—carting babies to and from and you know the more trust, the more you see they start giving her more responsibility, so she started to do more caring stuff, but not like a registered nurse by any means.

My dad, back to my dad, he was, he started out just labor work and then this is the story I've learned from years later. He asked after like four, five months, or if not within a year... yea four, less than six months, he saw a bunch of equipment just sitting idle nearby not running, not anything. So he asked, he would say, 'What's wrong with that?' and they say, 'Oh, it's broken. We don't know how to fix it, and the guy who come down here, they don't even know how to fix it. We just leave it there.' He say, 'Can I play with it and see if I can fix it?' They say, 'Oh, have at it!' You know, well guess what? He fixed it. He got it to work, and because they give them that freedom to work with the machine, and he did it all on his own time you know. And he fixed it, he got it running, so he knows how it works. He learns about the, this is the term, this is the term that they call processor. C41 processor. It's the type of formula, emulsion they call emulsion, which is on a Kodak paper print. And it's a C41, it's a chemical, C41 process—processor. So he understand how it works, and word got to management that, Oh he can fix this. So then, they got him fixing all the machines. So he did that, and of course he gained trust that way. So then, he started doing more, just like the work he starts fixing the machine, and then I think what had happened was... I don't know how, but they—he made his way into the dark room. Do you know what I'm talking about? The dark room, where you do printing and...that's where he used to do it in black and white because I guess there was broken equipment and all that. And then from there, he fixing the equipment and all of that, and then, he always volunteer because he wants to keep moving up, you know. So, let's say if I think it was like an opportunity that they were behind on work. They didn't, they couldn't have enough... so he'd just offer. Say, 'I'll do it.' You know, start making prints and doing work in dark rooms. And they were surprised how talented he was in the dark room because back then it's not like digital cameras. Think of Photoshop, but you do it by hand. You do shadow and dodging and all this. It's way—it's an art. And he was doing it, and his print came out so beautiful and they say, 'Wow, this guy really have talent!' So they put him in the dark room, and from there he became, fast-forward, he became a manager of basically, I think for the entire whatever the department (**JH**: Wow). And then (**JH**: That's impressive)... Yeah.

And then he came up with an idea where he streamlined the whole process for Kodak. Not just Kodak in Mississippi but for nationally. It's like a patent of production. From Kodak photographer, you know like those guys in school pictures, because he has experience in photography, he got the president of Kodak in a national—in a national meeting. This is, there was some discussion before all these meeting, right? And the president saw something that he discussed this with him. And basically he say, 'The way we can make more profit if we streamline and if we standardize from the field all the way to the production, from our photographers in the field. Like school picture photographer, they go take pictures.' You know he said, 'The problem is school pictures, those guys go out there, they don't have a template to work on. So everybody on their own. Everybody have their own lighting set, light set up, distance, their favorite this and that. And then so when you come back, you can have a hundred photographer with a hundred different look. So when you print pictures, you can't print the same, you can't print with the same set up. You have to customize a hundred set up.' (JH: It's not efficient) 'It's not efficient,' he say, 'if we can standardize those guy with one set-up, we can crank out more work on less time,' you know, all that. Less materials. So, through that, they flew him to New York at a national photographer meeting conference. The President of the Unite... the president of Kodak say that this is the way we gonna do it, and my dad say he heard uproar of course, from a lot of photographer, but he remembers, yea, you gotta understand back in those days, management style was very different from now. It was then, it was like, my way or the highway [laughing]. Our way or the highway. So he actually moving up, really quick in the corporation. But then he realized that the passion of his photographer, what he wants to do, and the limited opportunities in Mississippi, so that's when he moved to Houston, Texas in 1981, I think, to start a business in Houston. Have a photography lab.

JH: So did he move to Houston after you moved?

BN: Did he move to what?

JH: Did you move to Houston before your dad?

BN: After he moved. I was starting my freshman year. So I just stay in the dorm. Yeah. Actually my dad he didn't go over Houston to start the business right. That was his plan but he went over and work for a very famous...color lab, custom color lab, and then from that, you know, he save his savings and built up his savings and start his own business, and eventually I was part of helping him running with the business. We had, one time we had two studios and labs in Houston while I was in college.

JH: Where did you go to college?

BN: Huh?

JH: Where did you go to college?

BN: University of Houston.

JH: OK. So you learned English very fast.

