

**Houston Asian American Archive**  
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Interviewee: Danny Nguyen

Interviewer: Quynh Le

Interview Date: April 4, 2013

Transcribed by: Quynh Le

Edited by: Chris Johnson (8/18/16), Evelyn Kurniawan (11/13/16)

Audio Track Time: 01:03:13

Background:

Danny Nguyen was born in Da Nang, Vietnam in 1966. His father worked as an interpreter for the Green Berets; his mother owned and operated a private pharmacy. He and his father left Vietnam for the U.S. in 1981, through 3 refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines, before arriving in Houston in 1984. His mother and siblings joined them in the U.S. later in 1990. He attended Clements High School and worked as a bag boy in Houston. Later, he and his father moved to California to receive the rest of their family members. He graduated from La Quinta High School in California, attended 7 different colleges and universities as he moved around the U.S. working toward his education. He moved back to Houston in 1996 and worked in commercial real estate and has remained in that field ever since. In 2010, he ran for and was elected City Councilmember At Large for Missouri City. He is currently involved in many organizations such as the Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce, Houston Association of Realtors, Certified Commercial Investment Members, etc.

Setting:

The interview centers on labor and capital, based on Danny Nguyen's working history and events from his election. The interview was conducted at the Danny Nguyen Commercial office, Houston. The interview lasted over one hour. He shared many accounts of his immigration, his work history, hardships, and his electoral process.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

DN	Danny Nguyen
QL	Quynh Le
-	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

**QL:** This is an interview with Mr. Danny Nguyen, conducted by Quynh Le on April 4th, 2013, part of Houston Asian American Archive for Rice University's Woodson Research Center. So thank you for

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being with us today. So why don't you start by introducing a little bit about yourself, where and when you grew up.

**DN:** I was born and grew up in Da Nang, central of Vietnam on December 26th, 1966. And I left Vietnam at the end of 1981... um, came to America in 1984, July 1984. Graduate—went to high school, Clements High School, graduated from Texas A&M International business, have chosen commercial real estate as a career. Since then, I have transformed from being an agent to a broker, to owner. And I used to—We used to have a RE/MAX franchise. But now we have our own identity, Danny Nguyen International.

**QL:** Yes. Um, why don't you start by describing a little bit about your hometown in Vietnam. What was life like?

**DN:** Okay. Da Nang... is geographically located in the central of Vietnam, at the smallest part. And of course when I was growing up, it was also when the war in Vietnam was—was at its peak. Of course, you know, witnessing, um, the sounds of bombs, fighting, and guns, and bullets; it's part of the daily experience. And of course, you know, besides all that, I mean, I still enjoy the peaceful morning with my family, enjoy the beach, biển Mỹ Khê [My Khe Beach], biển Thanh Bình [Thanh Binh beach]. And there was a lot of rice field, buffalos, coconut tree. It was a mix of negative and positive memories.

**QL:** Yes. And what were some of your most significant memories of that time?

**DN:** A lot of casualty. A lot of human casualty because of the war. And uhm... and the uhm... the difficulties, the adversity that local people have to deal with. I'm talking about, um, nature. You know, Viet... Da Nang is the place that nature doesn't favor very much, constantly under flood. I mean, miền Trung lụt [the central region is flooded] all the time. Constantly under flood, typhoon, bad weather, very difficult to grow uhm... crops. So local people they have to struggle very, very difficult due to that in addition to the... contribution of the war.

**QL:** Yes, and you lived with your family, your parents and your five other siblings at that time, yes?

**DN:** Yes.

**QL:** And what did your parents do?

**DN:** My father was an interpreter for Green Berets. It was an American Special Force, I believe. And my mother was a nurse. And she had her own pharmacy, private pharmacy.

**QL:** I imagine your parents were very involved in the war?

**DN:** Yeah, I mean of course everybody was involved in the war. Of course, I mean, if you were 18 or above at that time, you have to, there's no choice. You've been drafted.

**QL:** What about your siblings? Were they older or younger than you?

**DN:** I got one—two older sisters, and one younger sister and two younger brothers. Six of us.

**QL:** How is your relationship as siblings?

**DN:** Well, very close. We're very close. We love each other, very supportive.

**QL:** Was your father's occupation one of the circumstances that led to your family's migration?

**DN:** That was not the sole reason. There were many other reasons as well. The inability to cope with the new environment.

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

**DN:** Yeah, of course. You know, you know, there was a big transition in Vietnam history, you know, one new form of government taking over the old form. My parents were so used to the—the life, and that environment. Of course, like anything else under new leadership, things operate differently. And, um... and they were not able to cope with that. And... And when the opportunity came up, we decided to leave. We believe about our opportunity.

**[05:18]**

**QL:** And that was at the end of 1981?

**DN:** Yeah, 1981, early 1982. Yeah.

**QL:** So did your whole family migrate at the same time?

**DN:** No just my father and I. And I didn't get to see my mother and my sister 10 years later.

**QL:** Yes. How much of the experience of the whole process of immigrating do you remember? Could you please tell us a little?

**DN:** Oh yeah of course. I mean, escaping from Vietnam in the middle of a dark evening. Get on a boat. It was a very small fishing boat, and we ended up with seventy-two people. I don't know what the capacity could it could hold, maybe less than five people. A fishing boat. And because of the overloaded capacity, the boat broke down the second day. And we faced a lot of desperation and... thirst and we ran into pirates.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** Yeah... it was... And then after that, we landed to Thailand. And unfortunately, you know, Thai government decided to close door of accepting refugee. And then we landed in Thailand right in the beginning of—after that law. So we were... my father and I were put in jail, Thai prison, real prison, because we were labeled as illegal infiltrators.

