

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

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Interviewee: Michael Nguyen

Interviewer: Quynh Le

Interview Date: April 18, 2013

Transcribed by: Quynh Le

Edited by: Priscilla Li (5/29/2017)

Audio Track Time: 01:03:19

Background:

Michael Nguyen was born in Saigon, now as Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam in 1955. His parents worked as traders in Saigon. He attended law school at University of Saigon for two years before his whole family migrated in 1975. His family was sponsored by a Lutheran church and settled in Hallam, PA. He worked several part time jobs to earn a living. He attended Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. He later moved to New York City to work, then went onto complete his M.B.A. at the Wharton School of Business at University of Pennsylvania. In 2000, his family—his wife, children and he—moved to Mexico as expatriates for a United States company. In 2007, moving back to the United States, they chose to settle in Houston, where he set up his own investment consulting company. Mr. Nguyen is also involved in many business and volunteering organizations around the city.

Setting:

The interview took place in his home on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013. The interview addresses many aspects of labor and working environment of Vietnamese Americans in the United States. Michael Nguyen recounted many stories from his personal experience. Although he moved to Houston fairly recently, given the nature of his work, he has a great knowledge of the history and development of Vietnamese American immigration and work environment in Houston. This is a very valuable addition to the Houston Asian American Archive.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

QL	Quynh Le
MN	Michael Nguyen
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

**QL:** This is an oral history interview with Mr. Michael Nguyen at his home on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010-2013. This is interview was conducted by Quynh Le for the Houston Asian American Archive at Rice University for the Woodson Research Center.

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Hi. To begin our interview can you please tell me a bit about yourself? Your name, when and where you grew up?

**MN:** Okay. Um, hello Quynh. And thank you for the opportunity to share some experience with you. My name is Michael Nguyen. The Vietnamese name, original, is *Nguyễn Hữu Vũ*. And I was born and raised in uh Saigon. Now is Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. I was born in 1955. Went to school there, went to university there for two years before I left Vietnam in 1975 with my family and we came to the United States at that time, when I was 20 years old.

**QL:** Yes. Um can you please describe your hometown a little bit around the time you grew up?

**MN:** Okay. Uh Saigon at that time uh it was a... biggest city in Vietnam. Probably about maybe over million, two million people at that time. Has many uh districts and I used to live in District 10. It's a um very nice city in the sense that it has influence from many different cultures. Number one, from the Chinese. There's a large Chinese population in Saigon at that time. And number two, um because of the French um connections, if you will, over many years, in Saigon, there's many architecture... and even the street design, and even the street names were heavily influenced with the French uh um culture. And then uh, the most recent one at that time was the influence of the American cultures. Um so it's a nice blend of international flavor. And plus the Vietnamese southern hospitality if you will. So it has a very unique uh, unique vibrancy to the city.

**QL:** Yes. Thank you. And how was your family? Well, what did you parents do as an occupation?

**MN:** Okay. Um my parents at that time, they were older, as I remember. They were traders. Um and um... small business owners at that time. We uh—my siblings, a family of uh four people including myself. And I was the youngest. I was busy studying with the high school and then after that spent two years attending University of Saigon, um the school of law. And I was a law student for two years.

**QL:** Great. Uhm... In your parents' occupation, do you remember any of it? What was your most significant memories of what they did or how that affected your family financials?

**MN:** Yes. Uh we... Our family was... was poor family. My father was doing some trading jobs, odds and ends, and actually he was a... an artist, if you will. He was a-a poet. Um and he recite poetry on the radio at that time. *Ngâm thơ* [poetry recital].

**QL:** Wow.

**MN:** Yep, yep. With a program called... *Tao Dân* [name of a radio program] at that time. Yes. Especially, the program was uh valued by many Vietnamese speakers. My father originally came from the North. So he has a nice northern accent that uh was suited for the *Tao Dân* poetry. And my mom was a... a trader, buy and sell things, at that time making um...making garments, if you will. And I remember she used to do the sewing in home. When I was young I was sitting next to her, sometimes helping her, sometimes just me-, mess things up... because I was—I was little. Uh but those experience growing up in the family, that need to work hard to earn a living has shaped my thinking and perspective in life.

