

Houston Asian American Archive

Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Tammy Do

Interviewer: Quynh Le

Date of Interview: March 7, 2013

Transcribed by: Quynh Le

Edited by: Priscilla Li (5/9/2017)

Audio Track Time: 00:50:19

Background:

Tammy Do was born in 1989 in Saigon (now officially known as Ho Chi Minh City), Vietnam. Her father worked for the military of South Vietnam and her mother was a stay-at-home mother. She and her family moved to San Jose, U.S. in 1992 and stayed with her paternal grandmother who immigrated earlier. In 1998, her family moved to Houston to help out with a family business owned by her aunt. They lived with her father's older brother in the Bellaire area of Houston. She attended Mission Glen Elementary, Hodges Bend Middle School, and George Bush High School. She held her first job as a hostess at Le Madeleine restaurant when she was 17. She attended University of Houston, entering as a pre-dental student, later declaring a Marketing major and Risk Management & Insurance minor. She currently works as a Financial Advisor at Mass Mutual Financial Group. She is also the Vice President of the Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce in Houston.

Setting:

The interview centers on the areas of labor and social perception to develop a history around her childhood experiences, family life and social interactions.

The interview was conducted in Study Room 204, Fondren Library at Rice University in Houston. The interview lasted 50 minutes. She shared stories of her childhood, her growing up, accounts of life in Houston and post-war Vietnam, and how her family has been affected by the changes.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

QL	Quynh Le
TD	Tammy Do
—	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 oral history interview with Ms. Tammy Do at Rice University on March 7th, 2013. This interview was conducted by Quynh Le for the Houston Asian American Archive at Rice University for the Woodson Research Center. So, thank you for joining us today. Uhm, so, to begin our interview, why don't

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you tell me a little bit about yourself? Uhm, please describe a little bit about your childhood or your hometown in Vietnam.

TD: Okay, um I was born in Saigon, Vietnam. And I came here when I was about 4 or 5 years old. I don't remember much of my time there. My dad was in the, uhm... he was a general in the military. And... I believe that's how we got over here after the war, because he has his status within the—the army. Um, as far as Vietnam there is not as much I can remember, I just know that... most of my family lived over there. Um, and then after the war we moved to San Jose to live with some family members over here.

QL: Okay, so your—I understand that your dad was a general in the military. What did your mom do?

TD: Uhm... I think she stayed at home and took care of us.

QL: Uhm, and you have 2 sisters?

TD: Yes.

QL: Uh are you the middle child...?

TD: I'm the middle child.

QL: Yeah, how old are your sisters?

TD: My older one, she's 29. She's in Florida for P.A. school right now. Physical Assistance School. And my younger sister is 23, she lives in Dallas and she's going to, uhm, Texas Woman's University.

QL: Great, um so how was your relationship as siblings when you were growing up?

TD: Uhm... I guess we're close as a family. One thing I do start discovering throughout the years is within the Asia community we're not very self-expressed. Uhm, I guess like feeling-wise, that's—

QL: Your family in particular or...?

TD: Yeah, though we say, you know, we're always there for each other... In my family, we're not very self-expressed until recently. Um and there's—I think the biggest breakthrough for me was, within the Asia community, you know there's always high expectation for us to become, uhm, doctors, lawyers, dental. My breakthrough was in sophomore year when I decided to change my major from—I did pre-dental for two years then I switched over and I went to go study abroad, uhm, for two semesters. And I came back and I switched to business. I think that broke me away from, I guess, all the pressure within the culture. Uhm, so, that was that.

QL: Yeah, I do understand and I do feel that sometimes there's a barrier of expression, uhm, within certain families due to like the culture in Vietnam. Why do you think that is?

TD: Uhm, I think there's a lot of expectations, because they're going to provide everything while we're young and then expect us to be their retirement. Uhm, that's how my point of view—that's how it's always occurred to me. And... I'm sure they push us to be successful one way or another. It's just, they're very... that mentality doesn't really change for them. You know you be successful in anything you do, doesn't necessarily be in the health field or one of those high status careers.

QL: Yes, I understand. Um so, you don't remember much about Saigon when you were growing up?

TD: I remember my dad was in prison, uhm, for quite a while, maybe 6 to 8 years. And we, I was sent to *đườn̄i qūê* (the countryside) to live with my grandmother for a couple of years—

QL: I'm sorry, where?

TD: *Quê* (the countryside)? [She is unsure if it is the correct word.]

QL: *Huế* (Hue city, Vietnam)?

TD: It's not *Huế*, it's *dưới quê* or the countryside. I don't know what you call that...