**QL:** Was the... immigration process, was that aided by any organization? Or was it just self-organized by the people who wanted to leave that night?

**DN:** I think individual efforts, yeah, a group of people who have a common goal to leave Vietnam.

**QL:** Just decided to get together...?

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**DN:** Yeah, maybe not together. You see how I told you earlier. That boat, I don't think it was intended for seventy-two people. But, I mean, it's chaotic, because, I mean, you're trying to flee. So, I mean, that's...

**QL:** So did you have to settle in any intermediate locations before you arrived in Houston?

**DN:** Yes, I've been... I have stayed in 3 different refugee camps.

**QL:** And that was after the Thai prison?

**DN:** After Thai prison, yeah. We landed to CQ [SP?], north of... located in the north of Thailand. Then we were transported to Phanat Nikom. And then... And then finally we were transported to Philippines, Batang.

**QL:** Yes. Can you please describe a little bit of the experience in those transition camps?

**DN:** The transition camp part was good. I remember I shared with you earlier. The first camp was horrible because we don't know what... would... our fate be like? We don't know, I mean, we just... it was like jail. I mean, spending our life behind the wire bar, I mean, [stammers] it's like in a prison...

**QL:** The barbed-wires?

**DN:** Yeah, I mean. There's a special term for that. We were 'under prison like fans,' ok?

**QL:** Was it like internment camp?

**DN:** Yeah, but it's very highly secure... high security... But the point I'm trying to make is that it was a tough life. It was very struggling... Standing in long lines every day, waiting to, you know, to get food, very small amount of food and water. Usually it was not enough for everybody. So basically we had to... uh, to divide our team up. If you eat today, and then... and then I get more, better portion tomorrow.

**QL:** So you had to divide rations among yourselves.

**DN:** Yeah, something like that.

**QL:** So you arrive in those three locations before you came in Houston in 1984. Why did you and your family decided to choose Houston?

**DN:** 'Cause my uncle sponsored us.

**QL:** And did you stay with your uncle in that time?

**DN:** Yeah—Uh... Not really. When I came ironically I happened to stay with my aunt. Yeah...

**[10:06]**

**QL:** Was that a separate family?

**DN:** Yeah, different family.

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**QL:** And uh... Which area of Houston did you settle in?

**DN:** Houston, Bellaire, and Highway 6. As a matter of fact, it's part of—it had a Houston address but—but theoretically it was located in Fort Bend.

**QL:** And do you remember what the area, what that neighborhood was like?

**DN:** Oh it was very nice. Very nice neighborhood, great, sub—brand new subdivision. Yeah.

**QL:** Could you tell us were there other Vietnamese communities around there? What were their general attitudes?

**DN:** Attitude of what?

**QL:** Just how people lived, how they interacted socially.

**DN:** Yeah. Of course, everyone focused on making a living. And the children focus on school. There were not, if I remember correctly, I don't think there were a lot of social entertainment or entertaining activities like you see nowadays. Totally different, yeah. We didn't have that big supermarket, Hong Kong. I remember we had to go to downtown for a very small supermarket called Hoa Binh. Yeah.

**QL:** So in your opinion, how was the quality of life compared to your hometown at the time?

**DN:** Economically?

**QL:** Yeah.

**DN:** Of course, much better. You go from a place where you constantly... have to worry about what to eat and what to shelter... to a very abundant life, you know, full of food, and you don't have to worry about that. [Sneezes] But in exchange for that you are under constant pressure to perform and produce and work for that life. It didn't come free.

**QL:** And what about socially or culturally? Did you face any challenges?

**DN:** Yeah, I mean, language barrier. I mean, even... even though I was a minor, I still have that, uh, to learn the new language and learn culture again. And we used to hang around with other Vietnamese... uh... classmate in school.

**QL:** Any... Did you face any discrimination or...?

**DN:** Not severely...

**QL:** Social barriers?

**DN:** Not that I remember. Maybe it had to do with my personality. But I was able to blend in and integrate very... smoothly.

**QL:** That's great. So did you find a level of support of the Vietnamese-American community around your... your neighborhood? Was that level of support...

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**DN:** What kind of support? Emotional support or...

**QL:** Anything.

**DN:** You know, we attended church, Vietnamese church. We go to uh... Vietnamese supermarket and occasionally we go to, uhm... gatherings. So there are some psychological levels of support. You know, knowing that you have some fellow countrymen living in that area; you are not alone. So I guess there was some level of support, emotionally.

**QL:** So what did your father do in Houston when you first arrived?

**DN:** Yeah he came and he had to start it from... start over. And he went to a nursing school, learn how to be an LVN, a nurse.

**QL:** And do you remember what his work environment was like?

**DN:** His work environment?

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** As a matter of fact, we were separated at that time because I was a minor. So I stayed with my aunt's family to continue my high school education, as a 9th grader. And my father lived in downtown. So there wasn't much that I know of, or remember of his work environment.

**QL:** Do you remember what his working wage or hourly salary was?

**DN:** Oh very, very minimum, very humble. I couldn't remember. If I remember correctly, the minimum wage at that time is about... was about \$2 something, can't remember. But my first wage is \$3. I remember I started as a bag boy in a grocery store, you know, putting groceries in the bag and carry the bag out for customers.

**[14:59]**

**QL:** So did you happen to know if there was a larger Vietnamese community in the field that your father was working in as a nurse in the hospital?

