Background: Dr. Nathalie Ho Roff was born in Saigon, Vietnam, in 1966. She grew up in Saigon during the Vietnam War, and her family remained there for three years after 1975. During that time, her parents bought French citizens’ papers for two of her sisters and a brother, who were then able to escape to France. In 1978, her parents bought a legal pass out of the country, and her family and her father’s brother’s family left Vietnam by boat. Tragically, however, their boat sank, and Nathalie lost many members of her family, including both her parents. The survivors—Nathalie, her brother, her uncle, and two cousins—made it to a refugee camp in Pulau Bidong, Malaysia. They remained there for five months until, in 1979, they were sponsored to come to the U.S. by a church in Hampton, VA. Later that year, one of Nathalie’s sisters came to the U.S. from France and brought Nathalie and her brother to Houston. They stayed friends with the family until her sister was able to afford to rent an apartment. During this time, Nathalie attended Alief Hastings High School. She then put herself through college at the University of Texas at Austin, where she studied Biology. She then earned her MD at the Baylor College of Medicine, where she specialized in internal medicine. Currently, she lives in Houston with her husband and three children, and she is training for a subspecialization in geriatric medicine.

Setting: The main focus of the interview is on areas of labor and capital, although matters of personal experiences relating to childhood, college and career are also discussed. The interview traces Dr. Roff’s background and journey to the U.S. from Vietnam as a boat person, her subsequent assimilation into American society as a refugee, and her education at UT-Austin and at Baylor College of Medicine. Mrs. Roff’s interview took place at the Chao Center Conference Room on the campus of Rice University, and took about an hour and ten minutes. Mrs. Roff’s story and memories are a unique and touching addition to the HAAA project, and we sincerely appreciate her participation.

Interview Transcript:
Key:
MB Maddy Bullard
SC Sarah Craig
NR Nathalie Roff
— Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
…. Speech trails off; pause
(?) Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)
SC: Uh, hi, this is Sarah Craig.

MB: And I’m Maddy Bullard.

SC: And we’re here today on June 27, 2012, in the conference room of the Chao Center for Asian Studies, to interview Dr. Nathalie Roff for the Houston Asian American Archive Oral History Interview project. Um, Dr. Roff, could you begin by telling us a little bit about yourself?

NR: Okay, um, I was born in Vietnam, and, um, I came to the U.S., um, as a boat person when I was thirteen years old, and, um, I was actually sponsored by a church, a Baptist church, in Virginia at that time. Um, and eventually, um, found my way to Houston in 1980…early 1980. And I’ve lived in Houston since then.

SC: Um, could you tell us a bit about your childhood?

NR: Uh, yes, sure. Um, I grew up with, um, a family of seven children, um, my parents were ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, and so, um, you know, they—they, um…they had a very good business running, my father r—um, owned a hotel in Vietnam, and, um, and—among other things he also was involved in other businesses too, but that was what w—I remember seeing, was the hotel business, and, um—

SC: And what city was that in?

NR: In Saigon. And, um, and—but things changed, you know, in 1975 the, um, the south, um, lost to the north, and so politically everything changed, and in, in 1978, um, the Chinese, the ethnic Chinese group in Vietnam, um, was a—somewhat pushed out, like they, they really, um…asked for Chinese to leave, by boat, and that’s when we left. That’s when my father decided to leave, my parents did.

MB: So what year was that?


MB: ’78.

NR: Yes. So we paid the Vietnamese government a certain amount of money, um, as part of the process. You pay to leave the country. And so, we, um, left by boat.

MB: Did your whole family go with you?

NR: Yes. Um, well, um, anybody that was still in Vietnam at that time left with us. Because I—my father was able to send my two sisters and a younger brother to France the year before, by, um, just different means, different ways to do it. But, um, so there were four children left, my parents and my, um, my father’s mother, with a lot of my aunts and uncles and cousins. So, we—we all left together. Mm-hmm.
SC: Could you tell us a little bit more about that process—if, if you’re comfortable talking about it? About…the process of leaving?

NR: Yeah, well it was a legal, in a sense, it, the—because the people, you know, from Vietnam had different, um…ways of leaving. So a lot of people left illegally, and then, then there were legal ones like my family did, where you declare to the government that you, you apply to leave and they grant you permission to leave after you have paid a certain amount, certain fees. And, um, so that’s, that—that was our family’s process, and, um, so we left, and, um, we ran into trouble. We had an accident, and so, um… my boat sank.

SC: Um…

NR: [Whispers] Yeah…

MB: Could you talk a little bit about what it was like growing up in Saigon, with, like, your family as ethnic Chinese in Vietnam?

NR: Yeah. It was a very nice life. We had, you know, everything. I went to a private school. Um, all the girls went to an all-girls school, the boys went to the boys’ school. We had a very comfortable life. Yeah…

MB: So your family was of a pretty high socioeconomic status?

NR: Uh, I would think so, but you know, it’s hard to judge when you’re young, and—we had everything we wanted. Everything, you know we had a driver, we had, you know, just…what you would get here for—for kids that go to private school. So it was a very fulfilling and, you know, happy life, and…yeah. And very good friends. Yeah.

SC: If you’d rather we—we…

NR: It’s fine, I’m sorry, it just gets a little…

MB: That’s okay.

SC: I, I totally understand and really, if, if you’re not comfortable talking about this I—

NR: No, I, I’ll be fine, I just need a little time. Yeah…so, yeah. It’s fine, I just—I just go through this, and then… it’ll be just fine. But yeah, no, we had a very happy life, and um, my parents provided, you know, everything for us. We learned French. We spoke Chinese at home, and, um, when we went to school then you have to learn Vietnamese—and s—and Vietnamese friends, so we had, we had Vietnamese, um, education too. But we learned French with the nuns, and, um, and that’s where the name Nathalie came from, was, you know, once you enter the school you have to have a French name, so, you know, it was given to us, and—and, um…yeah.