**QL:** Yes. Um so in... Your family migrated in 1975, yes?

**MN:** That's correct.

**QL:** And what were the circumstances of that migration...?

**MN:** At that time, as we all well know, it's a change in regime in Vietnam. That—prior to that there was a what I call a civil war between the North and the South... Um and um the conflict was something... gave a lasting

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impression on people on both sides of the war. And um many people told me that the war was a mistake in both sides. However, at that time, as a young man, I... barely twenty years old, I was just pretty much following what my family was doing. And um they—my family decided at the end of the war, it was April 1975, the Southern Vietnamese government was folding. Um so the family, along many other friends and relatives, felt that it would be better off to leave the country and look for um more stable life somewhere else. Um and that was the thinking at that time. So, with the elders in the family decide to leave, I just simply followed suit.

**QL:** Yes. And did your whole family migrate at the same time?

**MN:** Yes. My whole family migrated at the same time.

**QL:** Yes. And how—what mode of transportation did you use?

**MN:** We, we left the country by the... ship of the... of the Vietnamese, the Southern Vietnamese Navy at that time. Uhm... At that point the—the term ‘boat people’ wasn’t invented, but now looking back, I think that uh my family was one of the first wave of the boat or the ship people, if you will.

**QL:** Yes. And did you have to settle in any intermediate location before arriving in the U.S.?

**MN:** Yes. Um we went to an island in the Pacific Ocean called Guam. Actually that’s part of the U.S. as well.

**QL:** Yes.

**MN:** We spent about maybe over a month there. And then since my, my sister, uh she um had a baby at that time. Because the family with a young baby has priority, so we were airlifted to um a settlement camp in Pennsylvania.

**QL:** Yes. And that was the reason your family settled in Hallam? Or...

**MN:** Yes, yes, in Pennsylvania. And, uhm, we went at that camp without knowing what uh — what to expect. And the American, well, had the program to help what they—we call refugees at that time, uh still trying to figure out how to settle many, many Vietnamese people. Um and they set up a program called Sponsorship with a church, of a Lutheran church, called the First Church of uh Brethren in uh York, Pennsylvania, sponsored our family. And um a kind family with the last name ‘Christ’ accepted us and brought our family in and we settle in the small um village, if you will, outside of York, Pennsylvania called the Hallam, PA.

**QL:** And, so how was the quality of life around the area you settled in? Uhm... economically, or socially, how did you feel about um settling in a new location like that?

**MN:** Okay. Um that’s a good question. It was a very big contrast in many ways. Number 1, um we came from—at least I came from a—Saigon, it was a big city of millions of people, went into a... town of, I would rather say a village, probably maybe 15-20,000 people at most. It was quite a shock but I enjoy learning the new life in the new country. And it was like the countryside that we were living in. Uhm, the people were primarily curious about us. Probably, we—for many of them we were the first foreigners they ever encountered in that part of the small um village of um Hallam.

**QL:** Yes.

**MN:** Mostly, they were kind and helpful. Um, but it was a culture shock for us, and we needed to learn and adapt.

**QL:** Yes. Did your family have to face any challenges? Uhm, language barriers or discrimination?

**MN:** Yes. Uh we face many challenges. Both um emotional, psychological and—and physical challenges. We... Uh after that we had a small house that we settle in. And we need to learn how to... how to live in the northern

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part of United States, which uh has the four seasons. Beautiful during summer and spring and fall, but the winter, um it was quite a surprise for us. The first time we saw snow, it was in middle of the night and the whole family woke up, and ran out, and start playing with the snow. And then we learn how to use the heating system. And then learning to how pay for the oil to do the heating system. It was quite expensive. Learn to how get the driver license, how to drive, how to... find a job. By and large, most of the people were helpful, but there were some discriminations against the newcomer.

**QL:** Could you elaborate on that?

**MN:** Yes. So one example, that I went to work in a factory that's making plastic bottle. And it was a co-worker who often times told me that uh 'What are you doing here?', but not uh in a loud voice, but more in a whispering voice because she knew it was something she's not supposed to say. But she told me 'What are you doing here? Why don't you go back to 'Nam. You're taking somebody else's job here.' I knew exactly what she was saying. I knew there was some discrimination against me in particular. But I didn't know how to answer that. The only thing I could tell myself is that I need to improve myself so I can get out of such a situation.

**QL:** What are your parents? What did they continue to do?

**MN:** Okay. My father pass away before we came to the United States. And my mom came with us, but she was well into the retirement age, over 60, so she was not working.