QL: Oh yeah, the countryside. Yes.

TD: So I lived there for a couple years. That's where my grandmother lives, my mom's grandmother. There were family for a couple years and then we moved back to Saigon. And then my dad got out of jail, he—we were able to come to the U.S.

QL: So, uhm, what was the time frame that your dad was in prison?

TD: I think it was 6 to 8 years, around that time, it's for a while. Of course, that's only what I hear through my parents. Uhm... And I remember visiting him once or twice, but it's very vague of what happened in Vietnam.

QL: Yes. So your family did—was quite impacted by the remnants of the war um in that aspect.

TD: Oh yes, absolutely. And my dad's brother, he went to war and he never came back. Um I think those were the only two in our family went to war in Vietnam. In my dad's family there were 12 kids. So, he went to law school for a couple years and then he had to leave to go to the military, to go to war.

QL: So, uh that was the circumstances of your family's decision to come to the U.S., right?

TD: Yes.

QL: Do you remember much of the experience? Uhm, the process of moving itself?

TD: Uhm, not much, we just packed everything and left.

QL: Was it really rushed? Did you have to decide very quickly to move? Um because I know some families decided to move just within 1 or 2 days, everything was packed up and they were gone. Um do you remember anything in your family's case?

TD: Uhm. No, I'm sure we left whenever we can.

QL: Right, so did you have to settle in any intermediate location before you went to San Jose?

TD: ... I think we might have 'cause I got my, my shots... Uhm... I think, that one I don't remember...[laughs]

QL: That's fine. Just whatever you can remember of your experience is wonderful. Uhm, so, you arrived in San Jose in '92, right?

TD: Yeah.

QL: And, what was your first impression of that city?

TD: It was very big. [laughs] And I just remember living with my grandmother at that time, my dad's side, 'cause she came to the U.S. earlier.

QL: Oh...

TD: And we lived with them for a couple of years and my... my parents went to go do nails. And that's how they supported us throughout the years.

QL: Do your parents still work um at nail salons or...?

TD: Yeah, my dad owns a salon now, and my mom just works at the salon and he just manages it.

QL: So your whole family, um that includes your parents and your two sisters, came to the States all at the same time?

TD: Yes.

QL: Were there... So when you first moved to San Jose, were there any barriers? Language-wise or social?

TD: Oh absolutely. [laughs] There was. I remember I had to take ESL [English as a Second Language] during school. I thought that was pretty awesome 'cause I get called out of class. But there were language barriers, like talking to teachers, asking them questions. I didn't really understand much. So that's that and at home we speak Vietnamese with each other. I'm very fluent in Vietnamese, I just don't know how to read or write.

QL: Right, 'cause you moved right before you started primary school in Vietnam.

TD: Yeah.

QL: Uh were there any... Did you experience any cultural or social barriers with the community there?

TD: Uhm, I just remember growing up being very awkward and shy.

QL: So no discriminations or challenges around that time?

TD: No, there's actually a lot of Vietnamese within the community.

QL: So how did you find their support um with your family just moving in the area?

TD: It was just family around us, and everyone supporting each other. And going through school there were eight other Vietnamese or other Asians there.

QL: So I understand your grandmother moved to the United States before your family did. Was she here alone or who did she come with?

TD: My aunt and my uncle came here first.

QL: On your father's side?

TD: Dad's side, yes. Everyone from my mom's side is still back in Vietnam.

QL: So where... where do they live now?

TD: Um we have a couple of relatives in California, still San Jose and there's couple of sisters over here in Houston and one's in Hawaii.

QL: Great. Go ahead.

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[She stopped for a drink of water.]

QL: So did your whole family move to Houston in '89?

TD: Uhm, I believe that was like in 1998.

QL: '98, I'm sorry.

TD: Yeah, our whole family moved to Houston. My aunt was over here and she told us to come over here. She opened up a business; she wanted my dad's support. And so we came over here in '98 and we lived with my dad's older brother.

QL: Oh, so you had family in California as well as Texas?

TD: Yes.

QL: So, uhm, your family decided to move to Houston due to business opportunities, right?

TD: Yes.

QL: So which area of Houston did you family settle in when you first moved here?

TD: It was Houston. We've lived here since.

QL: Oh, so the same house since?

TD: Uhm, no, it's a different house. It's more towards the Alief area.

QL: Okay. And what was the neighborhood like when you first came here?

TD: Uhm... It was... a more smaller neighborhood... Um what do you... what do you mean?

