

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Victoria Ai Linh Bryant

Interviewer: Sarah Craig

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Background:

Victoria Bryant was born in Pleiku, Vietnam, in 1974. In the wake of the Fall of Saigon in 1975, her parents tried several times to arrange to get out of the country, finally succeeding in 1978, when they escaped by boat. After several months in a refugee camp in Malaysia, they were sponsored to come to Houston by another Vietnamese family. Her family settled in the Heights, where her father got a job as a welder, while her mother worked in a nail salon and later opened her own salon.

Because Victoria came to the United States at such a young age, the entirety of her education occurred here. During her childhood she attended L.L. Pew Elementary School, Holland Vanguard Middle School, and Jones Vanguard High School. When she started kindergarten, she spoke no English, but by fifth grade she was proficient in the language. (However, she continued to speak Vietnamese regularly with her parents.) After graduating high school in 1992, she went to the University of Houston to attain her BS and Phar.D. degrees. She worked as an intensive care pharmacist at the Veterans Affairs Hospital for six years, during which time she got married. She and her husband founded an in-home care service for seniors, Ambassadors Caregivers—which is now a thriving company—and she left her job as a pharmacist to focus on their business full-time. After several years, they founded an additional business, Senior Vantage, which deals with healthcare marketing and networking in the healthcare and senior care communities. It was as a result of networking for Senior Vantage that she met City Council member Danny Nguyen and began to be active in the Vietnamese American community in Houston. She agreed to help him revitalize the Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce. She was elected president of the Chamber in 2011 and continues to hold that office as of this writing.

Setting:

The interview was conducted in the conference room of the Chao Center for Asian Studies on the campus of Rice University. The interview required approximately an hour. Dr. Bryant provided a wealth of information about the experience of growing up in Houston as a member of the ‘1.5 Generation’ and about the revitalization of Houston’s Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce, in which she played a critical role. She also extensively discussed her commitment to raising her children bilingual in English and Vietnamese and ensuring that they have a firm connection to their Vietnamese heritage. She was very insightful and informative about these and many more topics, and is a wonderful addition to the archive.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

SC	Sarah Craig
VB	Victoria Bryant
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

SC: This is Sarah Craig, and I'm here today on July 11th, 2012, in the conference room of the Chao Center for Asian Studies, to interview Dr. Victoria Bryant for the Houston Asian American Oral History Interview Project. Um, Dr. Bryant, thank you for being here today, uh, could you please begin by telling me a little bit about yourself.

VB: Uh, sure. Um, my background is, um, I was born in Vietnam, I came here when I was three, um, right after the fall of Saigon, um, and uh, lived here in Houston since, and uh, you know, gone to public school like everybody else [laughs], uh, went on to, uh, to get my pharmacy degree, I went back and got my doctorates, and worked for the, uh, the Veterans Affairs hospital for six years. After that I started my own business in home care, it's called Ambassadors Caregivers, helping seniors, um, live independently at home, and then after that, um, I started another company called Senior Vantage, and that is healthcare marketing uh for the healthcare um—senior healthcare industry. And, uh, got involved in, um, you know, couple of non-profits, and then became the president of the Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce last year, and I'm still currently holding that office, and so that's where we are. [laughs]

SC: Well cool. Um, I guess going kind of chronologically, uh, you were pretty young when you left Vietnam. Do you remember anything at all about the part of your childhood that occurred in Vietnam?

VB: The only thing I remember was the day my parents put us on a boat at night. Uh, it was in a little city called, um, Cantho, c-a-n-t-h-o, and I remember, it was—it was just very dark, and it was at night, and—and we were on the boat for a long time, 'cause they were, we were trying to take the—the smaller route out to the—to the sea, and me turning around and asking my mom, um, 'Why does it take so long to get to Grandma's house?' Cause that's what they had to tell me. Did not know where I was going, the next thing I knew I was, you know, in refugee camp, and that's—that's my only memories of Vietnam.

SC: Wow. Um... could you tell me anything more about, uh, your family leaving Vietnam, do you know how your parents arranged it, did they [VB: Mhm.] tell you anything later when you were older?

VB: Yes, um, uh actually my Dad was in the Air Force, uh in '75, um—I was born in Pleiku and that's the base, the air force base, um, so in '75, the Fall of Saigon, they flew everyone out of the base to Saigon to basically take a bigger plane to the U.S. And, um, my Dad, I guess—I don't know what he was thinking, but he felt bad, uh, about, you know—because all we had on us at the time were the clothes on our backs, so he said I can't leave my—you know, leave without getting things for my children—and at that time it was just my brother and I—so he went home to get them and, um, my Mom went ahead with me on the plane, and we went to Saigon, and he was gonna take another route, and he never made it. So we had to get off the plane and go to my grandmother's house and stay there, and then he showed up two months later. He was—he got caught in

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between, and um, and finally escaped, um, and going through the, the forests of Vietnam, the terrains, it was pretty bad, and then showed up to my grandmother's house two—two—two months later.