BN: Yes! I think so. I think, but I think I learned too fast for my own good and I lost the...I didn't concentrate on the fundamental grammar. I think I can, verbally I can express myself well, but when it comes to writing, it's just, it's like two different personalities. [JH laughs] You know, so I tend to make a lot of mistake on writing. It's something that [sighs] it's always bothers me, but not enough where I wanna do something about it [Both laugh] because I'm so busy with life, as it is.

JH: I mean if you can communicate...

BN: Yeah.

JH: [long pause] Yeah, I guess like, I'm curious, how did you do, I mean you came here knowing no English right (BN: Yeah), so how did you go about your day-to-day and negotiate and like how did you learn English? 'Cause I mean getting thrown in a high school or middle school...

BN: Yeah. There wasn't a...

JH: Were there ESL Programs? Or?

BN: No, it was cold turkey. It's like, just imagine if you teach a little kid how to swim and they say, 'Ok.' You throw them in the pool. That's it. That's how they learn. And so, the best analogy, that's my best analogy I can think of is...that yeah I was thrown into the pool. I didn't drown. I tread at first. I was just fightin' to tread in the water, and then eventually I learn how to swim. And, but I was never a swimmer. Does that make any sense? Like you were like a competition swimmer they have techniques, they have form, they understand the whole process. It was just basically you swim all out [both laugh]. It doesn't matter what stroke I have. It doesn't have—it doesn't mean my form is correct, you know I just. So, I've learned I think from a verbal expression, I remember, I do recall that the people at church did say that there're two people in our family of all, even my parents included, and my father knew English more than any of us. They say there was two people who picked up English really fast was me and my youngest sister, and she was eight at the time. So the younger you are the faster you pick it up. Before me, I think I made the effort of concentrating on verbal expression because that's where I see everybody everyday, you know. And so, I had a, I had, my cheat notes like to enunciate a word, an English word. I will write it in Vietnamese, what it sound like in Vietnamese, in the syllables. Does that make any sense? Let's say (JH: Yeah) you have a word that is

three or four syllable. So I would write it in Vietnamese and practice that, so when I say it, it's cleaner and I learn it faster than my sibling that way.

JH: So you were kind of like speaking Vietnamese in English.

BN: Yeah, the process was...I remember there was time that I have to think in Vietnamese before I can speak in English. Now it just nature. It's second nature it just come out. I don't even know what I'm thinking right now actually. I'm talking to you. Is it in English or is in Vietnamese? But I think it's more in English. The mind, you know what I'm talking about... can you speak Chinese?

JH: Some, but I have to think in...

BN: Yeah, piece it... You see, when you are at certain stage where that language becomes second nature to you. And then you learn to switch back and forth. The mind is amazing, isn't it? But I, to this day, I just had this thought even a couple days ago...there's certain level of math that I still process in Vietnamese. I couldn't quite (JH: That's interesting), yeah, especially counting, algebra, even some geometry, you know when it's calculus, then it's all English after that because I've never learned algebra when I was in Vietnamese, in Vietnam. So, from calculus all the way up to engineering math everything is English. But for basic stuff I still count in Vietnamese. I don't know why. I just I still count in my head. Now I can say, '1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7' really fast, but if I have to do a calculation in a quiet time, or for focus, I do it in Vietnamese. I don't understand why.

JH: That's interesting.

BN: Yea, very interesting.

JH: So, can you tell me a little bit about your first job and how you got it?

BN: Uh.. My first job was at Kroger, and I think I put it on the application that I was 16, I think (JH: 14?). But I think I was more like 15 or 14. But let's put it this way, I remember that because I lied my age to work at Kroger. I think the minimum age was either (JH: 16?) 16 and I was only 15 and I lied my age and got the job and worked there. And, you know, by that time I think I was very comfortable with the American culture, I was... Oh, wait, wait, wait. That would be wrong because a friend of mine, I just friend on Facebook this last year. I have not seen him thirty-something years, right? He say he used to work at the Kroger where I work and he said that—he said he remembers, this is through high school. He said he remembers me because I help him clean up a palette of Cokes. Now, this was before your time when there Coke were in those thick glass. Coca-Cola bottles were in thick glass and we move on those palettes and if you don't stack them correctly on the pal—wooden palettes, and you make a turn too fast, it will roll off and break. So,

he said that he remembers when he broke that, and I just, I was in the front and I heard, so I just ran back and helped him clean really fast cause I didn't want him to get into trouble. And he was saying something. He say something, he told me he say something in English, and I say something back, but he didn't understand cause I guess my English wasn't that good. Yes, so, I was wrong. Even at 15 I wasn't that good. But it was enough to get the job 'cause, but he said that was the memory that he had about me, you know. That was, that still to this day he said that I help him for that so. So that's pretty much the extent of my Kroger [chuckling] (JH: Oh, ok), nothing to shout out.