**DN:** It was a little bit rare. I don't know why he chose it. But not too many people.

**QL:** So there wasn't that many Vietnamese people.

**DN:** Not—not that I was aware of.

**QL:** So when did the rest of your family arrive here in Houston?

**DN:** Ten years later. About nine or ten years later, from... the end of ninety... so in the 90s. I believe the end of 1990.

**QL:** Yes. Did you mother continue working when she came to the U.S.?

**DN:** Yeah, she did.

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**QL:** What did she do?

**DN:** Babysitting and ... may đồ [tailoring/sewing clothes]. You know, she subcontract with people to finish the...

**QL:** Tailoring?

**DN:** Not tailoring. Tailoring is when you do the whole thing. This is like a part of assembly. You know, they give you a part of any garment and then you complete that. It's more like a...

**QL:** Oh, an assembly line sewing?

**DN:** Yeah, something like that.

**QL:** And uh, the rest of your siblings came here along the same time with your mother...

**DN:** Yeah—No, one, except one. My oldest sister. She married. She had married. So because of her change of marry—marital status, so she stayed. But we sponsored her and her husband a year later.

**QL:** So do you have any relatives left in Vietnam?

**DN:** Not immediate. Distant.

**QL:** Yes. So what school did you and your siblings go to? Let's start with what school you went to when you came here.

**DN:** What school?

**QL:** Yes, do you remember the name of the high school?

**DN:** Clements High School.

**QL:** Clements?

**DN:** Yeah, Clements High School.

**QL:** And where was it? Which part of town?

**DN:** Fort Bend.

**QL:** Fort Bend?

**DN:** Sugar Land.

**QL:** And you started in 9th grade?

**DN:** Yes.

**QL:** So you finished high school in Clements and—

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**DN:** No. I did not. My last year we moved to California. And I finished my high school in La Quinta High School. The reason we moved to California's because we were preparing to receive my family. We believe in that California is... is easier to adapt because there were more Vietnamese population. Yeah.

**QL:** So you moved to California to easier... to more easily bring your family over and help them transition to the U.S.?

**DN:** Yes.

**QL:** Which area of California did you stay in?

**DN:** What area of California... uh, Orange County, Santa Ana.

**QL:** Did you father continue working as a nurse in Orange County?

**DN:** Yes, yeah, he were.

**QL:** So you had to finish your last year of high school in California?

**DN:** Yes.

**QL:** So how—how different was California from Houston at the time you transitioned?

**DN:** It was an upgrade for me socially. Because we got to see a lot of other fellow Vietnamese and there were more social activities, bigger supermarkets and more churches and temples. And I really like it.

**QL:** Was it a significantly larger Vietnamese American community?

**DN:** Yeah, yes of course.

**QL:** Were the social interactions different from the way people lived in Houston?

**DN:** I think so, I think so.

**QL:** So how long did you family stay in California?

**DN:** Let's see... [Long pause] Ok, 90, 2000. About three years—two, three years.

**QL:** Can you describe a little bit about the neighborhood where you stayed in Orange County?

**DN:** It was a very rough, very rough, high crime neighborhood. And the reason for that was because it was cheap. So as a matter of fact, it attracts a lot of immigrants and refugees and its close proximity to supermarket and all the daily amenities that we needed.

**[20:05]**

**QL:** So...

**DN:** But it wasn't a very upscale or desirable neighborhood.

**QL:** So less safe than Houston, or than the neighborhood in Houston?



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**DN:** Yes, that's correct. Compared to the subdivision that I stayed with my aunt, it was a different life.

**QL:** A lot less safe, you feel?

**DN:** That's correct. I remember there were a lot of gangs. Yes.

**QL:** Did your siblings continue their education in California?

**DN:** Some... some. They have attended some college. But none of them graduated except me.

**QL:** And you said you graduated from Texas A&M?

**DN:** That's correct.

**QL:** So when you graduated in Cali—graduated high school in California, did you continue onto college—

**DN:** As a matter of fact I had attended seven universities and colleges.

**QL:** Can you tell us a little bit about that please?

**DN:** Yeah I mean, I attended... after high school I had attended community college called Orange Coast College. And then I went to State university, [inaudible] and then I went to San Antonio, went to community college again. And I went to... Then I attended UTSA, University of San Antonio. And I went to Corpus Christi and attended UT—Texas A&M University. So you remember—remember that I was working when I was a student.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** So wherever I worked, I attended university. I make a vow to myself, regardless what happens I will get my college degree, regardless. So I got my college degree. And what I'm proud most about my graduation is that I didn't owe one penny. No loans, zero loans, all self-sufficient, working and paying for myself.

**QL:** Yes. So you did not have to rely on family financials?

**DN:** No, very self-sufficient.

**QL:** That's great. How much was tuition back then compared to now...?

**DN:** I don't know, but I remember as a student a great part of that went to tuition and books and apartment. I know that I had to work a lot.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** But, you know, but I didn't like waiting in line for the grant or loan. It was worth it though.

**QL:** What field of study did you begin with in your first college or university? Was it always business?

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**DN:** Pretty general—Yeah I knew that I have that. I knew, I have always known that I have a strength in diplomat, diplomatic fields, negotiating, deal making—People, it has to do with people and deals. And as I go further and further into my programs, and I knew that, I mean, business is my inner call. And I chose international because I knew that everything will be international. We're talking about twenty years ago, but I knew that. You remember people talking about global village and everything like that. Yeah. So, that's why I chose international business.