MB: So were you raised Catholic, or did you just go to a Catholic school?
NR: Um, I was raised as Catholic, even though my mother went to Buddhist temple, but my parents pretty much just followed what the school was tau—teaching us. And so, we were, we went to church, and chapel on Wednesdays, and on weekends we would go to church, and so we were raised, you know, Catholic. And it was actually, um, a choice that my, I remember my mother saying that we can choose, when we get older, that we can decide.

MB: Did you decide to continue that faith?

NR: I, um, I joined the Methodist Church when I met my husband.

MB: Mm-hmm.

NR: So, um, yeah. I—yeah. I continued with my Christianity, but, um…yeah.

SC: And then, um, I believe you mentioned in the pre-interview questionnaire, that after leaving Vietnam, you were in a refugee camp for a brief time?

NR: Yes. So that’s actually all, you know, leaving from Vietnam you can’t really make it anywhere else, so you just go along the coast of the, you know, the country, and we ended up going along the southern coast and, um, went to Malaysia, and—and at that time, there were already refugee camps set up, and so that was, um, that was the only way the Vietnamese people could make it, was to be able to find the refugee camps and, set up, you know, settle there, in between time before you could go to another country. And that’s what happened, the—people figured out where to go, and, um, and we ended up going to the refugee camp there. So, and then, that’s when people, um, in the camp would help you out, and try to get you to, get settled, in that area too. So that’s where we ended up, in Malaysia.

MB: Were there a lot of people in the refugee camp?

NR: Mm-hmm. Yes. Um…I don’t remember the exact amount, like the, the numbers of people, but it seems like it was very crowded. You know, people were fighting for places to I—to build houses to live, and so… It was, I would say, thousands of, you know, tens of thousands of people then. But it was even more crowded by the time we left. So people keep coming into the, to the camp. Yeah.

SC: And…uh, a Baptist church in Virginia sponsored you, and how did they, how were they finding people to sponsor in these refugee camps?

NR: Right…that’s a very good question. So, um, at that time, in the U.S., you had the Orderly Program from the President, who thought that it was very unsafe for boat people to just escape and, and you know, be, um, attacked by Thai pirates and different, um, issues, over—in the water. And so the U.S. um passed an act that, um, created an Orderly Program where if you have relatives in the U.S., um, you can sponsor someone in the refugee camp, and I have an aunt who was living in Virginia, and she was going to, um, a Baptist church, and so I think that you need to have some—somebody who can financially support the refugees before you could sponsor the
people over. And that’s what happened; my aunt was not able to sponsor us financially, because she had just gotten here in ’75, and, and so somehow the church, you know, c—was—was willing to do that, and so they did all of the paperwork for us to join my aunt in the same town. Um, but she’s—she was not the main sponsor, but the church did it, and, um, and they were very nice, and, you know, they—what happens at that time, is they would set up, um, a, a house, or some way for you to have a, a place to stay, and they tried to, um, create jobs, or they find jobs for you to do, and we used to, um, the—I came with a group of people, because, um, I have an uncle who’s survived the accident as well and he was sort of the guardian, because he was the oldest person that, that we had. My two cousins and my brother and I were the survivors, with my uncle, so there were five of us, and he was the only adult, and, um, so he was, he would cut the grass for the church, on the— you know, on the weekends for a living. And doing odd jobs like that. Because we didn’t have any skills, and we didn’t have any language knowledge to really get any other jobs. Um, so, yeah. So the church sponsored us, and, um…yeah.

SC: And, um, do you remember what church, in what town?

NR: It was in Hampton, Virginia. Um, I don’t remember the name of the church…I can probably look it up, but I—I remember the reverend’s name, Franklin Hall was—is his name, I actually met him, uh, a few years ago, here in Houston at a conference, but yeah. It was, it was, um, a Baptist…I don’t have the name in mind. It was Hampton, through.

SC: Okay. Thank you.

MB: So, um, you mentioned on the questionnaire that your sister had made the decision, uh, to move to Houston and that you went with her.

NR: Yes.

MB: How did your sister get to the U.S.?

NR: Yeah, so this is one of the sisters that was in France at the time, and she, um, she came over to visit us, because, you know, she had only gotten news that we had an accident, so she really needed to get over here to see what’s happening. And so once she got here, then, you know, she realized what, what the condition was, and how we were living, and so she then flew to Houston to visit some friends of our family, just friends of my parents, and then she, you know, talked to them, and she thought it would be a better place for my brother and me to be living with people that we knew. And so, she just decided to move us here. And….

MB: So she was older than you?

NR: Yes. My sister is nine years older. She’s my oldest sister. Yeah.

SC: And your uncle stayed in Virginia?

NR: Mm-hmm. And I never, I never, um, contacted him after we left. We—we…didn’t leave in very good terms, and we just, you know, we just sort of—we didn’t even tell him we were
leaving. So we sort of snuck out of the house and…took the Greyhound bus, and made it to Houston. Yeah.

SC: And so, when you got to Houston, uh, do you remember what neighborhood of Houston you were living in at first, when you first moved here?

NR: Yeah, it’s, um, Hammerly, over there by, uh, actually I have an address, recently I went through a lot of old photos, but, it was, um, by I-10, and Long Point, and I don’t know what that subdivision’s called, and you’re not from Houston, but I, I can look it up and, um, yeah. I remember the address. I actually ran into the man who let me stay with him, about a month ago in a grocery store. Yeah, just ran into him, and I saw him and I said, ‘Are you the one?’ Yeah, and he…so anyways. It was just a friend. And I didn’t know him, he didn’t know me, but, you know, he was letting us stay with him for a few months. We would stay with friends, different people for a few months, and then we would move to another apartment for another few months or so.

SC: So just friends of the family?

NR: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. And then after, maybe a, you know, six months or a year, then my sister managed to, um, to find a way to stay in the U.S. legally, so then she was able to stay and get a Green Card. And so we, um, so she got an apartment for the three of us to live together. So…we, we then became independent at that time.