**QL:** Yes. And uh... your job at the factory, was that your first job in the United States?

**MN:** Uhm, yes. I... I had a number of what I call first jobs, if you will, that last for sometimes two weeks, sometimes a few months. A lot of odds and ends job. But uh I would say the officially first job would be... working in a... in a factory that... making pewter product.

**QL:** Pewter products. What was that like? What was your jobs experience like working there? Uhm... what was the wage to begin with?

**MN:** Okay, if I remember correctly I think the wage was around \$2, \$2.10 per hour uh at that time. And um... the working condition was um not very good. Um my job among many other uh... fellow Vietnamese Americans men and women at that time was to polish the uh pewter products. Uh plates, uh cups, um spoons and things like that. It was a very, very dusty environment. I remember I was working uh the, what they call graveyard shift, which is 11 o'clock at night to 7 o'clock in the morning. Um and at 7 o'clock in the morning when I finish work, um because the working environment was so dusty, um when we uh took showers to... change our clothes before we go home, it was uh—the water sometimes it was pretty black, getting the dust off our body. Um...while we knew the working environment was not good, we had no choice, because we need to earn a living. But deep down inside, I was telling myself that, other people talk about the American dream. I came to the United States, and I want to pursue my American dream, but uh what I was doing wasn't it. I knew it wasn't it. Clearly. I said I better start looking somewhere else and by some other way.

**QL:** Yes. And uh was there a Vietnamese American community or population doing the same work as you in the same place?

**MN:** Yes, we had about eight or nine um Vietnamese American people doing the same thing. And we were pretty much in the same boat. We does... came to the United States and we need work to earn a living. Um and um... we're all in a kind of shock that uh... moving from an environment of the big city to a small city and from... either university students or working in a white collar jobs, now came to United States, we had to work in a factory, uh doing manual labor job. So it was a shock in many, many different way.

**QL:** Yes. And did those same people live around the area that you lived in?

**MN:** Yes. We live in kind of the same area. And uh we actually... commute to go to work together. I remember that my uh first car it was a Volkswagen bug. And a bright orange one. Um I was proud of it because I uh was of... very few people they had a car at the time. I remember I bought it \$400. And I piled about 5 or 6 of my friends or co-workers into that car and we jammed it in there and commute to work from 11 o'clock at night to 7 o'clock in the morning.

**QL:** So it was a very small Vietnamese American community.

**MN:** That's right. It's quite small because the—the small town at that moment that we lived in.

**QL:** So how was the connection within that group?

**MN:** Um it's a pretty tight because we share many things, including background, hope and dream and fear together. And at times, uh we had to figure out a way to survive in the new environment, meaning that we will long for our old Vietnamese food, Asian food. But in a small uh American town, we couldn't find such a thing. So from time to time, um especially during the weekend, we got into a car and we drove down to Washington D.C. to go to... I remember at that time maybe 2, at most 3, Vietnamese grocery... stores in Washington D.C. It took us about um two hour's drive each way to buy a bag of rice or a bottle of fish sauce. **QL:** Yes.] But we were so happy, able to find those uh items.

**QL:** Yes. So there was a much larger population of Vietnamese Americans in D.C. at that time?

**MN:** Yes, yes. There was a much larger population of Vietnamese American population in Washington D.C. at that time, yes.

**QL:** Can you compare um the difference in living, living standard of Vietnamese Americans in those two locations a little bit?

**MN:** Um I think that those that settled in um the Washington D.C. area probably um have a better service um because there were a... existing Vietnamese American community at that time. Um that's why there were grocery stores there. But exactly how it started uh that community there, I do not recall. But I remember I could see that the people who live in that area probably they came before so they were on a more well-to-do level than we, the poor rural uh Pennsylvanian.

**QL:** Yes, so, uh working opportunities and um things like that were much easier in Washington D.C.?

**MN:** Uhm, I believe so. At that time... at that time, probably the working and opportunity to find jobs was easier in Washington D.C.

**QL:** Um so have you lived anywhere else um besides Pennsylvania?

**MN:** Uh... after that time, um I... lived in a number of places... Um. Let's see... After college—I went to college in Pennsylvania. Uh in 1979, I went to work in uh New York City. Uh it was a quite experience. Because when I interview with a company called EDS, Electronic Data System, it was in Pennsylvania. But they said that, um 'Well, you from another country and now you settle in a small town in Pennsylvania. We just want to see how you survive. I would like to put you in new environment.' Because EDS at that time has many different locations. Um the headquarters of the company was in Dallas. I was expecting that they keep me in Pennsylvania or send me to Dallas but they say, 'Let's try another place,' which they assign me to an office in midtown Manhattan, in New York. And they said, 'If you can survive in New York City, uh we think that you'll survive everywhere else afterwards.'