**QL:** And so you kept working while studying.

**DN:** All the time, full-time.

**QL:** And you stayed within that, uhm, field of business all throughout the seven college and universities?

**DN:** I'd taken several added crazy course. I mean, I still—I mean [stammers] if you look at, I took voice lessons. I take dance lesson. I take jazz. I take, uh, I just took whatever I liked.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** You know, but I had a great time. 'Cause I even take, let's see what else. All the things, all the fun classes.

**QL:** Yes and—

**DN:** Oh, foreign languages, taken French. Yeah, taken French. And Spanish.

**QL:** So did you have to face any challenges during your university and college experience, aside from tuition and managing your financials?

**DN:** Yes, yes, yes. As a matter of fact, constant struggling to find time to do my homework. Because I have to work, I mean, right after getting out of school, then I have to work. So it's a constant battle of finding the time to finish my homework and conquer my never-ending tiredness and exhaustion because of working.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** That's what it was, yeah.

**QL:** So, you went to college in seven different locations. Why were you moving so frequently around that time?

**[25:00]**

**DN:** Like I said earlier, my goal, I don't believe any certain school that will make me a person who I would be. So I attend whatever school that I happen to do business at that time. At that time, I help a lot of people set small businesses. So I happened to be in Corpus Christi, then San Antonio and Austin. So wherever I was, I attended that, that university.

**QL:** So you were moving your location to tend to your clients? Or...

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**DN:** Uh... Yeah, in a way, yeah, to accommodate my work. Because my work at that time was priority. Remember, we talked about self-sufficiency.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** I have to—I have to make a living for myself and go to school. So...

**QL:** Oh. Great, that makes a perfect transition into the next section I wanted to ask you about, was about your employment.

**DN:** Ok.

**QL:** So your first job, you had your first job when you were 16, I believe?

**DN:** Yeah.

**QL:** Yes. And what was that job?

**DN:** I was, the term, if I remember correctly, 'bag boy'. Bag boy. You remember, used to see them around. You know, some boy, and you had a uniform on and that conveyor belt. You know, when it's—and you take the groceries and the commodities and you put them in the bag. And then you just help the clients put them in the cart and push it out to the parking lot.

**QL:** And where was that?

**DN:** It was on Bellaire. Close to where I live, on Bellaire and Highway 6, in Houston.

**QL:** And that place was called... the Safeway?

**DN:** Yeah, Safeway. You don't see them anymore, but it used to be a very popular market chain. Like Kroger's...

**QL:** Yes. I believe they're still in D.C., last time I saw it.

**DN:** Yeah, you see that letter S.

**QL:** And your hourly wage was \$3 at the time?

**DN:** I believe so. But remember I get tipped. I get a lot of tip because I was very... very nice to clients.

**QL:** Great. So how much was the \$3 wage comparatively to median wage or like... living standards at that time?

**DN:** Uhm... [Long pause] It was minimum wage. Minimum wage is student wage. You cannot make a living with that wage.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** So... just enough to use that money to send back to Vietnam to help my family. Remember I was in school. You're talking about high school when I was...

**QL:** That was still high school...?

**DN:** I was in 9th grade, can you image? I would get back—get off from high school at 2 o'clock. 3 or 3:30, I put my jacket and rode a bicycle few miles to the supermarket. Didn't come back till midnight. And then... Yeah, I don't think that kind of wage would support a person to have his or her own apartment or anything like that.

**QL:** Oh no definitely.

**DN:** That's why I live with my aunt.

**QL:** Yes, so can you describe a bit about your experience working there? How did you feel about it? Was it difficult?

**DN:** I had a very good—you know that is a very manual job. It's the lowest, lowest level in the whole store. I mean, in addition to bagging people's groceries, I have to clean public restroom, too. And do all kind of things, I mean, what—whatever needs to be done. We, the bag boys do it. But I was very happy to do it, because I knew that was... that wasn't permanent. And as a matter of fact I was very grateful for that experience. It gave me the opportunity to interact with, how to deal with people, how to make people happy.

**QL:** And how was the community, or the local people that you encountered every day? Do you remember your interactions with them?

**DN:** Local?

**QL:** Yes. The people who shopped at your Safeway.

**DN:** Oh yeah, I mean, because I was so nice, you know. I was, 'Thank you for shopping at Safeway! How can I... Can I take your groceries to your car?' Generally, I would say I had received a lot of very kind treatment. Of course there are exceptions, a few [laughs] you know, you can never satisfy, you know.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** But overly, generally it was very good. Good experience.

**QL:** I see. Were there equivalent Vietnamese, Asian American food markets around there?

**DN:** No not even close, it's much more professional; it's cleaner, and more product line. But they carry different products.

**[30:00]**

**QL:** But not specifically food markets around that time? Asian food markets?

**DN:** Oh yeah, there were, there were... Vietnamese supermarket, but very limited, very small. They carry mostly items that you could not find from the mainstream groceries like nước mắm—you know, fish sauce, and very ethnic food, I mean, exotic food, you know, rice and all that.

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**QL:** Yes. So what did... Vietnamese or Asian American people usually, like the fields that they usually worked in, specifically Vietnamese Americans... around the time that you were, when you started your first job, do you remember what they usually worked in?

**DN:** Say that one more time, I didn't pay attention.

**QL:** So, do you remember what Vietnamese Americans usually started working in, like which fields they worked in?

**DN:** Oh yeah, mostly the majority working in a, uhm... very lower entry level in the assembly line, manufacturing company. Because you have to remember that that was the first wave in the early 80's. Those were the first wave of Vietnam immigrant and refugees. So they did not have the highly educated level and they were not equipped professionally. So I would say 90... 90... 95 percent working at a very humble beginning.