Um, and so, '77, we tr—uh my father actually organized, um, you know, the boat, and he had people on the boat, um—actually '76, '76 my Mom, um, he organized the boat, we were supposed to get on it and leave, but it so happens that she had to give birth, so we told the boat to go ahead and go, and we found out later that boat sank.

So in '79—I mean '78—um he organized another boat out of Cantho, and uh, we had, you know, probably hundred and fifty people on there, yeah [SC: Wow], uh, it's like a small boat, it's not even like, you know, anything. It's wooden, uh, you know, old, and, and just a hundred and fifty people packed like sardines, um, and uh, and took the boat out during the middle of the night. Everybody met, they knew where to meet, and took the boat out, and we ended up in um, um, uh, Malaysia. And uh, that's how we left.

SC: Mhm.

VB: And at the time, uh, when finally the U.S. said that they'll pick us up, well um, as a child I always looked Amerasian, I had red hair, and so they were gonna let me go first. Because they thought I was a—the kid of a soldier, they thought I was—you know, I was Amerasian, but I wasn't, so um, when they were about to let, uh, you know my Mom and I go, my Dad's like 'No no, this is my kid,' so we had to stay there for, um, another year, um because of that, so.

SC: So—do you remember where in Malaysia the refugee camp was?

VB: I don't! I know there's a few camps, and I don't remember which one it is.

SC: And so... the Americans were coming in to get you all because your father was in the South Vietnamese Air Force?

VB: Um no, it's different countries, it was like a lottery system, and you just would—everybody hopes to come to the U.S., nobody hopes to go to Germany, you know, or France, they just want to go to the U.S. so it was, it was random. Yeah. [SC: Mm.] So my father and brother, uh, came first, for some reason we were separated. They came first, and then, six months nine months later, then my Mom, my other brother and I came to the U.S.. Yep.

SC: And so the fact that your father was in the Air Force didn't have anything to do with the way that you finally got out of the refugee camp, it was just—

VB: Um—I am not sure about that, um... the only thing I'm sure of is if he stayed in Vietnam he would have been imprisoned. So... yeah. So I—I'm not sure how, you know, what the process is to—that you would leave.

SC: Mhm.

VB: Yep.

SC: Well I'm glad that you got out okay.

VB: [laughs] Thanks (?)

SC: Um... so then your family came straight to Houston?

VB: Yes, we came, um, straight to Houston and uh have stayed since. Um, my uh father had to learn English, he did go to trade school, um, you know, and um, so he became a welder, or he—you know, he's very proficient in English, and he just became a welder basically. Uh, learned a couple of trade—he was also a mechanic at one

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point. So he had a couple of trades, you know, and but he did go to school here, trade school here. And um, later on my Mom, um, you know, like probably every Vietnamese person here, you know, got into the nail industry. So she did [laughs] at one point own, you know, um, nail salons and things like—like that. So.

SC: And um, since this project is focused on labor and capital, do you remember what your father's salary was as a welder?

VB: Oh. You know, my father, uh, was a very proud man, and he never told us what his salary was, what he made, nor did he ever tell us what he did, so that's—even up to the day that he passed away, you know, but we knew! I mean, we just kinda knew, you know, but it wasn't something you asked, so my dad was not, nope. [laughs]

SC: And what about your Mom's nail salon business?

VB: Mhm. Um, she owned, um, um—she worked, um, as a manicurist for a while, um, so after my Dad passed, she bought, um, bought a store, with her friend, and they ran it for a while, uh and then uh c—you know, during our teenage years, we were—I wasn't a bad kid, but I think my brothers were [laughs]. So she had to sell it, uh you know to find something that's more of nine to five, and then later on she bought another store, until her retirement. So... yeah, that's what she did.

SC: Uh, do you remember where her stores were?

VB: Yes, uhum. Um, the first store was on, um, 610 and Ella, um, and then the second store was off of 45 and Monroe. So.

SC: And do you remember the names of them?

VB: [laughs] The first one I don't, the second one I—I don't either. Sorry. [laughs]

SC: That's okay. Um... where in Houston did your family initially settle?

VB: Mhm.

SC: Like what neighborhood.

VB: Yeah um, we, when we first came here, we settled in the Heights, um, and that was, you know, just in an apartment complex, um, and then my parents, I guess, somehow begged the—the priest, who at the time was running the Allen Parkway projects, and so we lived there for a couple of years. Um, and then from there—yeah, it was, you know, that's where every Vietnamese, I think, you know, if you didn't—yeah, if you came from Vietnam and you didn't have anything that's where you stayed, on Allen Parkway, the projects. Until they—there was rumors that they were closing it down, and tearing it down so we had to move. And uh, we moved to, um, you know, this—South Houston. Um, and then after that, they purchased a home, um, um close by there in South Houston, and we lived there in that neighborhood until—pretty much until I got married. We—we still have that house but it's rented out now. Yeah. But it's, you know, it's a 4onger—congregant of, you know, from one place to another it's always Vietna-um, Vietnamese neighborhood that we stayed in.

