

Interviewee: Phong Vu

Interviewer: Nathan Gabriel

Date of Interview: 2/29/2012

Background: Phong Vu was born in Dong Nai, a rural area near Saigon, and around the age of eight, he immigrated to the US with his family. Upon arrival, he spent his earlier years in Salt Lake City, Utah, and attended college to become a pharmacist. Visiting Houston at the invitation of his friend, he quickly became involved with the Vietnamese church community and developed an attachment with the network he built here, hence decided to move to Houston in the end. This happened in 2004. He is now working as a pharmacist at a CVS in the city. While working and living here, he had an opportunity to interact with people from difference races coming from all walks of life that he had not been exposed to when he was living in Utah, and to reflect on his hybrid identity and values as an Asian American, who strives for individual accomplishments but also holds his family and community with utmost respect.

Key:

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview transcript:

NG: Just to reiterate what you signed, I'm Nathan Gabriel. I'm recording this interview for the Rice HAAA project. The purpose of this interview is to collect the story of your immigration. I have some questions laid out in this packet. If you go off those questions and start talking about other things that's fine and could be good even. So do I have your consent to record this.

PV: Yes.

NG: Can you tell me about the town that you're from in Vietnam?

PV: Um, I was pretty young so I don't remember a lot. All I know is a lot of what my parents told me. It's a little town called Dong Nai. It's not too far off from Saigon I here, it's a little village that it's a little market place and then houses surrounding the market place. It's a lot of rural area I guess it's not very developed at all.

NG: How old were you when you left there?

PV: Uh, about six or seven.

NG: Six or seven?

PV: Yeah.

NG: And from there you went?

PV: Then we went to Thailand for about four months and from Thailand we went to the Philippines where we stayed for about seven or eight months and then we flew to America from there.

NG: So you were how old then when you arrived in America?

PV: So we left about 1979 so it took us about a whole year before we got to America. So I was born in 1972, so about 8 years when we got to America.

NG: What were the reasons for your parents immigrating?

PV: Just more freedom, there was obviously a lot of uncertainty with the communist rule. So our parent wanted to give us that opportunity to live in an environment where our choices are our own. And-and our possessions are our own often times there is a lot of restriction or uncertainty of what, you know, the future holds when you're in that environment where they can take away your possessions, or do whatever they want. Mainly for our future, for the kids future to give us a better place to grow up and have more education and freedom of and just pursuing our lively hood.

NG: So Dong Nai, you said it's near Saigon. Do you still have relatives in that area?

PV: Yeah. On my dad's side. I don't really keep up with the relatives there. You know I've made a recent trip back there to visit my grandma. Not recent but it's 2000 so twelve fourteen years ago when I went back. My grandma was still alive then but she's passed away. Um so yeah. I have an aunt, some uncles that are still there. My uncle recently passed away too. Um some cousins there...

NG: And that's all on your father's side?

PV: Both. Actually on my mom's side as well. Her younger brother recently passed away. And they I have a couple cousins with them on my mom's side, and dad's side as well.

NG: And did they all live in Dong Ni, or near there?

PV: Yeah, yeah. They're very concentrated near there. It's very near.

NG: You said you don't remember much of Dong Nai, that it's just rural near Saigon. How would you describe rural? What does that mean?

PV: When I went back and actually saw the house that I lived in, it was it was just a shocker to see where I originally grew up in, and to see the families living there. I just remember images here and there, and the market is basically like a platform. It has just basically wood and it's like a raised platform. And everyone's house was basically a store front. Every morning they would have food items put in front of their house or they would have places on their platform to sell. I don't remember much of being the country. It just there's no paved roads. It's just dirt, you know, dirt trails.

NG: You went there to visit your grandmother. Can you say a little about your visit in relation to the reasons you gave for why your parents left Vietnam? You sort of said it was about opportunity and you mentioned something about possessions?