**QL:** So more—

**DN:** Manual.

**QL:** More manual and assembly line—

**DN:** Yeah, assembly line, fishing.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** Fishing industry and yeah.

**QL:** That seemed the most popular employment at the time.

**DN:** Yeah.

**QL:** And so what other jobs did you hold after that? I know you moved around a lot and worked with a lot of different people.

**DN:** Yes and when I moved to California, I worked in hardware, as a sales clerk. See I get promoted from a bag boy to (laughs) now I did the cashier. So I had the money. So that was a big promotion for me. And yeah, I worked in a hardware store for several years. Yeah.

**QL:** And that was in Orange County?

**DN:** You know what a hardware store is right?

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** They sale household daily...

**QL:** Hammers.

**DN:** Exactly, hammer and paint.

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**QL:** And, what other jobs after that? Do you remember?

**DN:** And one time I worked in the... a medical manufacturing company called Baxter, producing medical supplies.

**QL:** Where was that?

**DN:** In California.

**QL:** In the same city?

**DN:** Different city. I lived in Santa Ana; I worked in Irvine.

**QL:** Why did you decide to look into all those fields? Like, why did you decide to work in medical supply?

**DN:** That time [inaudible] because the money does. I didn't think much about it. They—they offer more and...

**QL:** So it wasn't because you were business oriented that you decided to do that?

**DN:** No, no, at that time it wasn't... No. They pay more and...

**QL:** So what were the more business oriented jobs that you held when you were working around in college?

**DN:** I help people set up business. Any store from nail salon to restaurant, to beauty shop. I help them to identify locations and prepare the business plan and help them with the process.

**QL:** Do you remember any specific cases that you worked in?

**DN:** Yes, I have set up several nail salons in the big malls... in big malls in San Antonio, Corpus Christi and Austin. And the biggest restaurant I... I did was a restaurant called Vietnam in Corpus Christi. They're still around today.

**QL:** Yes. And Corpus Christi was when you attended Texas A&M.

**DN:** That's correct.

**QL:** And what year did you graduate from Texas A&M?

**DN:** '96.

**QL:** '96? And how did you feel that your whole—that your process of working during college, how did that compliment your education...

**DN:** Well it helped me... it had helped me to identify where my passion is, where my strength is... what I was good at, and—and what area that I wanted to focus on.

**[34:57]**

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**QL:** Great. And... So after graduation, what did you move on to doing? I know you started looking at a Master's degree.

**DN:** Oh yeah, that's one of them. I attended a couple courses in the Master degree program in Texas A&M. But I left after that. Then I went to Houston. I went to Houston after graduation and I continued my Master's degree with uhm... Phoenix University. But I decided, I mean I said no, because I was—I did not plan. I knew that I'm not going to work for somebody else. So I don't think that M.B.A. would help me much so... I decided not to continue.

**QL:** Yes. So how long were you moving around before you came back to Houston?

**DN:** I left in 1987 and came back in... '96. So how many years is that?

**QL:** That's nine years.

**DN:** Yeah, nine, ten years.

**QL:** Wow. So you went through... that sounds like almost ten locations within those ten years.

**DN:** Yeah, definitely, yeah.

**QL:** Wow. And what job did you get when you came back to Houston? What was the first one you transitioned into?

**DN:** Commercial real estate.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** I jumped right into commercial real estate. I worked for a very big company called Henry S. Miller. Commercial and property investment.

**QL:** Can you describe some of your duties when you were working there?

**DN:** Yeah, my duty is pretty much related to what I've done before: to help people to prepare business plan and identifying their prospect, prospected market target and identify the location that match, demographic that match the—the target market, facilitate the negotiations and coordination.

**QL:** And what... Was there a lot of the Asian—Vietnamese American population that came to work with you? Did you encounter them a lot during your time in working in commercial real estate?

**DN:** Oh yeah, yeah. You remember when I came back to Houston in 1996... in '96, the population—Vietnamese population was huge at that time so... So there's a lot of interactions, professionally and socially.

**QL:** It was a rather rapid expansion during those times.

**DN:** Oh yeah, yeah, big.

**QL:** How different did you feel the city from when you came back compared to when you left?

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**DN:** Uhm, Physically, not much. But emotionally and psychologically, it's totally different. I left as a minor without anything, you know, as a very... uhm... w-with not much. When I came back I had a college degree, and I had experience—business experience, and most importantly with an unshakable amount of confidence. Yeah. [Long pause] I saw a lot of opportunities in Houston.

**QL:** So, were the Vietnamese American community in the places that you've been in those 9 years, how were they different from those in the Houston area?

**DN:** From where?

**QL:** From the places that you moved to, during your nine years that you were in different locations?

**DN:** Oh yeah, I mean, much more concentrated here and we have more amen—ethnic Vietnamese amenities—amenities, such as churches, temples, supermarkets, restaurants and coffee shops and yeah.

**QL:** So there weren't as much things that were catering specifically to that community compared to Houston?

**DN:** Of course. Of course. Of course not. Because the bigger population, more demand in Houston.

**QL:** So after you worked with Henry S. Miller, what did you continue to do? How long—how long were you at Henry S. Miller?

**DN:** Henry S. Miller... few years. And then I—and then I progressed on to get my broker license. And I... get my own business called DQN. DQN stand for Danny Quoc Nguyen, you know?

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** But somebody make fun of us, they said 'đi kêu anh' DQN. [The phrase 'đi kêu anh' sounds like QDN phonetically and can have connotations of flirting in Vietnamese.] And then not long after that, a great opportunity presented to me, great opportunity.