SC: Interesting. So when—when your family first moved to Houston, there were other Vietnamese families around?

VB: Um, yes. We came to Houston with another family and so they—they kind of stayed with us, uh you know until—they were single, think there were two men who were single, and my Dad adopted them as brothers, and so they lived with us until they got married and moved out. But there were always Vietnamese people around, and we were sponsored by, um, a church, a Vietnamese church at that time. Yes it was a couple, and—and then

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there were two kids, they sponsored us over here. Yeah. And that's just basically means that, you know, they kinda help us with the paperwork and we needed, you know, translation, and helping with—us with the social services. Um, and today we are—you know, we're still friends. And yeah we're still in contact with that family.

SC: Cool. Um... what was your experience of the Vietnamese community in Houston growing up? Like as a kid.

VB: Oh, at a—as a kid? Uh, you know, as a kid it was—growing up I remember it was always fun, 'cause we had—after school was a lot of activities and games and, you know, uh, just playing outside. We, um, a lot of us went to the same schools as well, um, so we got on the bus, and, you know, it was just a c—a comfort, you know, being from another country, you kinda gravitate towards people that you're familiar with, and that—I think that was it, just gravitating and being in that comfort zone. Um, uh you know and having, you know, friends that are like you, that look like you, that act like you, that, you know, speak your language, so that was—that, that was just how it was. Um, you know as we got older it b—it was different, because we, um, you know, submerge ourselves into the American culture and then we became more Americanized. So by the time that we went to middle school, we were like halfway there, and then by high school we, you know, we—we're pretty much, uh, you know, Americans. And my—my brothers, you know, at that—that point, they're—they—nuh, yeah, hardly speak Vietnamese. So it was like going from only speaking Vietnamese to almost forgetting the language. Yeah.

SC: And—what about, for you, did you continue to speak Vietnamese with your Vietnamese friends at school?

VB: No. At school we—um, only probably up until middle school that we, you know, still hung around, because they're—the same friends in middle school were the same friends in elementary school, and then high school you had so many choices, so, um, not really, I mean up to that point we—we spoke both. It was both. And then when I got to high school—I went to Jones Vanguard School—and, um—and I—there were only probably three other Vietnamese, you know, students, and we all spoke English, so after that it was—but we still kept the language at home, my parents would not let us speak English in the house. So, we tried our best to speak Vietnamese, but when we're—we're speaking to each other it's in English. But if they catch us, they'll tell us to speak in Vietnamese. So we, we kept the language, and that's how we—'til this day, you know, I still speak Vietnamese, and—and write and read it. So.

SC: Do you speak to your siblings in Vietnamese now when you talk to them?

VB: No.

[both laughs]

VB: But I—I do speak to my children in Vietnamese, because I want—even though they were, they're born here, they're half Vietnamese, um, they speak Vietnamese because we, you know, we want to preserve the language, and it's—I mean it's, frankly, it's hard to learn a second language. But if you already have, you know, a first language, you know, we—we—we're trying to keep that, because otherwise [inaudible] it would be so hard. We have friends who are Vietnamese, both parents are Vietnamese, and the children don't speak Vietnamese at all. All of their friends don't speak Vietnamese. And, you know, and that's one thing at least I can do is, you know, have them speak Vietnamese.

SC: Um, when you came to the U.S., uh, as a small child, did you only speak Vietnamese?

VB: Yes, um, when I started kindergarten I remember telling my mom, uh, 'Who are these blue eye and blond hair strangers, they're like aliens, you know, and they tell me stuff and I have no idea what they're saying, and'—yeah, I mean for a while, I had no idea what people were saying to me, and then we took ESL, and I think it was all the way up to fifth grade, we had to take ESL. So. Uh-huh.

SC: And then by fifth grade you were proficient in English?

VB: Yeah. Um, totally proficient, you know, fully proficient in English, and—so we didn't have to take any more, um, you know, ESL classes in middle school. Yeah we were done with that.

SC: And you mentioned where you went to high school, uh, where did you go to elementary school?

VB: I went to, um, it's called L.L. Pew, and it's like on the east side, I-10 and McCarthy or something like that. Or somewhere over there [laughs]. And then middle school I went to Holland, um, Vanguard School, out in the same area. [**SC:** Mhm.] I don't know how I got out there 'cause we didn't live out there. We took the bus out there. [**SC:** Hm.] It was my dad had put us in those schools, so.

SC: Mhm. And the makeup of the student body, was it—

VB: Um, uh n—I would say 80% Hispanic, 10% Anglo, and then 10%, you know, Vietnamese. So. You know.

SC: Okay. Um... did the kids who weren't Vietnamese treat you differently because you weren't Vietnamese, or was it all just the same?

VB: You know what, probably. [laughs] I think so. Uh, you know, um, especially in grade school when you're speaking Vietnamese to your friends and—I mean we were still, you know, kinda clamoring to—to our—our Vietnamese friends. So yes, it was, you know, [inaudible], you know, they would call us Ching Chong and say Ching Chong and we're like, 'We don't know what you're saying,' and you know. So I mean we were made fun a lot, but it didn't break us or anything. You know. [**SC:** Mm.] Kinda just—passed that on.