QL: Oh, just general life and how you felt living in the area? Was it comfortable? Did you feel a sense of security? Or any difficulties in moving in or getting used to the area?

TD: Uhm, no, everything was really close. I walked to school; it was only a couple blocks down from the house. And I remember there was a park in front of our house so I was always there. And my then cousins would always come and my aunt would babysit us.

QL: How was the quality of life in Houston compared to San Jose?

TD: I guess when I grew up older, well at that point I was older than California. But it was more family. Like I know our whole family lived in one room when I first came over here. Uhm... It was quite a struggle I believe and my parents always fight about money.

QL: [Inaudible] So was it a good transition? Or was it difficult to move here—to move to Houston from San Jose?

TD: Um I'd say it'd be about the same experience. Over here it's more of a struggle 'cause less family support. 'Cause my grandmother would take care of us back there and now it's my aunt and uncle who's supporting us over here.

QL: So was it because that you lived so close to each other, in the same—your whole family in the same room, was it then that you started developing more of a connection to your family, or like improving on your

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expression of yourself? Or was it still...?

TD: It was still very—I guess it was still very suppressed. As far as goals and dreams, what I want to be when I grow up. [Laughs]

QL: I sometimes have the same problem with my parents. Um I guess it's a cultural thing depending on what Vietnamese parents expect of their children. So in Houston, what school did your parents—oh I mean, your siblings go to? You and your siblings. Do you remember?

TD: You want like elementary? Middle school?

QL: Yeah, any names.

TD: When we were in elementary school, we went to Boone Elementary. And middle school... we moved here to our new house. No actually, I moved here to the new house and we went to Mission Glen. I went to Boon Elementary till second grade, and I moved here from second grade. So, Mission Glen Elementary... and then Hodges Bend Middle School... and... George Bush High School.

QL: Great. Um, so in the neighborhood surrounding the area you lived in Houston, was there a greater Vietnamese community?

TD: Yeah, we lived pretty close to Bellaire.

QL: Okay. Were they supportive of you moving there? Did any families help you out? Just in the sense of social interactions.

TD: Yeah, family helped out, as far as like job-wise, provided us jobs and eventually my dad- or my parents worked up to own his own business. And that's one of the reasons why we moved... over here. 'Cause we did live in an apartment for a year or two when me moved out of my aunt's house. And then we moved to a house... this house right now that I'm living at.

QL: Yes. Uh do you still live with your parents right now?

TD: Yes. And I'm about to move out next month. Uhm... Closer to work.

QL: Great, thank you. So what were some challenges or hardships that you and your family in general face in Houston?

TD: I guess language barrier for one. For them being in the nail business or hair business... uhm... they just know how to work and communicating with clients or customers is very hard for them. They just work and go home. And that's how they supported us and raised us. Language barrier was a struggle for them.

QL: Yes, um but, so... but social-wise, um the Vietnamese community around them... I feel like sometimes the nail or hair business in the Bellaire area is a very close-knit community.

TD: Yeah everyone knows each other most of the time. But they still have competition and back and forth. But it's nail people know nail people, hair people know hair people.

QL: So it's that give-and-take within that community.

TD: Yeah.

QL: Yes. Um so you had your first job when you were 17, right?

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TD: Yes.

QL: And just for the record, where did you work?

TD: Le Madeleine.

QL: Le Madeleine. How did you find... How did you find that job?

TD: Oh, just looking online to find a place to interview. It was my first job so I just wanted a place that pays.

QL: How long did you work there?

TD: About 6 months.

QL: So... Was that during summer or college?

TD: It was during... Um I think during high school, when I was 17. I worked for 6 months and I turned 18. And then I got a server job, 'cause you need to be 18.

QL: Alright, uh then you went on to college right after high school?

TD: Yes.

QL: What college did you go to?

TD: University of Houston.

QL: Um so working at... So that job during... at Le Madeleine, was it to support your family financials?

TD: No it was just for me, my freedom, having money to do my own stuff. 'Cause for them, if they provided everything a roof, or a house... uhm, allowances, uh there's not much there that I can do. I do want to raise my own money and buy my own stuff. It's that point of life or (?) high school.

QL: So... Are there family or relatives in Vietnam that your family is currently supporting?

TD: Yes, my mom's family. She sends money back every month or so, to help support my grandmother.

QL: Um, and since then has your family sponsored any family members to move to the United States?

TD: We tried for my mom's sister's daughter. But she wasn't able to come over.

QL: So your cousin?

TD: Yeah.

QL: Um, great. Oh do you know why she wasn't able to come?