SC: So, until she got the Green Card, how were you supporting yourselves? Was she working at all? Or…

NR: She, well she was working in France. She was going back to France, back, you know, she had to go back to France to work. So we, um, I don’t—I didn’t ask the people, but I think somehow they got some sort of government help, probably, because we were under-age, you know, we were all under sixteen, eighteen, so I—they supported us. These people provided food and…we just went to school and that was it. You know, we didn’t really…ask too many questions.

And it, it was just a short time. So we—we pretty much just—I did a lot of cleaning for the house, and cooking and stuff, for people, and, and went to school. And that was it. Yeah. So they just let us board with them, I guess, you know, we were boarders, w—with people.

MB: So did you go to, like, several different high schools during that time, or were you at the same school?

NR: Yeah, I was actually very lucky. I only, um, we were able to stay in the same junior high school. At that time, they called middle school, ‘junior high’. So we went to junior high. And then, um, and then by the time I got to high school, my sister had moved us to an apartment, where we could actually go to like, one high school. So my brother…my brother did, did switch
high schools, um, because of the, the move, but, um, I did not. I was, I was able to stay, go to Alief Hastings and I just stayed there for the whole time. So, um, that was fortunate. It just—it just worked out that way, that between junior high and high school, I was able to—to change schools at the right time. So, it worked out.

SC: And when your sister did move to the U.S., uh did she get a job? Do you remember where she was working?

NR: Oh, yes, she, um, she had a lot of jobs. She was cleaning houses, and, um you know, just whatever she could find. And, um, yeah. She, she had a lot—she had a bunch of jobs. She was always working, um, probably, you know, different kinds of things. I never asked her, but when I was old enough my brother and I went to work. So we didn’t really ask too much about my sister’s position. As long as she could pay the rent, and all of this. She never complained to us about rent and stuff, so. It all worked out. We didn’t have to pay rent, either, she was able to manage herself, so she never asked us to contribute to the rent or anything. It was just pretty much spending money for us, and so…And we didn’t make that much money. It was very much, you know, part-time after school and whatever, um, minimum wage at that time, we just earned enough for fun money. But…yeah.

SC: And by the time you moved to Houston, I—I know you mentioned that you learned Chinese and Vietnamese and French in Vietnam, but did you speak English when you came to the U.S.?

NR: No, not upon arrival, I did not speak English at all. So I learned just throughout the years, I learned, um, and that’s why, when, um when I was in Virginia, they didn’t know what grade to place me, you know, they would put me in different levels, and they would move me to different classes, but…I entered um, sixth grade in the U.S. Because I, I actually hadn’t gone to school for several years in Vietnam, in the time, the transitional stage to—so I didn’t go to school for several years. But I, I joined sixth grade when I got to Virginia. And then once I got here then, you know, I continued on to seventh and eighth grade, in Houston. And I just, I mean I, my English was very poor, but…I was still, I—I was getting by. I could still get by. And it took me awhile to read books and stuff, so I would reread, um, several books in junior high. But I think once I got to high school, I was able to keep up with the classes that I w—wanted to take, so…

SC: Did other kids treat you differently at all because you didn’t speak English fluently in high school?

NR: No, no. You know, I never had any problem. Um, I actually…didn’t have any problems at all. I was very, um, well-received in high school. I played volleyball for the team. I played, um, team sports, and I was actually offered a scholarship in high school, to go play volleyball at Wichita Falls, Kansas. I turned it down because I wanted to go to med school, so I wanted to focus on premed courses, but yeah, no I had a very happy high school time, and…yeah. It was very fun. Kids did not treat me badly at all. Yeah.

SC: That’s really good to hear.
MB: So did you have, like, any teachers who, you know, would teach English specifically, just like ESL-type stuff, or did you…?

NR: Yes, yes, I had to be in ESL in junior high. I did take ESL. Um, in junior high school. Mmhmm. And I, that was only, you know, seventh and eighth grade—

MB: Mm-hmm.

NR: And then I was, I was okay once I got to high school. So, I guess, when you’re young, it’s—it’s a little easier to learn the language. And that was my case.

SC: And then when you were in high school, you worked at, first at Chuck E Cheese’s, you said?

NR: Yeah.

SC: So how—how did you get that job?

NR: Um, yeah—actually I had a Vietnamese friend who was setting up the store, um, for them, and so that was the first time that they had opened up Chuck E. Cheese’s, and so he was somewhat the, the manager for the store, and, um, so he just asked, he just told me to go apply at that place. And it’s—I was Billy Bob, and I, you know, you dress up as B—Billy Bob, and, um, and I made pizzas in the kitchen. So, yeah. And, uh, you just apply, and I think because it was an open, a new store, everything was new, it was, you know, first come, first serve. And if you, you can work the certain hours that they asked you to, and I did, and so, yeah. I worked there.

MB: Did you get paid hourly?

NR: Yes. And it was minimum wage, as well. Yeah. That’s how it—that’s how those, those jobs are like. Yeah.

SC: And the minimum wage at that time was…?

NR: I think it was $3.25? Something…and it probably went up, too, by the time I went to college, it probably went up to $4-something, but I don’t really have it in mind. I don’t think, yeah I can be precise.

MB: So were other people your age, um, employed at Chuck E. Cheese, also?

NR: I…I would think so, but I didn’t really pay attention. You know, I, I think they were all young. There were some other, older people, but, yeah. I think it was just teenagers. Young people.

SC: And how long did you work there?
NR: I worked at Chuck E. Cheese, I think a pretty good time, I would say about a year or so, because then I found a better job, at Safeway. Safeway was closer to my home, I was able to walk to work, and it was more consistent with the hours, so, and I didn’t have a car, so it was much easier for me to walk to Safeway grocery store, so, yeah. That was the longest position I had—at Safeway.

SC: So you decided to work at Safeway because it was closer and more convenient and more consistent?

NR: Yes. Well you, you know they set so many hours you can work. I needed the hours, more than any—you know, more than just, you know, anything. So I wanted to make sure that I had at least twenty hours a week, and then, um, and you know, it provided insurance as well. So, um, I was, I had insurance, and um, and also the manager was very kind to me, and he would give me the summer position every, every year when I came back from college, I would work in the summer, so. And in the summertime I would work full-time, forty hours. And so, it was, it was a good, stable job. And I became the assistant manager, at one point, too, so. So they—

SC: Nice.