PV: You know I was speaking to my dad about this and why we left. And, you know, his answer was that he wanted us to have that certainty where, you know, freedom was the utmost importance to him, and he didn't feel like he had that freedom. His possessions were easily taken away for any matter of reasons if, you know, the communist wanted to get him in trouble. But a lot of people back then were caught up in going to America. It was the place where you could have your dreams fulfilled and reached. Or whatever it was, yeah. I think everybody was caught up in trying to come to America because there were so many stories of people making a living here, and so maybe they got caught up in that. When I went back there my intent wasn't to visit my grandma. It was just to visit Vietnam. A friend of mine invited me to go back visit Vietnam. I really didn't want to meet my grandma because we never really had a, you know, relationship. You know all these years I've never once written her or talked to her. But my parents still kept up when they first came over here. We would always be buying stuff to send back home so that they can sell in the market place or wherever they may be. Clothing electronics and you know stuff what you have and later on it would be money but mainly it would be items that we can—that they could resell back in Vietnam. When I came back to see my grandma, she-It was like a little village and when she took me there everyone was like, Hey that's So and So's son. And I was like-That was twenty years ago and they still-And I guess everyone knows about my coming home. And it's a really tight community and it's really... Everybody's just walk into each other's homes and they're very knowledgeable about each other's siblings and family members. But she had pictures of me and growing up and my girlfriends and my brothers and so all along. She's been keep track of me and my progress and what I had been up to, so it kind of touched me at that point that I should have reached out to her and find out what's been going on in her life, since she's so intimate with my life through my mom and my dad.

NG: So would you say that you visited your grandmother more out of an obligation?

PV: Yeah. I, you know, it was more of honestly an obligation because, you know, out of respect my parents would never forgive me if I went to Vietnam and I not visit my grandmother, you know. But I was in Saigon and she was in that, you know, the country side and I called her. Reluctantly I called her and said, "I'm in Saigon" and she says, "Okay say there I'm going to come pick you up." And she comes. She comes on one of those motorcycles, you know that's how they get around, and she was sitting on the back of one of those motorcycles with a guy and she's like, "Okay I've got another motorcycle. Let's just hop on this motorcycle yo." She grabs my luggage and is like "Let me get your luggage for you" and I'm like "No I've got my luggage." But she's-she's so happy to see me and it's just very touching how she, after all these years, still made me feel very welcome. But yeah at first it was just more of an obligation.

NG: And so what would you say your motivation was for going back to Vietnam?

PV: It was just one of those things where a friend asked. He-If he didn't ask me to go with him, I probably wouldn't have gone. It was one of those things just more out of a, just to tour and see the country not really out of any kind of personal reflection or anything, to see my past or whatever. And that really hasn't hit me 'til later to just to learn more about my heritage or be more involved or be more concerned about Vietnam in general.

NG: And your friend that you went back with was he also originally from Vietnam?

PV: Yeah. He was.

NG: And he was also going just to tour?

PV: Yeah. He has family back there in Saigon. His family lives in Saigon. His aunt lives in Saigon and his family owns a very successful business there so you know, they get to live in Vietnam and that's where we stayed in between our trips, between here and there. They had bus tours going to, you know, certain places in Vietnam and we would just take a short trip and stay a day and then come back through Vietnam.

NG: So what sort of places would you go to on these trips?

PV: We went to ah, Da Nang, this little island. You know we had to take a little speed boat out there. We went to Hanoi. We took a little flight up there to see the north, to see how it contrast to the south. Just little trips here and there.

NG: Okay. Maybe we'll come back to that later. So you came to America at what age?

PV: About 8.

NG: I would like to ask about the education system in America. I would assume that you see yourself to an extent as an American?

PV: Yes.

NG: Could you say in what ways you would see yourself as an American? What aspects of yourself make you an American?

PV: Um I guess it's less the fact that you know... Um there's a lot of American values that I hold, and I think it's because you know, growing up in America, obviously it instilled the individuality verses, you know, the Asian family you know was about community, family, less individuals and more family in America. By the time you hit 18, you know, you're out of the house, you're independent, and it's-it's promoted. It's kind of like expected that you'll find your own way, whereas the Asian community its more of a, you know, family first. You sacrifice yourself for the benefit of the family, then you can, after you benefit the family then you can benefit the community. And you see a lot of success, you know, in Asian communities because you know the financial resources are pooled together because of the, you know, of families helping each other. You know they oftentimes sacrifice maybe everything for one child to be successful in school, whereas you know if you have the stresses of moving out and trying find a job and support everything else and go to school oftentimes to maintain a family at an early age, you get a lot of failures because there's not a lot of resources I mean it's more so you know we really didn't have much of a choice coming over here, we had to stay together. But then you know you go home like my parents, everyone who initially came over here they wanted to keep those values and traditions and especially our language, he would not let us speak English at all when you're at home you speak Vietnamese. At school you can speak English but at home you speak Vietnamese. And he, my father was a teacher so he would help us with our schooling and in the meantime, he would make us translate Vietnamese to English and English to Vietnamese, you know certain articles just to keep our tradition or our language. But it becomes a point where he couldn't help us anymore as we progressed through the school system. You know he did the best he could but you know, the fact that he brought us over here and he always reminded us that "We came over here for your lives future so make the most of it" and you see him, you know, going to do things working as a dish washer,