TD: Not really clear. I know she wants to come here for school. Um and, oh yeah, I believe she took a test and she didn't pass to come over here, something along those lines. But I know that we tried to sponsor her to come over but she wasn't able to.

QL: So she's still currently studying or working in Vietnam?

TD: Yes.

QL: Uh so, regarding your university experience, um how did you find University of Houston?

TD: Um I just applied... 'cause University of Houston gave me some scholarship and financial aid to go. And it was between St. Thomas and University of Houston. So University of Houston gave me more um scholarships and money to go there. So I ended up going there to save money.

QL: Yes. Um so uh you said you switched your major during sophomore year. Do you remember why, specifically, why you decided to switch?

TD: Oh yeah, that turning point of my life. I remember um my parents were always comparing me to my cousin and we were both doing pre-dental for 2 years. And I remember the time when I failed organic chemistry, that I took that pretty hard. I was really embarrassed and ashamed like 'Oh, my parents are going to think I'm a failure.' And at that point, I knew I didn't want to do... I didn't enjoy doing dental. And um I gave myself a choice: either I applied for the study abroad program—I always knew I wanted to travel, and-or stick with dental. And so, I applied to all the scholarships that were available and I ended up getting about 75% of it paid for because there's no way my parents could afford that trip. And I end up going.

QL: Uh where did you end up going?

TD: It was a program called 'Semester at Sea' so we sailed around the world for 3 months. And I covered about 10 countries when I went, it's all over Europe and Egypt.

QL: Wow. Um so what was that experience like? What did you study?

TD: I studied business marketing. Uhm, and it was just an amazing experience, just being really free and getting me the opportunity to discover myself and what I really want in life. And it's just a whole new freedom, not being suppressed. Um and I ended up going again summer 2010. And that one I went by myself. Like the first one I was with 2 friends and I did find myself attached to them or trying to stick around them. But, I never really broke free and just really have the freedom to do whatever I want. The second time I made the decision just to go by myself. And... that was definitely the best experience ever.

QL: Did that help in your discovery of self-expression? To push things along?

TD: Yeah. I really discovered, like, yeah, you do what you love and the money will come. [laughs]

QL: Eventually, yes. So why did you choose to go into pre-dental in the first place?

TD: Just made a lot of money. And that's what I heard a lot from my parents, you know, 'do something that makes you a lot of money, be a doctor, be that.' And I knew it was good. And it's just the schooling I didn't really enjoy at all. The things we were learning, I didn't want it. And always being compared and so much competition, and I was pretty competitive. Uhm, I graduated top 5% in high school. And so when I failed organic chemistry, I took that pretty hard, 'cause I've never failed anything before, much a class.

QL: So I guess it was um self-imposed expectations from your parents?

TD: Oh yeah. Um I knew it was my responsibility to take care of them when they're older. It's just that that's not the path I want to go down.

QL: Yes, uh so did you have any other majors besides the pre-dental requirement?

TD: Uhm, I was going towards biology, declaring my major for biology. But I ended up switching to business. Cause the first 2 years I took a bunch of um health classes and pre-reqs for the pre-dental. And then when I declared my major I declared for Business.

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QL: Uhm, great. So after- so you switch to a business... business major and your minor is...?

TD: Risk management and insurance. And Asian Studies.

QL: So did you... Asian Studies, wow.

TD: Yeah, actually European and Asian Studies because my study abroad class, it counted as a major—a minor so I just took the classes.

QL: Great. Did you get your—So was your currently job the one you got right after graduation?

TD: I got it when I was still in school. So they recruited me in my last semester there. It was in financial planning. When I first started, it was quite a struggle because it's basically owning your own business, building up your own practice, and I always had that mentality that, oh no one's going to really want to talk about money, it's uncomfortable. It's like a voodoo subject. And I really came to discover through my experience, like, really helping people stress less about money and really pursuing their dreams, because money is a core of why people fight. Or... there's a lot of problems surrounding money. And if you know how to save more effectively, you can spend less time stressing about it.

QL: And just for the record, which company do you currently work at?

TD: Mass Mutual Financial.

QL: Yes. Um so, when you first started working there, what was the entry salary... entry-level did you...?

TD: It was strictly commission and bonus on top of that. So whatever client you acquire, whatever asset you acquire, you get that plus bonus.

QL: Do you remember average how much you made?

TD: It depends on case sizes. So there's cases I made about \$9,000 per one client, and small cases about couple hundred a client. So it really fluctuates a lot and depends on how you acquire clients. And with that job really just got me to go out and just really network and be- putting myself out there, being around people and getting to know people.