JH: Figured it wasn't what you wanted to do...

BN: No, no... It was not. It was just a stepping, you know it just, you gotta remember my parents was workin' on minimum wage, you know, seven kids. We ALL had to work and make do what we gotta do. After one year in the home that the church sponsored, they help us to purchase a house. It's a two bedroom house... three bedroom house, but it's one—bedroom is a single car garage convert into a bedroom. But one bathroom for nine people. I tell you that was tough. [JH laughs] (JH: Half of them girls too). Yeah, it was tough when you have to fight for that number two break [Both laugh]. 'Hurry up!' But yea, we went to work. All of us went to work early and go to school. My year in college stretch out quite a bit because remember I was telling you my dad had a business. So, I was helping him run a business and goin' part-time, and then toward the end, I, you know, things change and then I just concentrate on school and finish it up. But...we at one time, I think it was 19...79? We have four kids in college at one time, and my parents were—did not make the kind of money that I'm making right now. Combined. In terms of the kind of salary. So, yeah we all did what we had to do.

JH: How was the transition to Houston? Or like why did you choose Houston?

BN: Mmmm. That was interesting because when I live in Mississippi, I was, other than my family, I was speaking in English 95% of the time, you know. So.

JH: Did you speak in Vietnamese at home?

BN: Yeah, at home. And, so when I moved to Houston, so all my family was Americans. There were hardly any Vietnamese friends, and friends that we have we speak English to one another. Um, occasionally yea. And then, so when I came to Houston, Houston has such a large group of Vietnamese. So I start, I went like 180. I went from 100% if not 99% American friends to 99% Vietnamese friend in like overnight. It's like another culture adjustment 'cause it was so new. Yeah, so new. And it was fun and all, but I remember I offended a lot of guys cause I spoke English, because I'm so natural. It's just so natural to me and I didn't have the practice. And a lot of guys gave me a hard time about like 'why do you have to speak English to us?' I mean like—to me, it's like,

‘What's the big deal?’ But to them it was a big deal cause remember the old school mentality still there. It's almost like you're tryin' to be somebody that you're not. It's like I'm not tryin' to be anybody. I'm just speaking English! But to them, I remember I really had hard time with that. A lot of Vietnamese people was giving me a hard time about speaking too much English. And unfortunately that's their problem because to this day, they still don't speak very well because they just wanna retain that culture or whatever. So, I have, I've, I still today, I still have complements, if you will, from American friends who knows other Vietnamese friend about my age and say, ‘I don't think I've ever met a guy who can speak English like you do the same age as the friend,’ say, ‘how come your friends can't say it that way’ [laughing] It's like everything is so—it's like look, I don't care [continues laughing]. Alright, look, I don't care, you know. So, anyways, so at University of Houston I hung out with all Vietnamese friends. So that was fun.

JH: Yeah, what was your college experience like?

BN: Yeah, here? I love college experience. That's why I love working here too. Not that I do anything with college students [both chuckle], but it just...looking back I think, you know, other than academics, you're really not responsible for anything [laughs]. (JH: Yeah, kind of in a bubble. A little bit, a little bit.) Yeah you're in the bubble, a little bit. You know you stress out about academics and maybe some other things but other than that, you know, you really don't know what stress is until you get out there. But anyway, yeah I love my college experience. That's where I met my wife. But this was in Mississippi. She, my wife, she's American. We met there and then when I transferred, we met there like for one year, and then when I transferred to Houston.

JH: Oh, so you actually went to college in Mississippi?

BN: Yeah, I started out over there and I finished here in Houston. And she stay there and finish and graduate at University of Southern Mississippi. USM. And I finished here at U of H. And we kept long distance relationship for five years. Five, and then six years we married—got married. So, it was tough. Long distance relationship. For American girl, she is awesome. She is.