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**QL:** And what does EDS stand for?

**MN:** Electronic Data Systems that's what EDS stand for. It was a company that uh do facility management in uh—now it's equivalent to I.T. services. But at that time, I.T. um was an unknown word. We call it data processing way back in 1979.

**QL:** Yes. Um so in—regarding to schooling, do you—which university did you attend?

**MN:** Okay, I attended 2 schools. The first one for my Bachelor's degree—actually, I take it back, 3. The first one was University of Saigon. [**QL:** Yes.] I studied law for two years. And in the U.S. I attend Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. Uh and I earned a degree, B.S. degree in Business Administration Marketing and Computer Data Processing. And my second degree was an M.B.A. degree I earned in uh 1985.

**QL:** Yes and where was that?

**MN:** That was the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

**QL:** Yes. Um so your two years of law school in Vietnam, you didn't get to complete your degree before you moved, right?

**MN:** That's correct. I did not have the time to complete my degree before I left Vietnam.

**QL:** Yes. And uh so why did you decide to pursue a business major instead?

**MN:** Okay. Uhm, that's a good question. When I came to United States, and people ask me what my interest, what my background is, I said I studied law in Vietnam. And they said that, 'Okay, that's good. You should continue to study law.' However, I looked at myself, and I said I was a newcomer to this country, I didn't have money in my pocket, uh I spoke very broken English. And I learned that in the law profession, you need to... have a certain level of pedigree and connection and network, none of which I had. So I said, let's not go for a long shot, but I want to study something technical, which was business and... data processing.

**QL:** Yes. How much was tuition back then?

**MN:** The tuition back then I think it was probably um... 4-\$5,000. Because I remember the whole thing was—tuition, room and board, was \$7,000 a year. Um since um... my family didn't have much income to speak of and I was working earning minimum wage, the school uh gave me a significant amount of grants and scholarships. And I receive some loan as well.

**QL:** And what year was this?

**MN:** It was 1970 uh...1976 to 1979.

**QL:** And what job were you working during this college process to back up your financials?

**MN:** Yes. Um I uh... took a number of uh part time jobs. One was working at the post office in the school...um delivering mail on campus. And uh... number two I was a teaching assistant uh for a professor and working in the computer lab. And number three I was working for a company called Wyeth Lab.

**QL:** How do you spell that?

**MN:** W-Y-E-T-H, I think. Yep. Wyeth Lab, yes. And uh that was to uh... It was interesting job because my job was to put in a white overall and carry... eggs, by the tune of thousands of them from a truck into a... into a

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warehouse if you will. Because that's... that's a pharmaceutical firm that use those eggs to make vaccine. I still remember one time I dropped a tray of 36 eggs on the ground, all broken. And I could see um an egg already with an embryo in it and it was... was not a pleasant sight for me. So I promised myself never to drop it again.

**QL:** [Laughs] Yes. Can you describe a little bit about your other jobs that you've taken during college?

**MN:** Uhm, yes. Um one job is delivering mail in college. It was a um nice experience because I have the opportunity to walk around campus um from department to department, from building to building. Uh unless it's in the middle of the winter, which is in Pennsylvania, winter sometimes is pretty brutal, very cold and uh windy. The other job I had was to uh... tutor students in data processing. It was my last year in college and I learn enough uh and... earn a good grades in those class so the professor trust me to let me tutor students and um grade their exam papers.

**QL:** Were there any challenges you faced during the schooling process?

**MN:** The um... schooling process um... I started out in 1976 with still pretty broken English, so the biggest challenge is to understand the um the lecture. The second biggest challenge was to try to fit in because I live on campus. It was a private um school, mostly um... white people from Pennsylvania and there were some foreign international students as well. So learning the...the American culture if you will, at that time, uh it was interesting, confusing...and um quite challenging at the same time. But um... I determined to um...to learn as much as I can because I thought it was an opportunity for me to get away from working in the factory, which I had experienced before I went to college so it was a quite good motivation. Negative motivation, but motivation nevertheless.

**QL:** Yes and uh so was your decision to go into business major partially influenced by your parents having been traders um in Vietnam?