QL: Great. Um was it... a really jam-packed schedule? Was it very busy work?

TD: It all depends on how much, like, people you're meeting. And you create your own schedule. We do have mandatory meetings we need to go at least three times a week in the morning and team meetings. And they really coach you around, you know. What's the process? Product training... And they're constantly training us on new materials, because within the investment world there's constantly changing rules with the government, the IRS and the tax laws. So you're constantly keeping up to date with that.

QL: Yes. And how were your clients? How were your clients? Were they... um I understand they're all in business. Do you remember what fields they were usually in?

TD: Majority of my clients when I first started off was my network of family and friends. And through that I build through referrals, just word of mouth. And right now I'm very involved with the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce [Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce], the vice president of that. I'm just really getting to know people and really getting my name out there and using them—using me as—be a resource to them. And with that I build my practice of acquiring clients. Um but personally for me I'm specializing in nurses and that's why I really enjoy helping nurses. I think they're very caring people and within the health field there's not very much knowledge about financials. Um, they're not very educated in that part. They're very good at what they do health-wise and helping others. But when it comes to financials, they're very

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unaware of their options.

QL: And uh a little bit more a delicate topic, did you experience any interactions, or any unexpected interactions due the fact that you were Vietnamese, coming from your clients?

TD: No. I think the only thing that keeps my no agreement staying in my head is just that I'm too young, like, I don't know enough. And that has gotten in my head that first year I was in there 'cause I feel like, oh, you know, 'Why are they going to pick me? I'm so young.' Um but throughout the years, with the more experience I've gotten, it's gotten a lot better.

QL: Yes. Experience is everything in that field. Um so, is there a significant Vietnamese American community within your field of work?

TD: One more time?

QL: Is there a significant Vietnamese American community in your company or your field of work?

TD: No, not at all. At my firm, I'm going on my third year. And there's only about probably 3, 3 or four within the whole firm. The firm has about over 200, uhm, advisors. And yeah, actually no Vietnamese people don't... Within the company Mass Mutual itself there's not a lot of Vietnamese people. But I know within other insurance companies, like State Farm or All State, they're very condensed in the Bellaire market.

QL: Yes, I do find that they are. I've met a lot of them actually.

TD: [laughs]

QL: So when you begin working with the Vietnamese [American] Chamber of Commerce?

TD: It was last year. Um I was introduced to the chamber by Victoria's brother, um the president of the Vietnamese Chamber. He was actually a client of mine and he said, 'You know, Tammy, if you want to get your name out there you should meet my sister. She's the president of the Vietnamese Chamber.' So I went um... I went to a couple meetings, helped out a couple events and I really took on the responsibility, like, 'Victoria, like, I really want to be involved in the community. Like, what can I do to support you? What can I do to help?' And one of my biggest advantage, or what my strong point is, or my strong area is really recruiting people. 'Cause when I speak with conviction, I can really enroll people into a conversation, getting them, like the importance of the Chamber, how it helps other businesses. You know, starting out a business is very tough. And having support within the community, that's what people need, especially within the Vietnamese community 'cause very rarely, I believe, they ask for help.

QL: Um do you find that- in the Vietnamese community that were coming to work with you and with VACC, uhm, did you find that there were a lot of language barriers?

TD: Uhm, not much. They're more Americanized Vietnamese. We're really trying to, you know, get more involved within the non-speaking Vietnamese community. Getting them out and about and just really networking.

QL: Yes 'cause I feel they would be very tight- tight-knitted and very constricted.

TD: Yeah, and stick to one another and just within the community. Um yeah, be more self-expressed.

QL: Yes. So, what position did you enter in when you began working with VACC?

TD: Actually [laughs] I was just a member. I went to couple of events and at that point, Victoria, the vice

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president... um she wasn't really taking on the responsibility as a vice president. And I really stepped in, 'Victoria, this is what I... you know, this is what I'm committed to. This is what I can do. And um you know, what is there I can do to support you?' And um she actually gave me the position of vice president. And I took on that responsibility and just really helped her grow the chamber because, yeah, we have to hold each other accountable in what we want, what we're committed to. And for me and her, I think we make a very powerful team.

QL: Um so when did you get promoted to your current position as vice president?

TD: It was last June.

QL: Great. And how did you find the newly-found responsibilities?