JH: What do you mean, for an American girl? [laughs]

BN: Well you know, there's this stigma about American girls. Well, the stigma that I got from my days that somehow the Asian girl are more...or in this case, Vietnamese, more loyal, more this and that. And so, and the American girl are more wild or whatever, you know. But you gotta understand this was the culture back then. This is early '80s, you know, there was still that mentality, early '80s is not far from 1975, the generation of Vietnamese that come over.

JH: I think it still persists to an extent.

BN: Really? I-I don't know. I just don't have time for any of that anymore, but I think if you ask, if I ask, let's say your...your parents' generation, who was born in China, raise you know, they will have some certain stigma about, you know, American this and that. But, when I say this, you do know right because, you know we, even though I didn't believe in that, you know that, but it—it played a trick in your mind. You know they say, are they right? But you know you don't care, but it does affect you in some way because remember, you can be a college student, you still kids in some way. You haven't experienced life yet you know. You know, here we are twenty-five years later. Our 25th anniversary is this year and then tag on top of that another six years, so thirty, thirty-one years. You know, I'm looking back to quite a few of my Vietnamese friends who married Vietnamese girls, and say, where are you guys? You know, what happened to your marriage. You know, that's not to rub it in, but it just—you know, when you love someone you're just gonna have to work for it. Doesn't matter, don't matter what race. Just make sure yeah. Yeah, our marriage is not perfect, but we work hard at it, you know.

JH: So I guess you, I mean you worked throughout college, so did, after college did you just go straight into the workforce as well?

BN: Yes. Uh...yeah.

JH: Straight into HP?

BN: I'm sorry?

JH: Did you start working for HP right away?

BN: No, I start out with, well remember my dad had a business. And he had this great plan [chuckles] that I should run the business. And, that I take over the business and all that, bein' a boy and all that. I think your parents...how old is your parents?

JH: Uh...around fifty.

BN: OK. So it's my age. Your parents can understand some of this. If they were talking to their friends in China, or in Asian cultures it's like, OK I have this business so my son should—my son or daughter should take over the... that's no different than any American. Some people, some parents have a business and they want their kids to take over, you know? [JH: Mmhmm.] But it's, their time you know, it's just not me. I'm not artistic. I'm not creative. And business is not my stuff. And it was really hard. First year I tried to work for him, and finally I branch out and start goin' into what I study in the field of engineering and then just from there just took off. So...



JH: Did you feel any like barriers as a Asian or as an immigrant? Any (BN: Now or then?)... Then. Or now.

BN: Barrier with whom?

JH: In the workplace I guess or in like, I don't know, just moving up.

BN: Yeah, yeah. I think so. I think it still exists. I think there's some...but I want to be fair about it. I remember there was a period in my life that I wanna move up in a corporate ladder because I was working at HP and all of that. And I couldn't quite seem to move up where I wanted. And there is some validity to what I think is wrong, because I'm Asian. I think so. I think so, I think it's there. Do I...do I harp on it? No, I don't have time. Like I said, I'm not gonna fight. That is not a battle that I want to fight. You know, so were there some thing, some unfair promotion if you will? You know? But unfair promotion exists whether you Asian or not, you know. But when you're Asian and you...and you see the other guy who everyone else say, you know...I'm going to give you an example. I had a—I had a position that I want to pursue, and I applied for that...No, no no no no no. I take that back. This—I went to management and I said, hey, we, you know I was, I think I had what my dad has. Streamline the process. Always process-oriented. Improve, process improvement. So, I came and talked to them, say you know, suggestion we need to do this and da-da-da. It was well, yeah. It was good and whatever. So I thought it was nothing of it, I guess to me, they didn't hear back anything from it, so I just assumed that they don't agree with it. And so there was a position open, very similar to what I proposed. And then they hired somebody else. Came from a totally background experience, however he got in, I don't know how. But you know, there are people who say good ole' boy network.