**MN:** Yes, yes. Um because my... my parents uh was a... was traders in Vietnam, and um it gave me the appreciation for... buy things and sell things because um I like... the business activities and I like—at that time I was dreaming about doing international business. Uh didn't have experience, didn't know what it entails but I, in a way, that uh young man declaration. That's what I'm interested in. So I pursue that. But at the same time I realize that I need to have some technical um... knowledge [inaudible]. That's why I study the data processing.

**QL:** Yes. And uh... so what year did you move to Houston?

**MN:** I moved to Houston in 2007.

**QL:** And to... Uh and that was to pursue your current occupation?

**MN:** Uhm... yes and no. Um... It's... it's an interesting move for us because in year 2000, our family was offered a job by a company in Pennsylvania to move to um Mexico City. And um... as an expatriate for the United States, we move to Mexico City. We lived there from 2000 to 2007. At the end of 2—uh my assignment in 2007 in Mexico City, uh we... decided we need to move back to United States. Looking at um our options of moving back to Pennsylvania, because at that time we still had a house in Pennsylvania, we figured that uh we prefer not to do so. Uh because Pennsylvania, uh we felt that it's too cold for us. We want to settle in somewhere warmer. So we actually looking in different cities in the United States and Houston came out on top. We didn't know too many people in Houston, but we knew Houston's a vibrant city that has a good international community. So we decided to move to Houston in 2007 directly from Mexico City.

**QL:** And so can you elaborate a bit about your currently employment?

**MN:** Okay. Since we move to 2007 to Houston, I wanted to uh... set up my own business, uh preferably to pursue uh... my international business dream that I had when I was 20 years old. Um but uh I didn't have a

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whole lot of expense, so I start to learn quickly and try to figure out how to do business between United States and Mexico, and between United States and Vietnam at that time. Um it was quite a challenge because we didn't have too many um examples or mentors to, to help me to do that. And uh made quite a lot of mistakes. But I think it was a right decision to start the business um... I decide not to go and find a job with a company 'cause uh I figure out that would pretty much tie me down. So I want to start my own company. Yeah.

**QL:** And uh what exactly does your company do now?

**MN:** Okay, right now um Cedona Group U.S. uh, LLC—that's the company that uh I um... I found. What we do is—what I call in short uh description is investment and strategic consulting. By that I mean we are helping companies to develop businesses overseas. For example, um company in the U.S, interested in develop business, trade, investment in Vietnam, I would help them with that. And uh in reverse, the Vietnamese company wanted to do the trade or investment in the U.S. I would help those companies to do that. I set up strategy, looking for customers, how to execute the strategy. Um I found that quite interesting, quite challenging but interesting for me to do.

**QL:** Yes. Um and is there a significant community of Vietnamese Americans doing the same um thing you're doing or in the same field?

**MN:** I think that... for what I do um... as a connection between U.S. and Vietnam, within the Vietnamese community in the U.S., a number of people are doing that. Um. However, that's not an easy thing to do. People like to do that but they don't know how. They don't have the experience. They don't have the opportunity. They don't have the um determination... Because, this is my humble observation, is that the Vietnamese people tend to stick with the technical field, where they feel is safer to do. Um electrical engineer, um data processing, I.T. management. Uh and even the professions like uh doctors, lawyers, um pharmacists. Those are pretty clear cut. Doing international business, it requires a lot of skills that is not science, not exact. And Vietnamese people I believe are not quite comfortable with the inexact science, if you will.

**QL:** Hmm yes. Um so how has your business helped you develop a connection with the Vietnamese community in Houston?

**MN:** Okay, um that's a good question. I uh... I think that while the majority of the Vietnamese American people in Houston uh pursuing their job and doing quite a good job at what they do, primarily in the technical area, there are many of them have a desire to uh be entrepreneurs, especially doing something with the connection with Vietnam. So the majority of people that I talk to, they learn about what I do... Um they'd like to know more, they'd like to get involved and they say that, what they can do to... to assist me in making the connection between Vietnam and the U.S. stronger.

**QL:** Yes. And uh through connections with them, have... have they opened up or have they showed you anything about the working environments of Houston in the past? Like in the 70's, 80's, 90's?

**MN:** Yes. I met a number of people here in Houston. I consider myself a newcomer, the Houston scenery. And I met people who'd been here 20 years, 30 years, even 40 years. And they said that the good old Houston was like this and was like that. And many of them are quite successful in this community. And they said over the years, Houston has changed significantly. Um now it's getting more of a... cosmopolitan area, becoming the fourth largest uh area in the United States. They are very large international community. People from many different countries, backgrounds have settled in Houston. Um I'm pleased to say the Vietnamese American community in Houston is a strong one, that um developed quite well over the years and has uh... good... has created a good image... as a... what I would say close to a model citizen within the community and community at large respect Vietnamese American people in Houston, if you will.