SC: And what about in high school, was it still like that or did it change?

VB: Um no, in my—the high school I went to was very diverse, and, uh, it wasn't like that at all. But middle school was still like that, and the neighborhood we lived in it was pretty rough, and so—that was like every day, you know, my—I think my brothers were in a fight every other day, something, you know. [laughs] So, it was—yeah, middle school, I remember in middle school, even at school, um, there were, um, African American girls who were picking on me, and uh, my bro—my oldest brother was, you know, and his friend, were kind of protecting me, uh, in middle school. I do remember that.

SC: And, you mentioned in the questionnaire that you started working as a nurse's assistant at Ben Taub Hospital when you were 15 [**VB:** Yes.], could you tell me some more about that job?

VB: Um, it was, um, there was kind of like, um, a program to, mm, to help, um, I guess it's an outlet or a program to help minorities kind of see the different fields, or, you know, what they wanna do in the future, um, and so I picked Ben Taub. And it was, you know, it was a paid, um, uh program, or was it—uh more like a scholarship, and not paid, cause um, 'cause I was only 15. But um, yes and I worked in Ben Taub for I think the—the summer. And I remember taking the bus there at 5 in the morning, from where we—I would—from where we lived, because my—my Dad couldn't take me. So I took the, you know, the city Metro bus there, and back, um, and so, I—I enjoyed it, but—it wasn't for me, you know, but it was just something, yeah.

SC: Mm. And uh, what was the pay at that job?

VB: Uh, it was very low, it was probably three do—three dollars an hour or something, you know, [laughs] back then it was very low.

SC: Mm. And was that—

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VB: Probably minimum wage—

SC: Okay. Okay, yeah.

VB:—probably whatever minimum wage—whatever the minimum wage was.

SC: Okay, um... And... where did you go to college?

VB: I went here, to the University of Houston. Um, for my undergrad, and for, um, pharmacy school there as well. Um, I—my Dad passed away when I was in high school, right before graduation, and I was supposed to—scheduled to go, um, to St. Thomas, and uh, you know with a scholarship and everything, and I just at the time didn't feel that that was the school for me. And so last minute, um, before my Dad passed away, he had put an application in to—to, um, uh, uh University of Houston, UT, and A&M. And I told myself I would never to go U of H, you know, because all my classmates went to Ivy League schools, and—and that wasn't one of my choices, so. But somehow I received a letter saying 'Hey, oh, you've been accepted to this school,' and um, and everyone who's top 5% of their class, you know, is automatically accepted to those three schools. And so when I saw that I was like 'I didn't apply for this,' but I remembered my—my Dad had, and so I switched schools in August, and then the school started in August, and um, you know, and went to U of H from there, so.

SC: Ah. And—do you remember what year you started at U of H?

VB: Yes. Um, I went to—I graduated from high school in '92, and wanted to finish c-college really fast because my—my Dad had passed away, so I went to HCC first, in the summer, um, I took 12 hours of courses, and a f—elective course, courses that didn't really, you know, matter, and then went to—the fall of '92, went to U of H.

SC: Alright. And do you remember what the tuition was?

VB: Um... it wasn't that much! It was probably, uh, nine hundred and something dollars, for the semester. Yeah.

SC: Oh my goodness. [both laughs] Wow.

VB: It was not a lot.

SC: Yeah. And, uh, how did you pay for college?

VB: Um, I had, uh, both scholarship and financial aid. And also work-study. [**SC:** Mhm.] Um, because I didn't want to burden my Mom with, you know, paying for it, she didn't—yeah, she—um, my brother and I went to college at the same time, so we—we did whatever we needed to do to finish college. And so work study, grants, and a scholarship.

SC: And where did you work for work-study?

VB: I worked in the, uh, library at, uh, one point. Worked in a few places but the first one was the library at U of H. Um, so.

SC: And were you active in any student organizations when you were in college?

VB: Um, just the, uh, the Baptist Association. You know. I became a Christian later on in life. My family's Buddhist. And so that was the only one that I was really active in, I was more active in my church than the school. And—I don't, I don't know why it is, um, I think it's a cultural thing, you know, that, um, you know, that—that we're not very involved. I'm more involved now, but it wasn't something that was push from my parents, or, I didn't really have that guidance, so—nope. I, uh, education was most important, everything else was just, you know, on the side.

SC: Mhm. And you also went to pharmacy school at U of H?

VB: Yes I did. Um, yes, I um, started out as—again, work study, actually a work study in the dean’s office at the pharmacy school, and um—but I didn’t know what I wanted to major in at that time, I um—I knew I liked science, and I knew I liked people. So I chose three professions based on logic, and one of them was teaching, social work, and—and um, pharmacy. Uh, and pharmacy was my last choice, cause that’s what my Dad wanted me to do. So [laughs], so when I, uh—the funny story is when I went to—to the, uh, when I tried to look for the education department and never found it.