NR: They kind of pushed, yeah, they promote you over time. So…it was a real position.

MB: So were your wages higher at that job than at Chuck E. Cheese?

NR: It was still minimum wage.

MB: Mm-hmm.

NR: But, um, you know, it has increased over the years. But also, it was, like, I knew I could get a job easily when I go back each year, so, um, I—they only pay you minimum wage. Yeah.

SC: And, uh, how was your English by the time you started working at Safeway?

NR: It was good. Yeah, it was really okay. I—you know, it was…there were other Vietnamese people working at Safeway, too, because there were…My brother also worked at Safeway with me. He was a sackeer, I was a checker. So, um, boys did different things and girls did different things. But, there were two other Vietnamese boys that I knew, at, at Safeway. Because we all lived in the neighborhood, and so we’d walk over together, to go to work, and so at that time…

SC: Was, was it a, was there a large concentration of Vietnamese in the neighborhood, then? Or…

NR: Yeah, actually, the neighborhood now is Chinatown, but at the time when we lived there, it was just, um, just normal middle-class American, um, families, and, a few scattered Vietnamese families. And my, my sister had gotten married at that time, and her husband bought his first house there, and he was very kind to let us stay with him, so yeah. It was, he, he’s American, and
so, um, it was a very nice neighborhood. Just right on Bellaire. Yeah. In Chi—right now, it’s Chinatown. It’s called Chinatown. But at that time, it was—Chinatown was not there at all.

SC: Right.

NR: Yeah.

SC: And, so where did you go to college?

NR: I went to UT, in Austin. Yeah. It was a nice state school, and, um, yeah.

SC: And what was your undergrad experience like?

NR: I was…it was very normal, I think. You know, I had, um, I took biology as major, and premed courses, and, um, I worked, so I was busy working as an undergrad. Um, I didn’t really have the, the American experience where, you know, people sort of get together more on weekends, I didn’t do that, but it was very fun, I mean, undergrad was very fun for me.

SC: Where were you working?

NR: I worked at the law library, and that was my main job, and then I worked in the, um, dormitory cafeteria, where I served food to people, and I tutored. I did some tutoring, in French and in math. So, that was sort of, different part-time jobs.

MB: So, what made you decide to leave Houston to go to college?

NR: Oh, I thought it was, UT was the best college in Texas, and, um, I couldn’t get into Rice [laughs] at that time I applied. I couldn’t get into Rice, and I had a really low SAT score, because my verbal section was very low, but I got into UT, and I thought it was a very—a much better school than U of H. I got into U of H as well, but, um, it was just academically a better school. And, um, and I checked out the premed courses. It was just um, more competitive, at UT, so.

SC: Was there kind of a Vietnamese student community at UT at all?

NR: Yes, there was an, an organization, a Vietnamese student association. Yes. But I, I didn’t really, I didn’t join their group. Um, they get together on weekends and stuff. I pretty much just went to work, when I was at school. You know, classes, and then work, classes and then work. So…yeah.

MB: When you were going to school there, did you live on campus or off-campus?

NR: I always lived off-campus. Yeah. I shared, um, rooms with people. It was the most, you know, economical way to live.

SC: So, how did you fund your undergraduate education? Were you entirely paying for it yourself?
NR: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. I applied for a lot of scholarships. Whatever I could. I went to the financial aid office and looked up a lot of, um, scholarships. They had books, back then, they had lots and lots of books, and you can just flip through, and I would spend my first few months, when I first got to campus, I did that. And then I just renewed whatever I could, you know, every year. I did have some loans, at the end, I had some Pell Grant loans, but a small amount.

MB: So, um, was UT, like, cheaper for people living in Texas at that time?

NR: Yes.

MB: Did you get to take part in that discount? Because you were living in Texas?

NR: Yes. I was in-state. So, yeah.

MB: Um—

NR: To me, it was not, um, it was cheaper than, than—I didn’t even look at any other schools. Like, I only applied to the Texas schools. And only the local ones, yeah.

MB: While you were in college, other than summer, did you come back to Houston to visit your brother and sister? Like over winter break or something?


SC: And…at this point, I know you mentioned your sister had married an American. Was she an American citizen at this time? Had, had you or your brother applied for citizenship?

NR: I actually applied as soon as I qualified. So I applied on my own, and I, that was when I went to college, so, in 1985. After you’ve lived in the U.S. as a refugee for five years, you qualify to take the test. And so, as soon as that happened, I just applied myself. And at the time I didn’t, you know, it wasn’t my job to—to worry about my sister’s citizenship, and my brother’s, so I didn’t ask them. I don’t know when they became a citizen. But we all did our own things. We didn’t do things together, so… I don’t know when, what happened with my sister’s citizenship. But I think once she got married, then I think, you know, they could legally take care of that.

SC: And then, what made you decide to go to med school?

NR: Mmm. I’ve always wanted to, when I was, um, throughout high school I wanted to go to med school. Yeah.

SC: And where did you go to med school?

NR: I went to Baylor. Baylor Medical School, yeah, Baylor College of Medicine.
SC: And...what factored into your decision to go there?

0:30:03

NR: Um, Baylor is, um, one of the better schools in Texas, and, um, I applied to the UT systems as well, so the Texas schools, um, they’re state school, the medical schools are state schools, so you apply to—with one application, and you rank whichever one you wanted to go to, and... I also got into the UT, um, in Galveston, but at that time Baylor rank—Baylor’s ranking was much higher. And it was, um, the same financially, whether I go to Baylor or the UT schools, and so I picked a higher ranking school. And, uh, yeah. And the training is better. Clinically, you get more training at Baylor, at, at that time.

SC: So, you mentioned you still are, are at Baylor College of Medicine, now as a doctor. Did you go through med school and then residency as well there, entirely within Baylor?