TD: Uhm, I don't know. For me, I never thought myself as a leader within the Vietnamese community of all places. Because I was very... I know I'm very Americanized and not very... comfortable around the older Vietnamese, um just because the language barrier. I'm not very... it's a different mentality when I talk to older Vietnamese people. Um and so taking on the responsibility being very involved in the Vietnamese community, I took that on and just really getting to know them and just really talking to them. At the end of the day we all have... I mean, the majority has the same meaning, everyone needs support. And coming from that I was able to connect with them.

QL: Yes. And how did you find that—How did that change your connection to the Vietnamese community here in Houston?

TD: Just being more involved. Before I was very to-myself or go to young Amer—young events. 'Cause I do a lot of social events within the young professional community, um but never too much in the Vietnamese community at all. And so with the Vietnamese Chamber, I really, you know, put me out there in the Vietnamese community, being a voice for them.

QL: Yes. Um are there any current projects to work with the community that the VACC is holding?

TD: We are. We have um a large event we started last year, it was our first year. It's called *Women of Prestige*, so it's recognizing ten most influential women in the Vietnamese community. And we got Christine Ha, um she's the blind chef winner. We got her to come out and recognized her as one of the top 10. And a sergeant in the police academy that was a woman. Just recognizing ten influential women within the community. And they brought their friends and family out, and just really getting to know one another and being more involved in the community. 'Cause it's not often that women, especially in the Vietnamese community, get recognized.

QL: Yes.

TD: So we're gonna host that every year. So this year we're planning for the next one. Probably in October or November.

QL: Yes. Uh did you get to witness their interaction with the community? And you know, just like, their place... Socially, or in the family, how were their interactions?

TD: I guess, they were very proud because not often they get acknowledged for what they've done. And they're kind of in the background. People don't really acknowledge them for that. And just really putting them out there, and being... acknowledging them, that's very fulfilling. Um yeah, and I think, I think people need to be acknowledged more for what they've done for the community.

QL: Yes. Especially empowering women so that they would step out more into the community. Did you feel like that reflected onto you?

TD: Oh yeah, definitely. I know that we as women have power in what we need to say and do. Um and just throughout the chamber it really gave me a voice. Anything I want, I can create.

QL: Great. Um so, you said um you were really interested in working especially with nurses and in the hospital fields to improve their financial situations or management. Um how did you become engaged in working at the um Solari Hospice?

TD: Um that was for personal preference 'cause I was very close to my grandmother. And when she passed away I was very devastated. And I knew I always had a love for the elderly, like, they make my heart melt every time I'm around them. And it's just one of my passions, the elderly, the senior, because, you know, they're kind of forgotten in the background. And originally I wanted to volunteer at a nursing home, I was looking for that. But I came across the hospice, they said they need people to really... they need more volunteers 'cause there's not enough. And so I took on that opportunity first. And it was definitely an emotional experience. Uhm, are you familiar with hospice work?

QL: Somewhat. But could you elaborate on that?

TD: Hospice is when—they get put into a hospice when they're about to die. And so their time frame is very short. Um and for me, that was very emotionally hard because I haven't been around a lot of people that passed away. But for having their last couple months of living, having someone to talk to and sharing each other is very fulfilling. And that really got me to be fulfilled in just what I do in volunteering. But after three months it just took an emotional toll on me. So I had to stop. Um but that's one of my passions, and my other passion is to travel and really—I'm very fortunate at a young age I get to travel. Right now I'm 25, and I've been to 24 countries.

QL: Wow.

TD: And that's one of my passions just really experience the world and, like, what's really out there. And so right now, I didn't put it on there but I'm in the process of starting up a foundation to really connect the elderly and travelling together, and let them fulfill their travel dreams. 'Cause people who are older really don't think they have the opportunity anymore. So that's the project I'm taking on right now.

QL: Do you know when it's going to launch? Do you have any plans yet?

TD: Uhm, I'm talking to lawyers and I'm coming up with a business plan for it. Um but, you know, it has to start somewhere. I can really image myself in five years looking back, this is when it all started.

QL: So for the record, when did you work with the Solari Hospice?

TD: I think it was around 2011? A year and a half ago.

QL: And you worked there for three months?

TD: Yeah, well I volunteered with them. It was only a day or two a week I'd come help.

QL: I can imagine that can be extremely emotional.

TD: Yeah, it is. It's fun just to be there with them. Just to be present for them. Um but it's very emotional.

QL: Were there a lot of Vietnamese Americans senior citizens there?

TD: No. The first patient I had, it was at his house. And so, I would come to his house and just sit there, you know, so his, his daughter can actually go to work, or run errands without having to worry when the nurse is

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not there. And just really sitting there, talking to him and watching TV with him, just someone being there.