SC: [laughs]

VB: ‘Til this day, I have no idea where it is, so I said maybe that’s not for me. That’s not God’s plan for me. Then I went to the social work department and tried to find out more information, what does a social worker do, you know, I knew they—they deal—dealt with people. When I went in there and I—I found it finally, and I asked someone ‘Where is the—the social work, you know, department,’ and um, the guy was a little bit standoffish, and said ‘Well this is a graduate program. You need to have a degree first.’ I said ‘Ooh! This is definitely not for me,’ you know, with that attitude. And then when I went into the pharmacy school they were super nice. So I said ‘Okay. And like, I guess I’ll go to pharmacy school.’ And that’s how I narrowed it down. [laughs]

SC: Cool. Um, and, how did you fund pharmacy school?

VB: The same way. Um, well, in addition—well there was no more work study at that time, and pharmacy school was really hard, um I did work in a pharmacy as a pharmacy tech, so I worked for Eckert, at the time, it’s CVS now, Eckert, um... I worked for Dillard’s—I mean, but during the school year I could not work, because it, the work load was, the school load was way too much. So I worked in the summer, uh, and things like that. So... but mostly I had, um, you know, student loans as well, so I took out—I had to take out a loan to—to finish school.

SC: Mm. And you remember what the tuition for the pharmacy school was?

VB: Um, yes, at that time, it—because it wasn’t considered graduate school yet, so the tuition was the same as regular, you know, just a four-year degree. So, I was—I lucked out. When I finished pharmacy school, the tuition was like, um, 1,700 at max per semester, and right when I finished my BS degree, they said that it’s considered a graduate program, so all of a sudden the—the graduate program, it sh—it just shot up, the price just shot up. And, um, I only had one more year to go to finish my doctorates. So at that point, the tuition was like 3,000 a semester, but I only had two semesters, so, you know, that was horrendous, compared to my first five years.

SC: Wow.

VB: So.

SC: And—after you graduated from pharmacy school you got a job at VA Medical?

VB: Mhm. Um, I, um, I went on, um—where did I go? I went on, um, a medical missionary trip while I was in pharmacy school, and it was, um, part of the curriculum, because I had a preceptor go with me. Um, so, after—and then, so happens that, uh, one of the translators on the trip is, you know, the brother of a supervisor at the VA, and for some reason, my whole life, I’ve wanted to work at the VA. Maybe I was subconsciously giving back to veterans, or whatever it was, but—and, uh, when I came in, um, you know, to interview at the VA, I

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didn't really have an interview, I just came in and told them who—who I was and, said okay, do you want the job, and I said yes! You know, so, started—graduated in December and started in February. So that's how I got the job.

SC: Cool! And, how much did you make at that time?

VB: Um, I started out at 42,000 dollars, um, that was my starting salary.

SC: For the—year?

VB: Year. Mhm. Um, and then, um, so, by the time I left the VA, they—thank God that they had paid for my student loan, which was 40,000—so, and um, and, by the time I finished school, I was—I was in the six figures, by the time I finished, uh, my tenure at the VA. So. And after that I left.

SC: Um, do you remember exactly what your ending salary was, or—

VB: My what?

SC: Your—your final salary there?

VB: Um, yes, it was, um, 109? A hundred and nine thousand. So. I cried when I left. But [laughs], yeah, I wanted to start my own business, so. Mhm.

SC: Um, so—what made you want to start your own business?

VB: Well, um, I you know, I'm always looking towards the future, and I've always been that way, um, you know, my Dad was very military, and so he always taught us to look five years, ten years from now. And I knew at that time that five years from then, I wanted to have a family and I wanted to have a flexible schedule, and I wanted to, um, you know, do some missionary work, and if I had a seven to four job, which is my—my hours, um, I couldn't do that, and I had, you know, four weeks vacation, or two weeks or whatever it was, and I couldn't do that, so I had to find another way to do what I love to do but yet have that flexibility. And I told my coworkers, um, jokingly, that I want a—a ten to two job with a lunch break. And they laughed at me. I said, 'No, really, I do.' And I remember telling them that. And so, um, my—I got married, uh, in 2002, and my h—uh, you know, we wrote out—out our five year plan, where we wanted to be, and we said well, we you know, and I—I didn't like the VA hours. I liked what I did, but I didn't like being on call every other week and working nights and, you know, the middle of the night they would call, and I had a pager, and it was kind of chaotic, and I wanted something more stable. Um, so we started—had an idea to start a homecare agency to serve seniors, and we started cranking out the numbers, and it looked good, and the investment wasn't that much, so we just took it out of our savings and started the homecare *while* I was a pharmacist. 2002, I worked 80 hours a week, 40 at the VA and 40 dedicated [**SC:** Oooh.] so I was working around the clock, and I was on call for my own company 24 hours a day. I was working so much. But I knew it had to take that to get to where, you know, to get to the next level. And I committed to that for a year. And after a year I said 'Well, I have to quit my job,' and—and I, when I, when I quit I was crying, because number one, it was a stable income, and number two, it was something that I went to school for, you know. And um, business is not my forte, that's not what I studied, and, you know, it, you know, so it—it was a re—it was really stretching my limits, and stretching, you know, stretching me in every sense, from, you know, physically, to emotionally, to financially, just—and it, it was a risk that I wanted to—that I had to take and wanted to take in order to reach my—my—my five year plan. So that's what I did, quit, and uh, since then, never went back. [laughs] So.