NR: Mm-hmm. Yes. I finished my residency in Internal Medicine, um, fourteen years ago, and I actually didn’t work as a doctor for ten years. I just stayed home to raise my children. And then I went back to do research, um, for the last four years. And I’m starting, um, a fellowship, um, this coming...year. Just starting July 1, I’m, I’m going to, um, be doing geriatrics, so, I’m coming back as a s—sub-specialist. Mm-hmm.

SC: Um.

NR: At Baylor as well. So...

SC: So, you stayed home for some years to raise your children. Could you tell us a little bit more about your family?

NR: Yeah, um, I’m married to a very nice person, he, I met—He was in law school when I met him, so he’s five years older, um, and we have three children, uh, I’ve been married for 22 years. And he’s, he’s, um, he comes from a very nice family, um, they have five children in their family, and very, just very nice people. His parents live in Houston, um, they received me, you know, very kindly, and, and very happily, from day one. I met him in 1986. And they’ve been very nice to me. Um, he is an attorney by trade, but he’s, um not practicing law right now. He’s, um, he does business. And, um, so our children are, um, twelve, fourteen, and seventeen. Yeah.

SC: And... is he...is he Vietnamese-American, or is he...?

NR: No, he’s American. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

SC: And—

NR: He was born in St. Louis, Missouri, and, uh, lived in New York after, after that, and moved to Houston in the ‘70s. So, yeah. He went to college in Connecticut, and went to law school in Austin.
SC: Cool.

MB: So when did, what year did you two get married?

NR: We got married in 1990. Yeah. I was, I had just finished one year of medical school—

MB: Mm-hmm.

NR: …at that time, so we got married, and…

SC: And so how do your children relate to their Vietnamese heritage? Is it important for them?

NR: It fluctuates—it depends on the time of, you know, how old they are. Um, I think when they’re—up until now, they didn’t really talk about it very much, but last year my oldest one, who’s, um, seventeen, she, I guess she was more interested in, in the background because of her history class, and, uh, she was learning about the Vietnam war, and, so she asked for me to take her to Vietnam. So I took her there, um, you know, for a summer, and she…didn’t think much of it, you know, at the time when we went to Vietnam together, but I think, after a, a year, or s— after a few months, after being back, she realized it was really a meaningful trip, and so she appreciated the trip a little more, and now she can… She can relate to some of the Vietnamese, um, family stories. Yeah. And she’s, you know, the kids enjoy getting together with my sisters and brothers, so, um…they have a good time. We don’t go out of, I mean, they don’t go out of their way to say, ‘Oh, I’m Vietnamese.’ You know, they don’t really do that, because, um, I don’t know, it’s just, they’re just…normal kids. [Laughs] Having a good time all the time.

SC: Do they speak Vietnamese?

NR: No. They don’t.

MB: Was that the first time that you had been back to Vietnam since your childhood?

NR: No, no actually I went—my, um, my husband and and his parents took me back after we got married, so in 1991 they took me back to Vietnam, just to see the country, and—and, uh, yeah. That was the first trip. And then I went back for a funeral for an aunt, um—an unexpected death, and so I went back another time by myself. And then I took my daughter back. So three times I’ve been back to Vietnam.

SC: And—what is it like going back?

NR: Oh, it’s totally different, it’s—you know, it’s—it’s emotional when I go back. And—but I, I do—do want to go back, and I want to take my kids back. Only when they want me to take them back, so, my younger ones, um, they haven’t asked if they wanted me to take them, so. Um, it’s a special place, it’s not really my pl—my country, cause I grew up most of my years here in the U.S., um, but it’s the background, and, you know, that’s where my parents were from, and that’s where I was born, so, I will always—I will always have a tie to Vietnam, but I can’t really say that it’s really my country now, cause the government is very different, and—it’s, you know, I
don’t get to go back to my old house or anything. [SC: Mhm] So, yeah. And I don’t have any close relatives. I mean, I have lots of cousins, but I don’t have any more aunts or uncles that are that generation.

SC: Yeah. And, do you have strong ties to the Viet—uh—Vietnamese community in Houston?

NR: I—I know some, some, uh, people in the community here, but I’m not very active with the Vietnamese groups here. I belonged to a, uh, a sports club when, when I first got to the U.S., I mean to Houston, um my sister took me to this, uh, Vietnamese, uh, group where they—we would get together to play volleyball and, and sports together every weekend. And so I still keep in touch with those people, but we’re not, you know, we don’t do any activities together, cause we’re all busy now, but—and, and have families, so, we have a reunion, um, our 30th year reunion was a few years ago, and we get together to eat dinner, but we don’t really, um, do anything else. And then as far as the other people in the community, I sort of hear what’s happening in the community, but I’m not an active member.

SC: And, do you have any opinions about the Vietnamese c-community in Houston?

NR: Yeah, I really don’t, cause I was so young when I got here, and there’s a lot of political, um, issues that the older generation always bring up, and I’m not, you know, I don’t keep up with it—with that, um so I don’t really know much with the politics, yeah.

SC: And—many people of the Vietnamese diaspora worldwide identify strongly with South Vietnamese nationalism. Uh how do you feel about that, do you also identify that way?

NR: I—I do, because, um, it—it was, that was, you know, part of the—where I grew up for twelve years. Um, I’m very anti-Communist, because they—you know, they came down from the north, and—and really uprooted a lot of families, including mine, and so, um, yes, I identify with the South Vietnamese, uh, government, and and the politics of the South Vietnamese people. Um it’s unfortunate, but it’s—it’s somewhat of a lost cause, you know, it’s- it’s all one Communist country now, so people don’t view Vietnam—it’s, I think South Vietnam is a city of two tales, you know, it’s got two different stories. If you’re asking people today who are living there, they will tell you a different story, whereas people who are—are overseas, they will tell you a different story. So, I think it’s just—it’s—it’s a city that has, you know, gone through changes with the wartime and stuff.

SC: Very insightful.

MB: Um, do you feel that your experience, um, as a refugee has been different from other people who have left Vietnam or, you know, other refugees from your country?