**QL:** Yes, uh from those stories, can you tell us a bit of what you've learn about the working environment, specifically job opportunities in the past.



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**MN:** Okay. [coughs] In um Houston, I knew that in the past has focused primarily in oil and gas. [**QL:** Yes.] And uh in the early 1980's, the oil and gas industry uh went down significantly. So a number of Houstonians, including the Vietnamese Houstonian, had to find ways to survive, if you will. Many of them was laid off. I knew, I have personal friends who'd—who've been laid off. So they started to go back to school, study something else, or diversify and doing different things. Uh in the... I would say in the past 10 years, Houston has been diversified into many different industries, attracting many more people from other um cities coming here and the Vietnamese Americans, no exceptions. Many, many Vietnamese Americans moving here from different states, particularly from California to here, looking for job opportunities, for better quality of life. Uh and there are plenty of jobs in Texas and in Houston, uh much more than average for the American city. And the Vietnamese people do their hard work, uh strong desire and respect for education. Uh they fit well within the community, find good jobs... um, either working for the companies or starting their own businesses here.

**QL:** Great. Um so did they tell you about job prospects for Vietnamese Americans, specifically back then?

**MN:** Um yes. Back in the 1980's, I knew it was a difficult period for them to find jobs. Some of them had to move away. But then eventually they came back to Houston. The job prospect for the Vietnamese American, we can look at three groups, if you will. One that uh professional, with the college degree that go and work for big companies. Um in Houston, we're strong in oil and gas, but we also strong in healthcare, in education as well. So those professionals with formal education would go there. The second group was the entrepreneurs, people that start their own business with the real estate, in restaurant business, in service, in logistics uh um... light manufacturings, many of those. And um thirdly... that um I would say people that either came lately, um or didn't have the opportunity for whatever reason to uh go to college and earn their degree so they work as technicians or even general laborers. Uh those people still have the opportunity to find jobs, if you will... Um so, in all the segments of the job market, professional, entrepreneurs and um blue collars, there are jobs for uh for the Vietnamese people here in Houston.

**QL:** But it was a lot harder for general laborers to find jobs back then?

**MN:** Uhm, that's correct, that's correct. Because in Houston, with its um closeness to Latin America, we have a lot of um general labor, people from Mexico who coming here and seeking employment and seeking better life as well. So for Vietnamese people that did not have the skills, they would have to compete with those uh... new immigrants and it would be more difficult for them to... to find job.

**QL:** Yes. So with all you've known about Houston and the job prospects, um you think you would've moved to Houston much earlier than you did?

**MN:** Uhm... probably so. Um I would—I would say that... I would say that Houston has a good future and uh welcome the newcomers to come here who's willing to work hard. And that's the key thing. You need to work hard to uh... to pursue the goals and... um even you have a job, you need to work hard to keep it. It's as simple as that. It's the same everywhere. And uh had I known Houston had such a good environment for job and for quality of life, I would've moved here earlier.

**QL:** What period of time do you think that would've happened if you had the choice?

**MN:** Probably I would say back in um... maybe... late 1980s or early um 1990s. After I graduate from uh from graduate school.

**QL:** If you had moved here, what, what field or what sort of jobs would you have looked at?

**MN:** Okay, that's interesting, probably the international business or some sorts, because at that time I, I uh had my degree already so I would look at something, because in Houston we have many companies that um have a global presence in many different countries. So with the background that rooted in Asia and a desire to do

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international business, that's probably something I would pursue.

**QL:** Yes uh but do you think the international connections were very strong still back then?

**MN:** Um I think so, not so much with Asia at that time, but more so with Latin America, [**QL:** Yes.] because we have closeness to Latin America and with the Houston International Airport here it's easier for people from Latin America to come here and vice versa.

**QL:** Yes. Uh so I also want to ask a little bit about your community engagement, can you, uhm, cite from your questionnaire, I understand that you have worked with the Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce and the East End Chamber of Commerce, could you elaborate your experience?