SC: And so, your business, it—it's not related to pharmacy, there—there's not really a link there?

VB: Um, actually, no, I employ certified nurse assistants, it doesn't relate to pharmacy directly, you know, um, I

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was a critical care pharmacist, and so I worked in the MICU and CCU and so, it was constantly code blue and—it's very fast pacing, very, you know, drugs, it was always drugs, and this one was like managing people. It was totally different, and these are nurses, you know, and, um, and then the—the, I had to do the accounting, learn QuickBooks, it's—it's totally different! It's—the only thing pharmacy that I really did was I offered my services if my clients needed help with their medications, which is part of the—the service, then I would help them. Either consult them, but that's—that's about it.

SC: And—how's the business doing?

VB: Um, it's doing well, um, um, the first year we put 60,000 into it, you know, because we had to—employee, and stuff like that. And we started out of our house, and um, um, and after the first year we made all the money back, plus some, so, and the second year, you know, we grossed over 1.2 million, and [**SC:** Wow.] since then, so. I think we did okay. It was a lot of work, and a lot of hours, and if you ask me to do it again I will not.

[both laughs]

SC: And so about how many clients do you have right now?

VB: Mm, I have anywhere from 20 to 40 clients, I have ov—over 50 employees, um, and, um, we bought our own building in 2005, so—um yeah we're still out of that building, and um, yeah.

SC: And is there any group in particular that makes up the bulk of your clientele?

VB: Most of them are um, um—this is, this service is, um, you know, it's not paid for by Medicare or Medicaid, so it's all private pay, and so it's mostly the affluent that can afford our service. And if you break it down to what, um, population it is, it's mostly Anglo.

SC: And you said you'd also started another business?

VB: Yes, um, Senior Vantage, it—because of what we do and, uh, you know, the networking, and um, the just being around the—um, the healthcare community for so long you know you meet so many people, and so we plan events like—like, uh, continue education for nurses and social workers, we do health fairs and big health expos, and—whatever else, um, we help communities now, like senior communities, market their community to—the, the, the lay sector as well as, we help um, um, uh, just the, you know, health, um, companies market to one another cause they're—they're needing each other's services as well, so they—they come to us. Um, and that—it's just, you know, it wasn't something that we thought about, and it, you know we had a business plan, it was just we just kinda grew into it, and they, they just came to us and—for events, and—and, you know, consultation, things like that, and—and, you know, my cousin, you know, she came to us and she wanted to open up a assisted living, so we consulted for her from A to Z, so now she has her own assisted living. So it was just something that fell in our laps, um, so.

SC: Cool, that's—that's really awesome. Um, let's see, I know you're involved in a lot of community organizations, um, could you tell me about the Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce [**VB:** Mhm] and your role in that?

VB: Um, in 2009, um, we did this big wellness expo for the lay community, and I needed politicians to show up. So, I'm—I have been outside of the Vietnamese community forever, I—I—I've never been in. So they don't know who I am, uh, you know, 2009. Before 2009, my—everything I did was in the mainstream. I didn't have, you know, clients in that community, I wasn't involved, nothing, none of that. So 2009, when I met some political, uh—because I had to bring them in to the senior community, and, you know, so that—it was election, um, it was, um, close to the election year, um, or is that 2010? I think it was two thousand—yeah, it was 2010,

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sorry. Um, that it was election year. Um, and so I met some people in the community, and, uh, and just became friends and got politically involved, I guess, all of a sudden. Now I'm in that circle, and I don't how, um, because I'm a pharmacist, you know, I'm, you know, in the senior community, and somehow I just got caught up in that circle. Um, and then I met, um, councilman Danny Nguyen, and he was the past president of the Chamber. And he says 'Why don't'—and it—it became dormant, and he says 'Why don't you help me bring it back?' And I said 'Okay,' and uh eventually I agreed, in 2011, to take over and bring the Chamber back because our community needs something like that to, to link, you know, the mainstream and—and our community, to do business with each other and within the community, the—our, you know, itself. And so that's how the Chamber got started again, I guess you can say. And, uh, when I came in the community, nobody knew who I was, and [laughs] uh, they call me the, uh, the fish out of the pot, or something like that. They call me the chicken out of the cage. [SC: Hm [laughs]] Because I'm not one of the chicken in the cage, you know, and so that's what they call me. The chicken from another cage, or something.

SC: And when you say you got politically involved, like how do you mean?