And so I saw that. I saw that, even some of my friends say, 'Hey,' my co-workers say, 'Didn't you came up with that idea?' [Both laugh] 'Doin' all this and now this guy doin' that.' I say, 'Yeah...' So yeah, it's exist. Now, that being said, I'm willing to admit this. Sometime when you move up the ladder, management, depending on what kind of management you move up, there's an operation management and there's business management, ok? Operation I'm talkin' about more like...blue-collar operation, machinings [sic] and manufacture. But when you come up business, communications specifically, and writing communication, and writing, is so important. And that's where my, has always been my Achilles Heel. My Achilles. And so yea, there's some validity to, I say, perhaps that is one thing that kept me from it. But here is what I'm thinking...While I agree to that, I also agree that they don't—they choose not to invest in me. You know what I'm sayin'? (JH: Yeah). They choose not to believe in me and... (JH: 'Cause it's definitely possible to work on...communication skills) Exactly, you know. (JH: If you have the other tools) Yeah, so give me a chance, give me the resource. Trust

me.

But I don't believe that they believe in me, so that's one reason I left HP. Actually, it plays a big role. After a while I say, you know I'm gonna get stuck here. And I keep sharing with them, say look, you invest, whether you admit it or not, there's a lot of experience here. You know when I leave I'm not sayin' that the department gonna fall apart, I'm not sayin that. When I leave, you wanna find somebody... so and if they don't budge, it's easy you know. So I came here, do I still have that struggle? Yes, but I have management who believe in me that can do it. So I work on it. You know, and I get better at it. So I have to say Rice University, as far as employment, truly lives up to the philosophy of equal opportunity employment. I truly believe that. I really appreciate Rice University for that. The other: they say it but they don't really practice it. Again, you're not gonna see me, you'll never see me hiring a lawyer fightin' for equal opportunity and sue this and that. I just don't have time for that, you know, so. And I'm a big boy. I can, I can play any game. At the end of the game, at the end of the day, I need to be who I am and comfortable with it. And I am not a person go and sue people and try to fight for equality. I'm gonna show 'em, and if they don't like it, I can find somebody else who can appreciate me and then perform that way. Does that make any sense?

JH: Yeah, yeah I know what you mean. I guess just to move away from work, um...Do you mind telling me a little bit about your ESL program?

BN: The what?

JH: You, the ESL program you're thinking of starting.

BN: Yea, um... the ESL program is something that, well it started last year. You know, we live out in the country. I don't know if you know. (JH: Oh). We live out, right now, I live out in the country. Very comfortable. We live on two acres. Real quiet, I love the country life. We've been there, we built the house there in 1999. So for years we've been there. Raised our children up. So I have a little bit more time now. I say that but I really don't. But, we've been going to church out there and this past year, and then in the summer, now, we're now if you don't mind, I'm goin' to the religious side, the spiritual side (JH: Yeah, that's fine) of this because it plays a big role to this. Starting last year, just through the process of praying...God just called me to go and serve, now over the years, I have served various ministries. I've gone to mission, done mission in South America. No, Central America in Mexico. Inner-city kids and all of that. But this last summer just God just called me to go to serve in Alief. And he specifically talked to me—using the term 'missionary.' And I don't, I would never call myself missionary. It's just like I serve, I help serve with the church and all that, although the word of God does say that. So I say, OK, mission—and, my wife and I knew that one day we will be call to be missionary one day. We just don't—just thought more like a field, you know, I don't

know if you (JH: Yeah) understand from field you go on to other country and all that. I was like, Alief? What does that mean? You know, and just praying some more, and so I shared with my wife, late summer last year—or actually in the fall I say, ‘Sweetie, I been praying and I think God is calling us to be missionary there,’ and my wife was really surprised and I said, ‘but he didn’t call me to start a church. Just go serve.’ So she said OK, so.

And then when I agree to his calling I said OK, I do it. Don't know how. Just go and see what happen. So I went out—and then the next day, Jesus say he want me to visit this, go into this church to visit him. I said OK, gonna do that. Now when I say this, I don't know if you believe it or not, you know, in the spiritual, spiritually speaking, it's not an audio voice. It's just, it's hard to describe. You just hear this, this very clear and...so I set up a meeting with the pastor, and I said, ‘Hey, been praying, God say that the I ought to be a missionary for Alief area working with Vietnamese community.’ And he say, ‘Really?’ I say, ‘Yeah.’ I said, ‘I can't explain it, but...’ And he said, ‘Wow!’ He and another pastor he said, ‘Uh...for the last few months we've been praying specifically for a Vietnamese guy who gonna be a missionary in this community.’ [chuckling] I said, ‘OK! Done deals. Where do I sign?’ So, from there, and so what Gods want me to do is partnership with that. And there's a reason for all this.