**MN:** Ok, uhm, there are a few things that um I get involved within the community here, however on a limited basis, because I came here in 2007 and busy starting a business, and uh once the business take off I traveled internationally quite a lot so I did not have a whole lot of time to get involved within the community. Um the Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce, the organization was formed recently I believed maybe two or three years ago. [**QL:** Yes.] And um their objective is to have a community where the Vietnamese American business people can get together, uh networking, learn from one another, support one another to grow their business uh within the Greater Houston area, if you will. Um and there are many uh professionals people in that organization, many entrepreneurs in that organization. And um we get together probably once a month or one every other month to have a networking and um to uh see how we can help each other to grow the business. And uh the second one, the East End Chamber of Commerce, um that organization based on the East side of Houston, um and that one focus significantly in the energy companies, if you will, um in oil and gas and uh oil and gas services companies as well. And I attended their luncheon uh meetings from time to time to uh to do networking and to, to learn about what is going on in the community.

**QL:** Yes um do you think the organizations such as the VACC would have existed back way much earlier to connect the um business people of the Vietnamese community?

**MN:** Uhm...that's the good question. I think that um whether it could exist earlier um or not, is not clear to me but should it? Yes, it definitely should have been there many years ago to help because um there are many other Chamber of Commerce, or the um support organizations of many different backgrounds have been in Houston many years, uh the, the Vietnamese one is the new, new one coming to the scene, I think probably two, three years ago. It could have been around ten, fifteen years. And that would be benefits to the community.

**QL:** Yes, and uh the real expansion of um Vietnamese American businessmen in Houston, when do you think that could have started?

**MN:** Okay, um I think that the growth of the Vietnamese American business in Houston uh probably start to grow at the same time as Houston recovery after the downturn in 1980s, [**QL:** After the oil bust.] after the oil bust. Yes. Because after that, the people scattered different places but then they coming back uh gradually, slowly. Um I think the potential is there, um, that it would need to have, um, leaderships, people who stand up and say 'Okay, I'll organize this and I'll organize that.' And naturally people would follow a strong leader.

**QL:** Yes. So organizations such as that would have been very helpful [**MN:** Yes.] at that time?

**MN:** Definitely. Because Vietnamese people um is a culture is more respectful and reserved, they keep to themselves more than uh getting together and help each other like other people that who, other immigrant groups, if you will, that come here in the past.

**QL:** Yes and um also in your other community engagement you listed the uh Boys Scout of America and the Truong Viet Ngu Hung Vuong. Um could you tell us a little bit about that?

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**MN:** Sure, the Boy Scout of America, um I got involved in that because my uh my son Mitchel he is a member of a Boy Scout troop, he was a uh boy scout, cup scout rather in uh elementary school. And now he is 14 years old, he's my youngest son, and he's been involved with cup scout and Boy Scout for I would say since 2008 up to now. He's quite learning and growing and have a good experience with that group so I got involved to help out and I was quite impressed with the Boy Scout of America. It teaches the um young men in the community how to be a model citizen, and uh I would say they are teaching future leaders of America.

**QL:** Um yes, is there—are there a lot of Vietnamese Americans involved in Boy Scout?

**MN:** Yes, actually, there's a number of Vietnamese American family involved in Boy Scout in our troop, the troop 1631 in um uh Sugarland, I could count, let's see, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, us let's say, us included, 5 families in one Boy Scout troop. I don't know about other troops but I'm sure that there are other troops with a Vietnamese American in there as well.

**QL:** And what about the Truong Viet Ngu Hung Vuong, can you talk as well about that?

**MN:** Okay, Truong Viet Ngu Hung Vuong, that's the school um that was set up over 20 years ago, way before I came, by a volunteer, by the Vietnamese Americans uh in the community that wanted to preserve the language, the culture and the custom of uh Vietnam in Houston. The school has a – has a mission of teaching Vietnamese language, teaching the culture to the youngsters. We have about 4 uh 400 students at this time. The teachers 100% are volunteer within the community, about 50 plus teachers in there. And we focus on language and culture, and uh we do not get involved in commercial and religions and politics, those are three that uh the school does not get involved in. And because I wanted our children to be able to learn Vietnamese better, so when we moved here in 2007, I was looking around for a place for our children to learn, um but we didn't get involved until 2009 or so if I recall correctly. And I put a few of my children there to learn Vietnamese and I became a volunteer teacher as well. Um it was a very nice community, um they, um, primarily the people that care for the younger generations, want them to preserve the Vietnamese culture, uh the customs, the understandings and learn the Vietnamese language at the same time. Uh we borrowed, rather we rented a facility of Houston Community College in Downtown uh and um we have class every Sunday from 9 o'clock to 12 o'clock. And there are students from, um, families coming from different places, as far as Galveston coming to Houston to attend the school.