QL: As company...

TD: Yeah, keeping him company. And it was pretty bad to the point where it's really hard for him to speak, very hard for him... move around. Um so he's just laying in one place.

QL: And you also had the project you worked on for Habitat for Humanity. That was during your study abroad in Ghana right?

TD: Mm-hmm.

QL: Can you elaborate on that experience?

TD: It was only a three-day thing. We went as one of the trips. And we went to the outside and outskirts and really helped put together a team to build houses for family that doesn't have houses. So we build a house for a family of four. Just carrying stones back and forth, and building the foundation for the house; um that was a short project, but it was very fun.

QL: Do you feel like you want to continue something like that here in Houston?

TD: As far as that aspect, personally, not for me. I know I want to focus on the senior citizen and the foundation.

QL: Yes. And how do you feel like your volunteering efforts have helped you connect more with the Vietnamese American community?

TD: Um as far as within the chamber-wise, that one is, you know we don't get paid for it, it's all volunteered work. Uhm... it's just really being out there and just... being out there and meeting them. I think that's the first step for me. And really finding out you know what is it they need help or support with. Because people, everyone need support, they're just too afraid to ask.

QL: Do you... Um so do you think they're still a lot of challenges the newer generations of Vietnamese migrants that are coming here, especially to Houston, do you feel like there are a lot more challenges they have to face?

TD: Challenges-wise, just the language barrier, I feel that's the most one. Um and especially if they want to start a career or business, they're going to have to know English. So language-barrier's the main one. And I really want the Vietnamese community to break out of that mentality of really suppressing their kids because they lose a lot of power in that, like, their identity, and what the kids—the children really want to do. Um so just being a voice for the Vietnamese community, like, you can do anything you want and create anything you want.

QL: So that brings me back a little bit to your family. Do you—Does your family still keep cultural aspects of Vietnam? Any traditions?

TD: Uhm, they do the *nhang* (incense) stuff, incense for my grandmother. We have a table for her, a room for her and my grandfather. We do *Tết* (Vietnamese Lunar New Year) every year, and we do the Lunar New Year. The Vietnamese holidays, we still keep up with that. Other than that, yeah, we just speak Vietnamese at home. And I just know the Vietnamese tradition and my mom goes to fortune-tellers. [laughs] She's very superstitious on those kind of stuff. Yeah, that's that.

QL: Did they... When you were growing up, did they really enforce that into you?

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TD: Like religion-wise?

QL: Yes.

TD: My mom is... how do you say *Phật* (Buddha) in American?

QL: Almost like a... Zen Buddhism?

TD: Yeah, my mom's Buddhist, my dad's Catholic. So I go to church. I'm not very involved with Buddhism.

QL: Um so were you and your siblings, you guys got a chance to choose which religion you followed?

TD: Majority of us were Catholic 'cause my dad would take us to church and we would take Sunday school. Um and then we got confirmation, went through that. But throughout the years, we kind of faded away, not going to church as much. My mom started going to church with my dad, but she still believes in both religions, just really going to church to help support my dad.

QL: How about... I would think there would be a lot of the Vietnamese community around the temples and Buddhist worship temples. Did you feel—when you were going to church, was there um a large um community of Vietnamese Americans?

TD: Yeah, Sunday school there were. I went to Sunday school and Vietnamese class, there were. And it's a large—it was a Vietnamese church. And so there's a lot of Vietnamese. Yeah, that's- that's where a lot of Vietnamese meet.

QL: So the sermons and services were in Vietnamese?

TD: Yeah.

QL: Oh wow.

[The recorder fell off the table. The resulting sound was cut out of the recording after the interview.]

QL: So going back to your family experience. I wanted to ask you to elaborate a little more on your father's experience in Vietnam, um how he was involved with the military and the war.

TD: Mm-hmm. He would always share stories with me about, you know, he- this one time he was just laying in the field with this group of guys and they got invaded. And it's a group about ten of them. And everyone died except him. And you know, he was telling me stories about how he almost died three times. And it's just very fortunate he was able to make it through the war. And just I really did ask him 'Have you really ever killed anybody?' 'How did that... how did you respond to things like that?' Um he did share a story with me how he would capture um the other side and he would tell them to kneel down, you know, 'I'm going to count to ten, you're going to run off and we won't shoot you if you don't look back.' But that's just the mentality... just really to tell them, so that he doesn't have to shoot them at point blank. But when they do run off, they do kill the other side, the other people. But just you know being the source of that, taking someone else's life, I'm sure has a huge impact on him. Um and he did it for his country, which I totally respect him for that. There's a lot of hardship he went through and I really got to understand that he wanted to... he wanted to finish law school but he didn't have the opportunity because of the war.