So, when I talked to the pastor, and then we started meeting on a regular basis. Remember, that's all I knew. So I start prayin' and—well I knew something else, he was telling me my gifts and talents, what I, what he wants me to do, to bridge, he wants me to bridge the younger generation and the immigrants, you know, all of this. And somehow, I don't know how this all work. So I talk to pastor, I say, ‘Hey, been thinking about doing an ESL program.’ He said, ‘Wow, yeah, I'm thinking the same thing.’ So then he say, ‘So what are you think...’ so I map out all this. But here's the deal. It's more than ESL. It's really a social...social and training, social and cultural training for immigrants, not just Vietnamese, because we—in Alief it actually has the highest Vietnamese population in the country per capita in that condensed area. But it’s also has Hispanic, Africans. And I, remember, this go back to years ago, I came in as an immigrant. There was no ESL then. No one, but I had a good support group, remember I mentioned that? From the church people, they spent time with us, to allow us to have a good foundation to launch our life here in United State. We had a good support system, good foundation. I want to reiterate that. And that's what I have recalled. And this is what the Lord wants me to do, is help these people, you know. The Bible say, the Jesus say, if they're hungry, feed them; if they're poor, clothe them. So that's what we're gonna do. They need help with the language. Help them. And then also part of the ESL we're gonna offer also discussion about cultural barriers and languages. So help not only individual, but the family.

So this is ESL now becoming an ESL program that is more tailored entire family, not

just, not just for those who want to study the language. So, we gonna do is like a family events, so when the, so the way we see it is the parents or the adults come, if they have kids, because we don't, we wanna provide them a means that they say, you know I come here...now you understand, remember when I say my parents came here, they have to go to work every—we all had to go to work and all of that. When you have young children, it's hard to work. You know, and you go home and gotta take care of your children, cook dinner. So these ESL program, we can go further than that. We gonna offer meal for these people. So when they come home from work, they don't have to worry about feeding their children. Bring your family. You go study, we feed your children. And then we teach your children English as well. So, not only we teaching you, we teaching your children, and we feeding you. And whatever else you need help, we will help.

So, you see, it's more than just ESL (**JH**: It's very comprehensive). Yeah, so this way, what we offering to these people is the...training, not only to learn the language, but to learn the culture, and then develop some sort of relationship. I still keep relationship with people at church from thirty-some years ago. Occasionally I still go back and visit. You know what, I still go back just to have *lunch*. Yeah, I mean I visit other, but you know what I'm saying, go and have lunch. That's how much it means to me. So, today's term, people say, 'give it back.' I don't, I don't like the buzzword, you know. I'm not 'giving back' anything, you know, I'm just keep giving. You know, it just. So, I guess there's nothing wrong with saying 'giving back' either, but I wanna go further than just ESL. Wanted to really help a family to really learn the way of how to adjust, adapt, and contribute to the society. Does that make any sense? (**JH**: Yeah)

And the reason is I wanna do this church environment, because to me it's safe. You know, when, it's hard to start with an—now can I go out there and start a brand new one or writing a grant and all that? I say I don't wanna do that. Because with church I have, I already have people who willing to, we have programs where people already taking care of kids. All that, all that concern about what kind of people are watching my kids, it's already been filtered, it's already been taken care of. You know, all the background checks, already taken care of. You know what I'm sayin'? I don't have to start something new. It's—what I wanna do is, and I shared this with the pastor, I wanna latch this wagon about ESL with the church and the church providing the volunteer. Church people love to do it. We have—we just have, I've been meeting with the pastor every Thursday morning and we're gonna have our first meeting in two weeks. We gonna launch this thing in June, and he said that he got a lot of people very excited about this, because they wanna help. They wanna help the immigrants that came to Alief. And I shared this with the pastor, and I will say this to those who, those like my position who came as a immigrant and do well, and I say this to American also, who were born here, you know how people get irritated because this is the fact. You have people who say, 'God, I'm just tired of all these guy coming over here and they don't even know what's goin' on,' and this and that.