NR: Oh, I think yes, yes yes, mine is different because, you know, I had to do everything by myself at a younger age, and and I’m very independent, and, um, it just, you know, created opportunities for me to do whatever I, um, whatever it is that given to me. Whereas if I had my parents around, who would have given me whatever I needed, um, I might not have worked that hard, or I might not have, you know, gone through the hardship that I did for medical school
or—I mean maybe I would have become a doctor too, but it would have been too easy of a way to live, to go through life, I think. And I also see my friends who have families, and and, you know, they always—they always have somebody to fall back on, whereas I have to, like, create it myself, yeah. And I’ll push myself to do it, because if something—you know if you don’t do it, no one’s gonna do it for you. So, um, yeah, I think my experience is different. And I think every refugee family has a different story and different experience in life, so, I wouldn’t say that mine is—you know, s—special, anything special, it’s just, that’s just the way it is. Yeah, but, you know, cause the opportunities are here, you can just do anything. You can do anything in the U.S. if you just focus on what you want to do, and you—you’ll get there, you’ll get there, cause a lot of people help you out in this country.

SC: Um, let’s see… Is—is continuation of Vietnamese culture and traditions important to you?

NR: Yes, yes. I—I really, um, believe that. I think there are certain things that, um, it’s easier, as far as the way we think or the way we talk, um, there are certain things that are nice to continue, um, I—I think that’s—that it’s very important. Cause—I mean, I—yeah, it’s very important to maintain that. It’s harder for my—for my family, in a sense, because we are, you know, two different cultures, and we’re trying to raise our children with different cultures, and so, um, I would only stress the Vietnamese culture if my kids are interested in it, you know, like I don’t wanna impose on them what my background or what I grew up with, because they may not understand it, uh, you know, cause we’re not exposed to a lot of the Vietnamese people, we don’t have a lot of family t-to—to reinforce it as well. So it’s—it’s a little harder, but it’s nice if they can just keep some of it, yeah.

SC: Um, do you still speak Vietnamese with your sister?

NR: Mhm, yes, yes. We only speak Vietnamese when we talk to each other, and I talk to one of my sisters every day on the phone. Um, when I talk to my brothers, I speak Vietnamese to them, yeah.

SC: And—do you ever participate in Vietnamese cultural events in Houston?

NR: Not really, I’m not—yeah.

SC: And what about, um, the Vietnamese shops over near Bellaire—

NR: Yes!

SC: Do you shop there?

NR: Yes, yes I do, I go there. There’s just certain things you have, you—I miss, so I—I go out there to eat and to buy stuff, yes. It’s a lot closer than going to Vietnam so [all laugh], yes, I do, um—and we eat a lot of Vietnamese food at home, so I cook Vietnamese food, yeah.

SC: Cool. Um, do you ever watch Vietnamese language media, videos, like the Paris by Night series?
NR: I only—I only watch it if other people are watching it, but I cannot stand those things. [SC: [laugh]] I just don’t get it, I—I don’t appreciate this, I think it’s terrible, I think those things are terrible, but sometimes you—you know you go to a restaurant and they have those things running [SC: Yeah] and I watch it and I, I just sort of, you know, watch it and laugh, and—but I do, I—I’m curious what’s out there, too, so. And I watch the news a little bit. I listen to the Vietnamese radio station, that’s how I improve w—my Vietnamese is to learn the new terms and to maintain the language, is to listen to the radio stations.

MB: So maintaining the language is important to you?

NR: Oh yes, yes yes yes. I try to do that, yeah.

SC: And—let’s see, I think we may have missed a couple of our talking points earlier.

NR: Okay.

SC: Um, could you tell us a little bit about your involvement in Teach for America?

NR: Oh, okay. Well actually Dr. Chao introduced me to Teach for America, and um, cause I’m—I’m a strong believer in education, and um, so when she discussed that I said yes, I would love to, um, participate, and, I think it’s a—that’s really the basic foundation of society is to start with education, so uh, I was able to, to be involved for three years. And then it got busy, you know, cause my children were younger then, so I—I just was, um, part of that for three years. And I served on the board, so I didn’t really, you know, do the teaching and and the training or anything with the corps members, but I was serving as a board member, raising money and participating with different events.

MB: Um, going back to your experiences in med school, uh, where did you live when you were going to med school at Baylor?

NR: Oh—yeah, I actually, um, so, I had—I lived real close to medical school, in a—in a residential neighborhood, um, so the first year I lived w—with my brother, he and I rented an apartment together and then after that I got married and so my husband and I bought a house and we lived real close to campus.

SC: Ah, what neighborhood?

NR: Southgate. Just, just south of Rice.

MB: What was your brother doing that first year when you were living with him?

NR: Um, he had just gotten out of the Air Force at that time, so he was going back to school. He was just um—he was getting a college degree at that time. Yeah. After high school my brother went to the Air Force for four years.
SC: Um… and how did you fund med school? I know you paid your way through undergrad, did you also pay your way through med school?

NR: Well, we—only for the first year. Um, I—I got loans, I got student loans to pay for medical school, yeah. You couldn’t—you can’t really work in medical school anymore, so, I—I worked at the library a little bit, but it was, it was impossible to work cause you don’t have the time to study, so, um s— and after I got married my husband paid for schooling then, so—and it was not that expensive at that time, medical school was cheap [SC: [laugh]]—cheaper, but yeah, I was very fortunate, yeah.

SC: And were there a lot of other Vietnamese Americans in—in the med school at Baylor College of Medicine?

NR: We had a good number of Vietnamese, yeah, in—at Baylor. I would say, I think probably ten in my class, ten or so.

MB: Out of how many total students?

NR: Uh, about 200, 200 students each class.

MB: Were your children born, um, while you were in med school, or after?

NR: After. Uh, my first one was born when I was in training.

MB: How was it balancing your work, like after medical school, and also having a family?