**QL:** Yes.

[00:40:00]

**DN:** You know RE/MAX? RE/MAX is a huge national franchise. And as I was looking for a location, because when I make a transition to have my own business to be a broker, I operate on the second floor of my house. And we're doing pretty well and I mean, I still—and then I was looking for a location. And I found a building that was for sale but the condition was that I had to buy the RE/MAX franchise. So I bought the RE/MAX and we still had like a hundred associate and agents running all over the places. So I had that for a few years and, and after the expiration of the franchise agreement, I convert it to my own identity, Danny Nguyen Commercial.

**QL:** Yes. So you had to buy the business as well as the location?

**DN:** Yeah because it go with it, inseparable. But the point was that I was trying to establish my own identity. But I have to tell you that it was a great experience though. I've learned a lot from that franchise.



**QL:** Yes. And uh—

**DN:** ...operation.

**QL:** And where was that located?

**DN:** Hillcroft and Beechnut. Hillcroft and Beechnut.

**QL:** So that was where the first Danny Nguyen Commercial office was.

**DN:** Yeah, yeah. RE/MAX Commercial and yeah.

**QL:** Wonderful. And, so you recently moved to this location here on Bellaire?

**DN:** In 2008.

**QL:** Yes. And...

**DN:** [Whispers] Five years already.

**QL:** So how do you feel about the Vietnamese American community that's working within the commercial real estate field? Is it rather large community that's working with you or coming to you to look at commercial real estate?

**DN:** Yeah. Initially, my client base was largely from the Vietnamese community. But as I grow, as I grow, as I expanded myself into the mainstream, and you know, this, you know, this industry is very product driven, you know? If you have a location in a certain area, you attract a certain ethnic group. So it's not up to me to say 'oh, today I'm going to work with Vietnamese, tomorrow I work with Chinese.' So whatever the demand for that location is, you know that.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** So right, and then I make—now I have a lot of—I have a lot of non-Vietnamese clients as well. Yeah.

**QL:** So why the commercial real estate field? Rather than any other business oriented fields that you could have gone into?

**DN:** Uhm, I'm not ashamed to say that I want to be rich. And I never make excuses for it, you know? I came from a place, it was so damn poor, the poorest place on earth. And I was sick and tired of being poor. And the only reason you can help poor people is not to be poor. So I always had—I always have had that deep desire to be wealthy. Because I believe that, I mean, God created people equally. Why one person is so... extremely successful, living in like a ten thousand square feet mansion, and the other person living on the freeway? And then I believe that there is no one person on earth that is one thousand time more of anything than the other person... smarter. So because of that I'm driven, you know, so I always find what is it that helps me to create wealth.

**QL:** Yes.

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**DN:** But, but, but, but the key—listen to the key—the key is that I have to help people to cre—to make money, to become successful first before I get—I get compensated. So you know, now, every time that I drive by—by different places in the city I see a lot locations and a lot of building. I look at Marie, my wife, I said ‘Oh, remember it used to be nothing but vacant space. It’s now, you have a business. This used to be vacant land with grass on it. Now you have a building on it because of our effort and vision.’

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** And I love doing it.

**QL:** So was that desire to help other people was what pushed you into, uhm, going into election for the position in Missouri City?

**DN:** Yes. A desire to help people and a desire to make... a physical change in the city. Take for example, I mean, you are sitting right in the heart of the Chinatown, sometime people call it international district. Twenty years ago, if you had come, it used to be nothing, nothing. Ok, but because of the visions and determinations of brokers, developers, we turned this area into a, uh—into a town. And because of that, you—you increase a significant amount of tax base for the government. And of course, the moment that that shopping center is up, that restaurant is open—it’s created jobs for a lot of people. And then it helps to pay taxes; and it’s helped the dynamic of the city. So now you suddenly create your own city for yourself. So that’s how I get into politics, to improve the quality of life.

**QL:** Yes.

[45:25]

**DN:** Does that make sense?

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** Stop me if you don’t understand...

**QL:** Oh, don’t worry. And so what was the process of you starting, initiating that political, your political road, your political life?

**DN:** Well, I mean the... [Stammers]... the commercial real estate industry requires a lot of knowledge of how rules and regulations and permit and planning. And as I get further into investment and development and I had the opportunity to interact with government, and looking—and then looking how the government operated has—has really frustrated me. You know, seeing people, city council and mayor, people who never had any business background or business, telling us, people of business what do to. It’s bothered me. And it insulted my intelligence and get—as I get more into it I said ‘Wow, I can do it, I can do better job.’ I mean, the government cannot tell business what to do. Because being a business person, being creative is the most critical things. Because you have to get—be creative to be an entrepreneur. But government operate at different level, they are very bureaucratic. They have red tape, so it’s public. So the reason I get involved because I want to create a city that we can value and pro-development and giving opportunity for business people to prosper. And if business people prosper, the community will benefit. Does that make sense?

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**QL:** Yes. So how did you find that opportunity to run for election?

**DN:** A lot of people liked me. You know, I mean, being in the commercial estate... for—for 10 years, and you will be known. You know, the advantages that I had was I have signs everywhere. People say 'Danny, I see your signs everywhere.' And they knew that you are the catalyst, you are the pioneer effort to bring business to—We're broker, right? I mean vacant land. Hey, I have a great piece of land, I mean, you want to come and build. You convince people. You bring the buyer and seller together and then the building... is up and constructed. And then people like that. They like people who can help them to create jobs. And of course the more business that—that you have, the less tax base that the citizens have to bear the burden.