QL: Uh do you know how early, or at what age your father became involved in the military?

TD: Uhm, I know it was very young, around 18 or 19?

QL: So during school?

TD: Yeah, definitely during school.

QL: So he began law school and then...

TD: I know he went to... Two years in law school and he had to drop out. I think it was like... I don't know. I'm not really sure how that works... Um but I know he started very young... And so that's what he tells me.

QL: Yes. Um has your father ever told you how or why he chose which side of the military to side with?

TD: Well, we're always on the South. And... that's how we were raised, that's how we were. That's how he was raised and um... he got to fight for his side. He didn't really believe what they have to say. He didn't really, I'm not sure, there's conflict in politics and all that...

QL: Propaganda...

TD: He didn't really agree with that.

QL: Um so your entire... his entire family was in agreement with this? So I understand it was um a very sensitive subject for a lot of families, especially in Southern Vietnam at the time. How does your father feel about that now?

TD: Uhm... Definitely thought it was an experience, you know, fighting for his country, that's his duty. And when it comes to talking to him about, you know, during the war and what happened, and he did share about his struggles when he was in jail. Um you know, what he had to eat, or what they put him through. I'm very sure that was very hard for him. And the sacrifice he has to make for the war. But at the end of the day everything came out right, like he didn't die, he came back to his family. His family really thought he was dead for a couple of years. And they would you know put out a plate for him at dinner, telling him to come home, like, his soul to come home. We share stories about that and one day he actually came home. And so, they really thought he was dead for one point of his life. And just being away in jail, being in prison, I'm sure that's a very long experience, a torturing experience for him. Um but we were very fortunate to come to the U.S., and really, we do have it a lot better over here. Um and yeah, we don't take that for granted.

QL: So it was the uh U.S. government's connection efforts to bring your family to the States?

TD: Yeah.

QL: So they contacted your family or...?

TD: I'm not sure how that works. I just know my dad said he got connections to the government to get us over here. And that was one of, I guess, one of the leeways for us to come over. We have an advantage over the other people.

QL: Rather than just applying or...

TD: Going on a boat. I'm not sure how that works.

QL: Or refugee status.

TD: Yeah.

QL: Great. So is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience?

TD: Um I do. Ever since I started work in the financial planning firm and just really learning how to build up my practice, my business and just really network with people. At the end of the day it's not what you know, it's who you know. And I really learned how to become a leader. And so through study abroad I really got access to freedom and self-discovery. And I took this other program, a leadership program, and through that I got access to power and really understanding how powerful one person can be. And I was just coming back from a funeral and, you know, it really hit me, I got really present to, at the end of the day who you're being with others lives through their words and the impact you make on other people's lives, because you're just laying there, it's just a body. It doesn't mean anything. And I got really present to that, like, I'm young you know life- don't take life for granted, life is short. But living a fulfilling life and really having an impact on people, that's what lives on. And that's what I really got out of that. So I know I'm young but there's a lot of things I want to accomplish and making a difference in people's lives. Um and I really got access to that through the leadership program I took. It's about seven months long, and yeah the whole path of transformation, just going through that. I was at the quarter life crisis.

QL: Yes, so do you have any projects that you're looking forward to?

TD: Um just starting out my foundation, get it going. I'm excited. I think that's what I was meant to be in life, what I'm meant to do.

QL: So how are you parents' expectations um or feelings about what you do now that you're no longer dental and you're a very successful businesswoman?

TD: They're, you know, they're fine. But before, you know they were still supporting me so they don't know if I'm capable of doing that. And just now they're more accepting. Like they know I can support myself; I can do for my own, and just to be whatever I want—whatever I can be, and just really supporting them at the end of the day if they really need help. Just being there for each other. Their mentality has definitely shifted a lot too throughout the years. And I really had a conversation with my sister, my little sister, because she was in nursing school um and I knew she didn't want to do that. And I really encouraged her to do what she wants in life, what she's good at, and what she really wants to do. And through that she ended up switching her major and she's going to apply to a different college for business. And so she's stepping out of the nursing field.

QL: Great and what does your older sister do right now?

TD: Um she's in her last year for physical assistant.

QL: Right.

TD: Uhm, and she should be coming home this year and going to work in Houston.

QL: Well, I thank you for the interview that was wonderful. Uhm, I wish your family the best luck.

TD: Thank you, Quynh, for having me.

[00:50:19]

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