VB: Uh... just, um, you know, helping with different candidates and bringing them in to events, and just helping with their election, so forth, or, um, now with the Chamber, you know, we try to stay neutral, but, it's basically helping our community understand the importance of voting, the importance of getting involved in the city, because our culture, we tend to work and do things for ourselves, and we have a business, that's all we focus on. You know, just like when I was in school, I didn't focus on extracurricular activities, because that wasn't stressed in our family. So the culture itself, that's not something that is stressed, you know, okay, let them do whatever they want, they get elected, fine, you know, whatever. Whatever laws they want to put into place, that's fine. But now I see that it—it, laws, and being involved, is—is so important, because that's what dictates our businesses, our community, and things we can and can't do. So, you know, it's—that's how I got involved, is to—you know, the election, help with that, let people know that these candidates, the—this is what they stand for. Not exactly pushing them to vote for this person or that person, but 'This is what they stand for, what do you stand for. We need you to vote, we need you to have a voice. We need your involvement, at whatever level it is.'

SC: And, have you noticed a trend towards increased involvement in the past couple years, I'm just wondering?

VB: Um, I think so, I mean, we have more Asian representatives, you know, in City Council now, and State Representatives, so—and—and, you know, being in the community, we—the other thing that I try to do is also look for potential newcomers, new—uh, you know, even students coming out of school who, you know, to get them politically involved, or—not political—politically aware of what's going on, uh, in our city, in our nation. And so, we're—you know, um, there's a—you know, the Asian, um, the Texas Asian Republican Caucus, and there's different groups that try to get Asians more involved, and—and, uh, that's where I'm involved in as well, is to try to seek out new leaders. Um, to—to hold, you know, different offices, to run for State, run for Congress, run for, you know, uh, City Council and things like that.

SC: Okay, and—you're also in the Houston West Chamber of Commerce and the Galleria Chamber of Commerce—

VB: Mhm. Yeah, those two Chambers involve my business directly. So, it's—I, when I go there I represent my business and not uh so—something else. So, to network and, you know, things like that.

SC: And then, I guess, veering away from business a little bit [VB: Uh-huh], um, you mentioned that you had a husband and three daughters, um, what's your children's attitude toward their Vietnamese heritage?

VB: Um... my husband's family doesn't live here. Um, and they, they're from Birming—he's from Birmingham, Alabama. So, as far as they're concerned, I—you know, what (?) I ask him, my—[laughs] my

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oldest daughter, when she was three, she had a complex, she said—you know, they all have curly hair, but they're real light skin, and they don't look Vietnamese, but they don't look—they kind of look European, or, you know, Brazilian—now that I've been to Brazil. And so they're like, um, 'Mom,' you know, um, 'why is,' you know, 'why is Daddy dark?' Or 'Why is my hair curly and yours not?' You know, so they—they do notice those things, but, you know, they know that they're Vietnamese too, because we go to a Vietnamese church, and they probably identify themselves more with—as Vietnamese than American. And I think that's because we go to the Vi—a Vietnamese church, we speak Vietnamese at home, you know, my Mom lives with us, and things like that. Which is all fine. So. Yeah.

SC: And—so, how long has your Mom been living with you?

VB: Uh, ih for two years, and to help me with the kids as well as teach them Vietnamese.

SC: So, it's important to you that—that your children continue to have that link to the language and the culture?

VB: Yes. It's very important, I even—we took them to Vietnam, um, two months ago, we took them to the orphanage, let them know how they live and how these kids in Vietnam live, and we—we did that, it's really important that they understand, you know, that not everybody has what they have here, in the U.S., and um, to not take it for granted. So we took them back there, and we not only did that, but we took them to see their extended family, which is my Mom's family, and connect with them as well.

SC: Mm, and what did they think of that trip, did—did they tell you any impressions?

VB: Oh, they loved it. 'Til this day, they want to go to Vietnam every day, you know, we still Facebook with my cousins and things like that in Vietnam, so they—they—they wanna go back, even my youngest who's three, you know, she's like 'I wanna go to Vietnam,' basically. Uh, you know, because over there, the culture is so—um—everybody's really close, and they live in close quarters, and family is really important, and they—they like that. Unlike here, you live in your own house, you have four walls and two doors, you know, and you—I don't even, you know, you don't even know who your neighbors are, but in Vietnam you know exactly who they are because it's so close, everything is so close, in—in Vietnam.

SC: And had you been back to Vietnam before that?

VB: Yes. I've been doing missionary work there, for—uh, since '97, um, we go on missionary trips, uh, medical missionary trips, so.

SC: And does your husband speak Vietnamese now, having been exposed to it so much?

VB: Yes. He does. He can, um, enunciate words as well as kind of—kind of read them a little bit, um, but he did have a teacher to teach him. So, yes, he can—more of, um, speaking language, versus, you know, the literature or writing things like that. So.

SC: Mm.

VB: Yes, and so my kids know, speak with Mommy in Vietnamese and speak with Daddy in English. And sometime Daddy will understand, and they're, uh, they'll be like, 'Oh, um, I didn't know you under—you know, could understand Vietnamese,' but he can. You know, speak the language.