**QL:** Yes. What year was that that you ran for election?

**DN:** Uh... May of 2010.

**QL:** Yes. And so they were just doing the city council re-election during that time. Was that when you signed up?

**DN:** Yeah. Yeah, it was a very—very challenging battle 'cause I had three opponents that was born and live here. And, and I won in the election third round, 57 percent. Three of them combined had less votes than we did. So I was very grateful for that.

**QL:** And just for the record, this was for the position of City Councilmember...

**DN:** City Councilmember at Large.

**QL:** At Large.

**DN:** Usually people when they first started running, they pick one small area. But I was a little bit crazy—I went for the whole city.

**QL:** Yes, I—I wanted to ask you on that. That was a very ambitious jump, right into City Councilmember at Large for Missouri City.

**DN:** Right. That's a good question. I love the challenges. But, you know, city council, it would have taken much less effort because you have to focus only one... in one area. But at Large, I mean, you have to convince thousands of other people. But it's just the—the challenge. I—I want to be a voice for the whole city.

**QL:** And what were some of the challenges that you met during that election?

**DN:** Uh... Of course, the... the slanderings from my opponents. And... raising funds. Inexperience politics. I didn't know anything about politics. Matter of fact, I used to hate politics, [laughs] you know, we were at a place where we wouldn't, we'd never want to get in politics. But you have to remember, local politics is different. Local politics is get involved in helping to improve the quality of life. But—but I had a very strong message though. So I turn every negative into positive. The more people—I let people talk bad about me and all that, but I focus on the positive message. Never, never one time talk bad about my opponents. That is—that was the highlight.

**QL:** Yes. Do you remember any significant or special issues that were brought up or that you encountered from the community, your local community?

[50:33]

**DN:** Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, thank you for reminding me. Yes. They accused me for pro-communist because... because I get involved with the international business. And specifically, at one time, I received the delegation from Vietnam, the Ambassador of Vietnam and a group of delegation from Vietnam... came to Greater Houston Partnership and I was the president and the founder of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce. And I received an invitation, a call. You know, I had a close relationship with the Greater Houston Partnership. So they asked me to participate in the panel. [Whispers] That was tough decision.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** Man, I almost lost lead. I said, I mean... because you know the... the... lot of people who came here, they fled the communist so that anger they still have it. But I... I was thinking differently. I said, how much longer? How much longer we hold on to—I had an option whether I look back and was very angry about that, and then, being angry at some people I didn't even know, you know. So I decided to move forward. And so I de—I accepted that invitation to sit right next to the Ambassador in the panel. And that was a big, big turning point, big turning point in my life.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** I mean, I received all kinds of threat and oppositions and they protest in front of my building. They threat to burn my house. Uhm, and that carry—that consequence c-carry all the way till the election day. They brought that old flag, you know, that—that three stripes flag. And then they protest me, right on the election day. They gave me a lot of pressure. I mean, I'm talking about—of course, not everybody, it's only a small older group. They forced me to apologize. They said, if all you do is have to do just apologize, and then not, maybe we support you, and we... give you money. And I said, let get on radio. I get on the radio. They thought I'm going to apologize them officially. And on the radio, I said 'What was it that I apologize you about?' (Pause) That was my concision... my constitutional right. And especially when the American government had normalized relationship with Vietnam. And I, at that time, I was an elected official, I was an American citizen. So I don't want to work against the government. I mean, the United States had a normal relationship with Vietnam. And several highly elected officials went to Vietnam, to visit Vietnam, to encourage trade and I was the president of the Chamber of Commerce. Are you telling me that I don't do—why, why should I not do, do business with Vietnam? And the finally I said, if—you don't have to vote for me. That is the highlight about my—my election. A lot of Vietnamese people in America, Quynh, they rely on them. Người Việt vote cho người Việt. [Vietnamese people vote for Vietnamese people.]

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** Same fellow. I didn't—I didn't need that. No. If you—if you look, if you look at the voting record in Missouri City, less than ta—less than ten Vietnamese voted and then half of that were my family already. So, so, I mean, so...

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**QL:** All your brothers and sisters...

**DN:** Yes, of course. And the—But the point that I'm trying to make here is that I stick it to the end. I... I... I believe that doing business with Vietnam is a great thing and I'd continue to carry on that, uhm, that mission, uh, that vision.

**[54:25]**

**QL:** Great. So it seems like there were... was more support from the non-Vietnamese community rather than the Vietnamese—Vietnamese American community.

**DN:** It's not more than. All.

**QL:** All non-Vietnamese...

**DN:** Yeah, 99.99...

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** But it was a good thing though. You know, in Vietnamese they said 'Đem trung đi đánh xứ người.' [Bring your troops to fight on foreign land] [This means to face struggles in an unfamiliar environment.] You don't know your real talent. But I was so grateful that, Quynh, let me tell you why. Because had I depend on the Vietnamese community vote for me, that would automatically had created dependency. Because they voted for you, so whatever they said you have to listen to them. But now, I said, I do whatever I want. You know, I don't owe you anything, that's why I took the trip to Vietnam, I make the mission. I'm not afraid of those people. So in a way, being independent is a good thing.

**QL:** Yes. So it seems that in the Vietnamese American community, even in 2010, there was still a lot of resentment...

**DN:** Less and less and less and less. You saw that.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** Yeah, I remember before I returned [from his recent business trip] that I attended the... any... event organized by the Vietnam Consulate, you used to see a lot of protesters but now it's... rarely see it. They start changing. Changing. They—sooner or later people have to leave it behind. Just like the Jewish. You know how the German... Hitler...