NR: Yeah, um, it wasn’t easy, but it’s very doable, you know, a lot of people do—go through it. It depends on the specialty that you choose. So, I—I, um, I picked internal medicine, so I was able to juggle family with, um, internal medicine. Whereas if you picked surgery or something that’s more, um, time, you know, involved, then it’s—it would be a lot harder, but, um, yes, so.

SC: You mentioned that you were getting a fellowship now, could you tell us more about that?

NR: Right, yeah. I’m starting, um, it’s just, um, another level of training, um, I’m starting geriatrics, um, medicine, which, um, is a subspecialty of internal medicine, and um, I’ll be in training for one year, um, where I—you know, I just manage the older people, 65 and older, with all kinds of issues. It includes palliative care, hospice, nursing home, um, everything involved with that—that phase of their lives. And uh— and acute care as well, at the hospital. So I’m rotating through the VA, the Ben Taub Hospital, and um, Methodist Hospital.

SC: And, uh, since this is a labor and capital focused project, um, if—if you’re okay with telling us, uh, what is your salary as a doctor at Baylor College of Medicine?

NR: Oh, well, as part of training, you only get the government level $40,000 i—in your training. So that’s the salary for a a training—a trainee. But I think once you, um, finish then, um, the starting salary I think is a hundred and twenty thousand a year, for a doctor, but—
MB: So do you plan—

NR:—as a clinical.

MB: Sorry.

NR: Yeah yeah.

MB: Do you plan to continue working, uh, at BCM after you finish this fellowship?

NR: I hope so, yes. I like to stay in academics, but, um, it’s—you—you just don’t know, what—yeah, I hope so.

MB: And what sort of research were you doing before you had this fellowship?

NR: Yeah, I was working on, um, the Hepatitis B, um, among the Vietnamese population in America, so my focus was, um, I didn’t really finish up my, um, project, and I’m continuing cause I’m also getting a Master’s in public health at the same time, I’m taking a leave of absence for one year but I’m gonna continue with my thesis, um and and I’m focusing only in the nail salons, so I’m focusing only the with the Vietnamese population in the nail salons for the Hep B. And hopefully we can eradicate the problem, you know, but, um, and I—I think that’s a potential risk of transmission, is in the nail salons.

SC: That sounds like very good research to be doing.

NR: Yeah.

MB: What—what sort of got you into that topic?

NR: Well, I—I—I’ve always concerned about the nail salons, like, the hygiene, and I sort of know that only Vietnamese people work there, and so I—I assume that they would carry their, um, culture and practices with them, so I always question their methods of sterilization and and practices of universal precautions, and, uh, it was just a concern of mine. And, um, and I know that Hep B has a very effective vaccine, from the eighties, and I just—I think that it’s been a missed, um, targeted population by the U.S., uh, population, like, you know, we—we sort of focus on the high risk people with HIV, and IV drug abusers, and and men who have sex with men, and that—they—that’s how they label the high risk groups, but I think that it’s just a missed population, by the—by the CDC.

SC: And—let’s see anything else that we missed.

MB: Um… could you talk a little bit about, um, how like, if you found a difference in the community that you encountered in Virginia with the community that you encountered here in Houston, sort of like, compare those communities and [NR: Oh, yeah] how you reacted and how you assimilated into those communities.
NR: Oh, yeah, I think—yes. In Virginia, it was, um—I didn’t see other Vietnamese people, we lived in a very small town, only—I remember seeing it as a Black town, you know the, I went to school with a lot of African American kids, and that’s all I saw, and so, it was, there was no Vietnamese that I could remember, um, in Virginia, and um, the only people I knew was just in my house, and so—and my aunt, and uncle, and that was all. And then in Houston, the community was bigger, um, they were—they were friendlier to me, it just seems like they were more helpful, you know, they were willing to help each other out, and especially they were friends of my parents, so, they were just very willing to help us out, and just a lot more things to do, and and it helps a lot to belong to this organization where you go and you meet with people every week, and you, you participate in team sports, you know you learn to negotiate with them and to interact with them, and they, you know, and they help out by just inviting you to their home for dinners and for meals, and hanging out with somebody. So there’s more of a community, a true community, in Houston. Um, Whereas Virginia you were pretty much on your own, yeah. But Houston was a more open community, and—and there were more organized groups like that, you know, we’d focus on sports, uh because the president of the club was a very uh kind person who wanted children to have a place to belong and to—to do things together, and to maintain the language and the culture, and so he created activities for us to, to get together every—and and it was a, a fee that you pay to, to get toge—you know, five dollars each month, but I—I couldn’t pay so they covered me. So people were very willing to help. They just took care of my—my dues, and um, yeah, so. I think people just help out at that time in Houston. Cause we were all just starting out, yeah.

SC: So was most of the Vietnamese community in Houston also refugees?

NR: Yes, uh—yes.

SC: And then—how did your aunt choose Hampton, Virginia, if there weren’t any other Vietnamese—and you might not know [NR: Yeah], just wondering if you do [NR: I don’t], how she wound up there.

NR: I think it was just a sponsorship, I think, you know, they were—they left in ’75, and—I—I didn’t have, I never asked. She was not real close to me as an aunt, cause she’s, you know, she—she was my brother—my father’s half-sister, so we were not—I don’t, I didn’t know much about that.

MB: And then the uncle that you traveled over with was, uh, her husband?

NR: No, no that’s actually a separate [MB: Oh] sibling of my father’s, and he’s, he’s my father’s younger brother [MB: Okay], yeah, and he was on the boat accident with us too, so he lost his wife and some children, so, he was a survivor as well.