Well, hello? You never taught 'em right. Nobody step up to teach them, to help them. They came over here, they trying to figure it out all on their own. Remember when I came over? I had a system. But that system that goes further than just ESL, it was before ESL, it was a personal relationship. You know, it's not just ESL. So that's what I wanna bring to the—the title is ESL, but it's more than that. It's more of a family, family who willing to, families who willing to invest time and effort in other family who just came to the United State and want to help their children, help the parents be a productive to, and a contributing members to the society because what happens on the, and this is fact, I don't have scientific proof, but this is fact. When parents immigrant come over here, and they have to hit the workforce running at full-time, and they're not learning, they don't have time to teach their kids, ok? So their kids going to school, their kids just like me. I was...get angry, get mad. I was like, not everybody is, can be sweet and kind. I was very hostile boy, you know? And...so they get in trouble in school. They get teased. But they can't express themselves. So what are they gonna do? They express themselves through violence, through quitting. And then so what you do is you creating a generation that causing this society more money, you know, to take care of them, or a generation that is destructive. You see what I'm saying? So, that's what this ESL is—on the title it's just say ESL, but there's a lot of details behind that because I—really what God want me to do is really help raising not just family, a generation. I'm speaking, I'm speaking proudly to say that eventually, twenty years from now if we keep doing this, we will raise generation from this Alief area that will continue to produce doctors, engineer, lawyers, you name it. You know, and they don't have to be all of that. They will be strong citizens, and productive members to the society. (**JH**: Have the tools that they can be what they wanna be). Exactly, exactly. And excel fast so that they can keep going, rather than get tossed aside because there is no one. Does that make any sense to you?

**JH**: Yeah. I actually participate in a program that's kinda similar to that. (**BN**: OK) So, yeah.

**BN**: And this is not new. I know other churches have done this. They do ESL. I don't know the level of details, but I just wanna share with you the intent behind the ESL (**JH**: Yeah). ESL is just a platform, but we gonna give them more than what they need. We give them, we give them so much they don't realize it. Subconsciously, years from now, they say, you know what? Those people really invest in my family. They just didn't teach me English, you know. So, you know how some—I remember I used to struggle in math when I was studying and I had older brother and sister, just a whiz in math. They, in fact, they represent the university for a math competition. And I always hate to go to them for questions because they never give me the answer. They give me the calculation process that I have to go through. And I just want the answer, you know. This is kinda similar. These people come over and they just say, 'Teach me to say enough so that I can get by.' No, I wanna teach you the right way. It's gonna go a lot further so that you can raise your

children the right way. And then, what you learn, what your children learn, you can bridge that easily. You don't have this gap, you know. So, I do have a lotta sympathy for, for, and probably some empathy for people who just came over and then they work so hard and then their children turn out to be in, you know, got involved in gang or whatever. I'm not here to change the world. I'm here only to do what I can do. But what I wanna do is to create a, what God asked me to do, to create a process that eventually it can self sustain. It's sustainable. And it continue to produce generation after generation and just keep moving and putting out good stuff. I don't have to be there to you know, twenty years—let's say if I die, let's say this thing run good for the next ten years and I die. I don't have to be there. People keep going. (**JH**: Be sustainable). Exactly, exactly.

**JH**: Aside from this program, do you have any other ties to the Vietnamese community?

**BN**: Uh...I'm starting in, getting involved helping with some other non-profit organizations, one of them is a, with a friend of mine who's an attorney, immigration attorney. So I help them with the paperwork. When he offered pro-bono, you know what I'm talking about? Services for poor income, low-income family, or elderly. And so what we do is, I do the interpretation or translation for them. You know, doing paperwork, while my friend who's an attorney really understand the law, the immigration law. And then, you know, work through it. So that's where I am right now. And I'm hoping through that I get to know more family member, Vietnamese family member and say, 'Hey, about ESL here, when you sponsor your so-and-so come over here, send them to here, 'cause we get you ready to go.' You see it's kinda all (**JH**: Yeah, it's a big, it's a big cycle)... Yeah. So I try to stay within that, how it's gonna connect it together, you know the immigration. And you know, I hopefully I get to know more attorneys that do it in Spanish, do it in African language and then eventually say, 'Go to this ESL program. We wanna help you.' You know.

**JH**: So I don't wanna take too much of your time, so I just have one, one last question.

(**BN**: Yeah). I guess, I'm curious, what, what does it mean to you to be Asian or Vietnamese American? Or is—and is that an important distinction to make in your mind?