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** If they had carried that anger, I mean they would—how long... how much longer are they going to be fighting with German? So I believe, I mean, I believe looking forward.

**QL:** Yes. So are there a lot of political—politicians or political leaders that are of Vietnamese origin here in Houston?

**DN:** There are three: One State Representative and one District F City Council in Houston.

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**QL:** And what are their names?

**DN:** Hubert Vo is the State Representative and Al Hoang is the Councilman District F. And then the... At Large of course is me. Yeah. And I'm so glad that we have three Vietnamese American, but we're in a different area. Yeah.

**QL:** Wonderful. So to bring the interview back a little bit to your family life...

**DN:** Ok.

**QL:** ... to your personal life. You're married now with two children.

**DN:** That's right.

**QL:** Uhm, what does your wife do in Houston?

**DN:** She used to work for an airline company. But as our business grew, I've been begging her to come back and help me. And she finally did. So now she help me with my operation.

**QL:** Yes. In your same company Danny Nguyen Commercial.

**DN:** Yes. Yeah.

**QL:** And how old are your children?

**DN:** Ah, six and seven. Six and seven.

**QL:** So in your household... in your household right now, do you still preserve your, for example your Vietnamese heritage or traditions?

**DN:** [Laughs] Very difficult, extremely difficult. You know that... You know I... go to work, leave the house early in the morning, didn't go—didn't come home until 6, 7. But fortunately, we send them to a school that teaches Vietnamese as a fully accredited curriculum. So basically, I mean, my children are being taught Vietnamese in school, in Stafford. And so I'm very grateful for that.

**QL:** That's wonderful.

**DN:** But it's so difficult to make them speak Vietnamese sometimes with you.

**QL:** So you're mostly speaking English at home?

**DN:** Yeah, sometimes I just gave up. I said, I mean [laughs] I tried, ok. But they try, you know.

**QL:** But when you were living with your parents, did your parents still preserve those Vietnamese traditions?

**DN:** Yeah.

**QL:** Enforce them? With you and your siblings?

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**DN:** Uh... I did not live with my family much in America. Pretty self... dependent. But while I was living with my aunt, I was strictly, very strictly... not forced, but encouraged to keep the [Inaudible] speak Vietnamese.

**QL:** Yes. What about other traditions? Like holidays or special celebrations?

**DN:** Oh yeah, we're very good at that. Vietnamese Lunar New Year, lunar festival and all that, yeah. Give me one second, ok? Take a break. Take a five minute break.

[Recording paused per interviewee's request.]

[Recording resumed at 00:59:08]

**QL:** Ok, so that—that's about your—that was about your family life. And uh... Are there any other organizations that you're currently involved with? At this time?

**DN:** Several, several. I'm involved in the Houston Association of Realtors, I sat on the political advisory and international advisory board. I don't know, what else... I serve on the International... International Relations Economic Development Chair for Missouri City. What else, uhm... I serve in the International Economic Development Council for Mayor Annise Parker in Houston. Of course, I'm the board of... well member of this building, Owner Association.

**QL:** The American First Bank building?

**DN:** Yes, yes. And a few more I couldn't remember. But pretty much related to the city.

**QL:** I also see here that you're a part of CCIM?

**DN:** Oh yeah.

**QL:** Yes. What is that organization? Can you elaborate?

**DN:** Yeah. CCIM is the highest designation and honor that a commercial real estate practitioner can have. It takes several transactions, multi-million dollars, proven transaction. And plus a person have to... has to take several courses and pass the courses. And finally take a full-day comprehensive exam. So that is like a... it signifies, it indicates that you're an expert in the industry. People call it a Ph.D., Doctorate in commercial real estate.

**QL:** Yes. And what does CCIM stand for?

**DN:** Certified Commercial Investment Member.

**QL:** Yes. And, in your resume, I noticed that you were involved with the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce—

**DN:** Oh yeah, yeah, yeah...

**QL:** The Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce.

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**DN:** Thank you for reminding me. I'm currently the board chair. Remember I shared with you earlier? I was one of the co-founders of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce. And I had served as the president. And then when my term expire, we voted a new president and she's currently the president of the Chamber of Commerce.

**QL:** Yes, Ms. Bryant.

**DN:** Victoria. Victoria Bryant. Dr. Victoria Bryant.

**QL:** Yes.

**DN:** You met her, yeah?

**QL:** Yes, I have. Great, so how is the operation of the Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce?

**DN:** Yeah, as a matter of fact, we operate in a non-funded basis. So pretty much just self-sufficient. And as you know we all have a full-time responsibility, not only in—in my private job, but it's [stammers] at a the city. And so does—so is she. So basically it's like a volunteer thing.

**QL:** So purely volunteer position—

**DN:** But—but we have a very focus vision. Our vision is not having a fancy office, a fancy title, a fancy—employee. But we create a forum where business people be the mainstream. Non-Vietnamese and Vietnamese community business coming together. And we've been very successful doing that. We create luncheon, gala, workshop... so the mainstream business people and the Vietnamese business community meet and exchange business card and... and uh... make deals.

**QL:** Great. Wonderful. So is there anything else that you'd like to tell us?

**DN:** I think you ask me—you have asked me plenty of questions already. [Laughs] I'm so glad I still remember that from the top of my head. And that's good, yeah.

**QL:** Well thank you very much for allowing us to interview you today. And this interview will be used in, again, in Rice University's research database.

**[1:03:13]**

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