SC: And so it—did you raise them bilingually with you speaking to them in Vietnamese and him speaking to them in English, is that how you did—

VB: Um yes, but when they were, um, up to probably one, they only spoke Vietnamese. I don't know why—I

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don't have no idea, 'cause when I took my oldest to Montessori school, she did not speak English.

SC: [laughs] Oh.

VB: And I thought that my husband spoke to her in—in English, but the schoolwork (?)—you know, she was speaking to her teachers in Vietnamese. [**SC:** [laughs]] So, we don't know how that—how that came about, but she only spoke Vietnamese in school. But, by the third kid, she—she refuses to speak in Vietnamese. [laughs] So—but she's coming back now, we—we're teaching her again, so. Want to make sure.

SC: Mm. That's wonderful that your husband is so—that he's really embracing the Vietnamese culture.

VB: Yes, he's allowing (?), yeah.

SC: That's really cool. Um, let's see—do you participate in Vietnamese cultural events in Houston?

VB: Uh, yes, when I have an opportunity. More so now than before, the last two years, so whenever I get a chance to, you know, I do. Um, and that ranges anything from, you know, um, you know the—the church, or the community, um, or just being in liaison, you know, between the two communities. Uh, American and the Vietnamese.

SC: Um, how often do you watch Vietnamese-language media?

VB: Never. [laughs]

SC: Okay.

[both laugh]

VB: So. I should watch it more often, but hmm... I don't know why I don't, maybe I just can't get it at home, or something. It—um, I don't.

SC: And how often do you eat traditional Vietnamese food?

VB: Almost every day, because my Mom cooks it, and we want our children to eat Vietnamese food. Um, and my husband eats Vietnamese food. So. Yeah.

SC: And uh, do you own an *ao dai*?

VB: I not only own them, but I design them.

SC: Oh, wow!

VB: Yeah, so—I have designed, uh, you know, a bunch (?), so.

SC: And your daughters also have them that you designed?

VB: Oh yes, mhm.

SC: Wow. That's really cool. Um, and then could you tell me more about your church?

VB: Um, I have been going to this church—it's a Vietnamese Baptist Church, but it's not all Vietnamese, and kinda not Baptist, but [laughs] um—for about twenty, um, twenty—twenty years, more than that. Um, so I've been involved in the church, and I sing on their praise team since I was 15, so, um, you know, that's my dedication, and, um, you know, I used to teach the children, I don't anymore, but I used to do that as well, so,

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very involved, um, you know, with the pastors and helping out and things like that. Mm.

SC: And, then, uh, I know many people of the Vietnamese diaspora worldwide identify strongly with South Vietnamese nationalism [**VB:** Mhm], um, and anti-Communism [**VB:** Mhm], and—what's your stance on that, how do you feel about it?

VB: Um, I think the older generation is very—not only anti-Communist, but they, till this day, you know, if—if, um, I were—if I right now were to shake the hands of the consulate, I think I would be protested. Um, so that's our older generation. I—you know, it's—I think for my generation, growing up here we're more Americanized, and we're more forgiving, and, um, you know, I don't promote Communism, I don't endorse Communism, I no—nothing. Um, but I do respect our older generation so I kind of stay away from that political aspect of it, but I'm more forgiving. If I had businesses in Vietnam, it's okay with me. If—if our Chamber members you know do business, you know, I'm okay with that, um, I just don't get involved in the political—on the political side, it's because it's so sensitive in our community. Um, you know, if we have events in our Chamber or in our community, they are not invited. And, um—and it's sad, because I think we miss a lot of opportunities, you know, to rebuild a country, to educate them on the democracy, on voting, because uh right now there's no voting system, it's just Communism, you know. And so I think we—we—we lose an opportunity, because we're so stuck in our past, um, uh—you know, to—to educate, and to—um, you know, to I guess—uh, Americanize their way of thinking, so—it's kind of sad.

SC: And, starting to wrap up a little bit, um, do you identify most strongly as Vietnamese, Vietnamese American, or American? Or something else?

VB: Vietnamese American. I think my Mom's generation is just Vietnamese. Vietnamese American, I think. And I think, for my children, they will be Vietnamese American too, you know. Yeah.

SC: And then—how do you see yourself in relation to the broader Asian American community?

VB: As in... what sense, like—h-how do we fit in, or how—?

SC: Like how—how do you personally see it?

VB: Um, I guess, um—in terms of, you know, our cultures, you know we've—we've been influenced so much by the—by the American culture that we don't see the separation, I don't see the separation. Um, um, you know, in terms of getting along, you know we get along fine with everyone, and we—we just—I just don't see a separation in, you know, and when they say Asian American, yes, we're included, um, but I think when we say Asian American it's more the Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese versus the In—Indian, um, Pakistani. I guess there's two Asian groups [inaudible], I guess you could say. So.

SC: And—let me make sure I didn't miss anything...I think that just about wraps it up, thank you so much for talking to me [**VB:** Thank you!] and agreeing to tell your story for this project. It's really wonderful.

VB: Thank you. Appreciate it.

[The recorder is turned off, the interview ends]