**BN**: [sighing] Jonathan, all my years I lived here, I never look at myself as Asian American or even Vietnamese American. I have to honestly say, I'm an American. And I just wish, I just wish less of that. I think it's good to have heritage. We should, we should be proud of our heritage, where we came from. But by labeling ourselves—labeling ourselves in that manner, in the context of somehow...It's hard, this is just one man opinion. I think it's counterproductive, you know. I think in general just say we're American. Now, are you? I look at you I can tell okay, he's American but I know he's got Asian parents cause he look like that. Now, where you born, it doesn't matter. Eventually, it doesn't matter, you know. So, I've never—I never trying to accomplish something with

a label that I'm Vietnamese American or Asian American. Never. It's not important to me. What's imp— (JH: It's just Bob Nguyen)— exactly. Because I think after this an hour and a half that we've spent together, I would hope that when you leave here, you will remember me as Bob as the person XYZ. You have a summary of this Bob Nguyen person. Not that he's Asian American because that title really doesn't identity my character. My character is what I've just shared with you. Does that make sense? (JH: Yeah). To me that's important. What impact I wanna leave here, than the label itself. So no, I don't have that goal, or that objective that's an Asian American's. I've always, even my kids, I share with my kids I say, 'Don't worry about family's name, you know, your family's name. Don't worry about that.' I said, 'You just need to follow what we have taught you and use your own understanding and knowledge and experience and wisdom and have your own identity and be the kind of person God wants you to be. The name doesn't matter. The name comes and go.' I think it's—I'm tryin' to, I try to live my life without a lot of barriers, you know. You can't get me because I'm Asian American. Oh, I'm Vietnamese American. I'm Vietnamese—I'm really Vietnamese by birth, so when do you stop? You know, you compartmentalize. If you just remove all of that what we have is an interactive, collaboration—collaborative culture. It's more healthy that way. And we can be respectful knowing that, you know, he has Asian heritage. We go over there and say she has—he or she has American heritage, you know, by appearance. We're making a guess here. But like it's whatever, you know? (JH: You just said, there's no need to put a label, right?). Yeah, I think so. But...

JH: Just your combination of being Vietnamese but also where you lived and what you did.

BN: I don't even care to be honest, I don't even care to be the first Vietnamese American in this XYZ thing, whatever that blank is. I don't care. I know the moment where I am and that's what I wanna be. I wanna be a kind of person that leave a positive impact and it could be a life impact for someone after I spend this much time talking to. I would hope that I leave something that is positive for you to whether to learn from or at least to observe and then say, 'Wow, that's interesting.' But not...not as some, this guy is, I don't think Jonathan will walk away and say, 'That was an interesting Vietnamese American guy.' [JH laughs] You will say, 'That Bob Nguyen is really interesting person.' I think that's essentially how we think and we need to maintain it that way, you know. That's an interesting Bob Nguyen, knowing that he came from Vietnam, went through all of this, da-da-da, you know, and then that's that. So...

JH: Sounds good. Thank you for your time.

BN: Hey thanks for...

JH: Really appreciate it.

BN: Oh, sure no problem. I appreciate that you allow me to share some of the stuff I, you know, I wanna, I wanted to share for a long time and I hope this information... will be used for someone who study and understand that there's things that's far more important than what we trying to look from individualistic or within certain boundaries, you know. (JH: Yeah). Now here's—I wanna leave this real quick. Remember I say the mind we're talking about how I think math, at a certain level I think Vietnamese, and in English. How our mind, now you're Chinese-born and you have Chinese parents, but you think a lot in English, but remember your *feeling* is universal—language. What you feel and what I feel is universal language. It's understood. You feel anger. That's universal language. You feel upset, you feel—whatever you feel. That's universal language, OK. What you love, the feeling of love is also universal language. Time is also a universal language. What I'm saying is everybody understands that. It doesn't matter what culture you come from. If we can remember that these—these essentials God had given us, in us and around us and use that universal language and help each other, I think we'd be good. Because you don't need a whole lot of translation to see somebody who loves you, right? You don't need a whole lot of translation to see someone who willing to spend time, give up their time, to invest in your life. Because what you receive and re—reciprocate or return will be positive because you recognize that it was given to me. You don't need translation to know this person could be doing something else but they spending time with me. This person could've love anyone else but decided to love me. Once you receive that and understand that and the feeling that we have, whether these emotions if you will, they're all the same. Use that to help one another. Ok, I'm done. I'm getting off my soapbox. [Both laugh]