MB: Um, um, so you mentioned that in Vietnam you went to private school, and obviously, you know, when you got to Virginia, going to a school in a community that was mostly African American [NR: Mhm], um that must have been very different for you. Um, I mean what was your experience like in that school compared to in Vietnam?
NR: Oh, shocking, shocking! I was like—I was so used to the nuns, you know, teaching us proper manners, and we always obeyed and studied and did everything in school, and then I showed up in this school and the kids were horrible! They would, um—I remember they were throwing papers, you know, they would ball up a piece of paper, and throwing it across the room the whole time, it was just chaos, is what I remember. And I just thought—and and they never learned anything in school; I just sat there in the back, and I just watched them, and I was so afraid to go to school, in a sense, because there’s no order, and and kids didn’t study at school, they just sort of played the whole time. They talked in class, which is completely not allowed in a Catholic—I mean at least in my old school, you couldn’t talk, um it was just shocking, and it was scary to me, but, yeah. I—I didn’t like it, I didn’t like living in Virginia, um, I didn’t like going to school there. I did my homework and I turned it in, but I didn’t really get anything out of school, but. And—but then again my English was no good, so I didn’t really get to—to learn that much. I was re—my—my sponsors were very nice people, um, they were so—n, so kind, they would work with us, they would teach us English, and they were very patient with us.

MB: So were those people like a specific group within the church?

NR: Oh right, right right, there was a—a couple, and I don’t know what the setup was like, but Mr. and Mrs. McCauley were, um, one couple that took us in, and they lived in a trailer, you know, just a little trailer not even a house, and they put us up and fed us, and um, just took care of us, and just, you know, I remember just they were serving us cereal with banana sliced in each bowl every morning. And, yeah. And just—I guess that was their, um they—they wanted to do that, yeah. And they maintained a relationship with my uncle over the years. He—they both passed away now, but, um, yeah.

MB: So you and your brother and sister lived with them?

NR: My sister never lived with the—with them, because she—she was always at, from France, so she, she went back and forth, but uh my brother and I lived with the McCauleys, um, and my uncle and my—I have two other cousins as well, they’re exactly the same age as my brother and me, um, and um, so yes, we all lived with the McCauleys until we were able to pay the rent, so we rented our own place, where, um, they had set it up for us to pay, we lived in an old house of somebody at the church had, and we rented it and paid rent for it and and did all of that. So the sponsorship for, um, for the church at that time was they—they paid for our airfare tickets to fly to the U.S. from the refugee camp, and then over the years, we pay them back. So we paid them the installments over the years. And my uncle did that, I didn’t pay for it, but over—I, I heard that, you know, he had paid all of that back to the church. It was very nice, very well-organized at that time, yeah.

MB: Were you the only family that they had sponsored like during that time period or were there other Vietnamese families that they had also sponsored?

NR: I think we were the only ones, I’m not certain, yeah. Cause when we left we actually didn’t contact the church either, and they they didn’t really know why we left, either, so we just sorta lost touch. But we f- my brother and I felt like, um, we didn’t really, um, need their help,
like we couldn’t really tell them the reason w—why we left, and all this, so we just left, and didn’t want to bother them anymore. We were able to take care of ourselves, and we just—yeah.

SC: And how old were you at that time?

NR: I was thirteen.

SC: And, your siblings in France, were they uh working or were they in school?

NR: Um, my younger brother was in school, uh, my two sisters have already been working… yeah. So they, cause they were, they were sixteen, they were more than—you know, sixteen and older, so they, they had to go to work. Once they got the news that my parents passed away, then they—they just had to go to work.

MB: So what were the circumstances under which, um, those siblings got, you know, moved to France?

NR: Uh, well, in Vietnam after ’75 you try to get out whatever way you can, and um, so my parents just bought someone else’s, um, papers, birth certificates that were French citizens, so they were, um, allowed to leave the country. So after ’75 you you try to get out whatever way you can. And people did all of that. Um, a lot of people did. A lot of people—you know, F—French people have been in Vietnam for a long time, so there were a lot of, um, marriages in between different places, and so there were kids that were French citizens and they lived in Vietnam, so what they—when that happened, then families who wanted to make money, then they can sell their papers, and that’s what happened with the two sisters. My sisters left as someone else’s, and then—some, with another name, and then once they got to France and they applied for—for um, a residency card with their own birth certificate, which is what my father had told them to do. Yeah.

SC: And—so, your other two siblings who were in France, are they still in France?

NR: Mhm, yeah. My—my, yeah, my sister is married to a Frenchman, and my—they’re both, they all married French people, and they have families, they have kids now.

MB: Do you stay in contact with them?

NR: Mhm, yes. All the time, yeah.

SC: Do you speak to them in Vietnamese as well? [two words unintelligible]

NR: Yes, yes, always.

MB: Do you still—do you still speak French?

NR: I speak some French, yeah. Well I learned, I learned more French when I was in college, so I was—review, you know, I picked it up again.
SC: And, uh, how do you feel that your status as a refugee affected the way that you settled into American society?

NR: Uh, I mean, I think it’s—I actually, um, thought everything went well, I mean I didn’t have any problems, as a refugee or after. It was all equal, everything, you know, all the opportunities were there. I was able to get a job and go to school as normal. Yeah, I didn’t have any problems as a refugee in the country. I never had any discrimination or any sort of political issues growing up. It was just very nice—very easy for me. Mhm.

SC: I guess, just starting to wrap up a little bit, um, do you identify as Vietnamese American, or Vietnamese, or American, like which of those do you feel the most strongly tied to?

NR: I’m American, yeah, I feel American, yeah. Mhm.

SC: Um, could you tell me a little more about that?

NR: Well, I—you know, I—I may look like a Vietnamese person, but I think every American in this country is from a different place or different background, and I just fit in. I—I fit in just like the Americans in the country, as long as somebody doesn’t label me as some, you know, as a Vietnamese American or something, I just am—I’m just like everyone else. I feel that, um, I have lived here all—most of my life, the majority part of my life is in this country, and this identiﬁ—I identify with the country, this is my country, and this is—I belong here, I don’t think I could live any other—in any place else, so, um, yeah. I see myself as an American in— in this country.

SC: Thank you so much for talking with us, I know it’s been very difficult for you to—to talk with us, that’s why I want to thank you, and we really appreciate it.

NR: Oh, I’m glad to—I’m sorry I was a little bit at the beginning, but—

SC: I—it’s ﬁne, I understand.

MB: It was great to meet you.

NR: Thank you, thank you for your time.

[The recorder is turned off, the interview ends]