**QL:** Wow. So um in your personal life, do—does your family preserve, and try to preserve the Vietnamese culture and language within the household?

**MN:** Uh yes, we try to do that to, um, limited success. Why? [laughs] Because, as you know, life in the United States are quite busy and the children quite busy with school, homework, and their friends, and uh whatever time left they get on the computer, they get on Facebook and Twitter and text each other. Um so the time they reserve for the family and for their parents it's uh very precious. And uh what we want to do, um at least in our family, we want the children at least to have the understanding, the appreciation of the culture, and they need to be proud that they have the roots of Vietnamese customs and culture. Um we preserve whatever weekends, holidays, and at home we uh we try to have celebrations of holidays from time to time, um but again, with limited success because we live in a fast pace American um society. [coughs] And especially in my family, uh language is a mixture of different things, we speak uh Vietnamese to each other, English to each other and Spanish to each other. Sometimes, uh in a sentence we can have three languages in one sentence, you know, so it's a funny mixture.

**QL:** Yes. And can you give some examples about some holidays or festivals that you celebrate at home?

**MN:** Okay, the uh the biggest one and the most important one for the Vietnamese culture is the Tet celebration, is the New Year celebration, um and the kids like that. Why? Because the Vietnamese has the tradition of, um, for the Tet New Year, we serve a lot of food, and uh most importantly for the kids, most interestingly for the kids is that they uh receive Li Xi, which is good luck money in a red envelop. [**QL:** Yes.] So doesn't matter how old

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they are, they always look, um, seek out the parents in the New Year and asking for Li Xi. Uh we also take them to Buddhist temple around the New Year as well, for them to be able to um uh to uh attend the um religious ceremony at the Buddhist temple, seeing how the community uh growing and the vibrancy of the community during the Tet festival. [QL: Yes.] Um and uh at times, we invite friends and relatives to our house as well. However, it depends on the day of the week. If the New Year falls on the weekend it's easier than it was on the weekday. The children has to go to school, sometimes they have exam on the first day of the New Year and we have to go to work so it's kind of quite difficult. Uh and other holidays as well, um we celebrate whenever we can, but it's very brief unfortunately, um because, again, school keep on going, work have to be done and we have to go to work. So we celebrate the American holiday more so than the Vietnamese holiday.

**QL:** Yes. And uh, a few personal questions, where did you and your wife meet?

**MN:** Okay, we met in Philadelphia. I went to school in Philadelphia, my wife also went to school in Philadelphia but, uh, we went to separate schools and we didn't know each other. And uh we went to a Vietnamese students Association party at that time. Um both of us graduated already, but um we came back to the party and that's why we met.

**QL:** Yes. And, was she also Vietnamese American at that time?

**MN:** Ah yes, yes, my wife also Vietnamese American and uh she was born and raised in Saigon as well.

**QL:** Oh wonderful, and what does she currently do in Houston?

**MN:** Um she is a pharmacist right now working for Wal-Mart.

**QL:** Yes. And how many children do you have?

**MN:** We have four children, two boys and two girls.

**QL:** And they're currently attending University or...?

**MN:** Yes, two of them attending Texas A&M University, um one of them, our third child Mindy, she is 11th grade in high school. And uh our youngest Mitchel, he's 14, he's attending um uh Four Settlement Middle School, 8th grader. Our oldest Stephanie she is attending Texas University graduating uh next month actually. [QL: Oh wow!] Yes, Vincent, our uh second child, is a son and he's a second year at Texas A&M studying electrical engineering.

**QL:** Great, well thank you for the interview. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

**MN:** Um that's a good question. I think that, um, the interview and the um recording of uh the facts like this would be quite interesting for the future generations to understand how the Vietnamese uh American community in Houston has evolved over the years. Um and you play a significant role in that, and this program would benefit greatly, not only the Vietnamese American community but uh the uh the Houston community as a whole because we are a healthy blend of many cultures right here in Houston. So this is a part of that and I'm glad to be able to play a small part in that.

**QL:** Thank you so much for agreeing to our interview. This is the end of the interview. Thank you.

**MN:** Okay, thank you. Bye bye.

**[The recorder is turned off. The interview ends.]**