doing odd end things, you know, very laborious work, you know, manual labor and you just, you know, you want to do your best to not let him down.

NG: You said your father was a teacher. Was that in Vietnam? In the US he worked as...?

PV: Yeah. He-he worked like his first job was just washing dishes at a restaurant. You know, he got a job a couple days after he got here, which is very surprising, I don't know how he got it but yeah. He worked long days, just washing dishes, and eventually somebody hooked him up with a job at a small boat factory where they, you know, made little boats, you know, speed boat, you know, from the ground up. So he did that for like 10 years. He got into an assembly line job putting parts together. He worked at, I think Avid Laboratories, you know just repetitive manual type labor. Nothing educated.

NG: What city did you come to when you came to America?

PV: Salt Lake City, Utah.

NG: So you emphasized the sort of family support structure that the Vietnamese have, and I think you started talking about that in contrast to American individualism. Correct?

PV: Yes.

NG: And you see yourself to an extent as an American. How would say, you see for yourself as an individual this family support structure? Do you think will you treat your children assuming you have some, the same way your father treated you and your siblings?

PV: You know, well I don't really say I'm completely American or completely Vietnamese. I mean obviously I'm both, and any day I look at myself in the mirror I'm Vietnamese. Um but then again you get caught up in where you live, you know, you have to fit into society where whatever the norm is. You have to fit in but um yea, it's a question-I don't have any kids but you know whether it's Asian or American the values that are time tested, hard work and being honest and loyal, faithful, all that. Those are principles that transcend across countries and boundaries. I like the idea of family oriented, if I were to raise a kid, I would want them to value family as much as I value you know...

NG: Let's try to get at assimilation or something. You said you're both American and Vietnamese. Could you list two ways in which you are American, sort of like try to be a little bit specific, and then list two ways in which you see yourself as Vietnamese?

PV: Yeah. I think with American values, the pursuit of success and individuality, you know making a name out of myself in my career in you know my successes, um and being independent as a person and that's what I would say I mostly my American values.

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NG: So to recap where we just left off before the battery died. Um, you were saying ways in which you see yourself as American. Are um making a name for yourself and having a level of independence...

PV: Yeah. I guess my main concern would be to be able to take care of myself, you know, financially, and not be a burden to my family um, and seeking out that individual success. As an American, everyone dreams of that fairy tale story of becoming someone of value through your individual success, either through riches or fame or scholarly efforts, um and achieving that some sort of individual accomplishments. My Asian values, you know I always, you know, I always hold my parents with the utmost respect, the elderly with respect, and I like that community oriented value where you know, you always hold the family first before yourself, and just being more, uh more community oriented than what I am now. You know right now I feel I'm very self-centered around what I do everything is me me me, verses if I'm at home visiting my parents, it's about the family, it's about what I can give to the family. I think there is a big difference between Asian American values, not that it is that anything is better or worse its' just how it is

NG: How about the neighborhood that your parents live in, or you know you talk about community. Is that just a family thing, or would there be other Vietnamese, or other Asian families that your parents or your family would interact with as you were growing up or now?

PV: Are you talking about Vietnam, or in America?

NG: Here in the US.

PV: Um, yeah, you know obviously I'm a Catholic and you know, and I attended a Catholic Vietnamese parish, and it's just natural to flock to people who are a similar race and similar background, because you have this immediate connection, you know. But in America it's hard to be very connected to a community because, you know, of the efficient ways of travel verses in Vietnam where we lived in the little village you could walk to bike to whatever you bought is around each other. Here people can live across, you know, you know, you can live on one side of the city and the other, because you have very good means of transportation. Um so the sort of community that we get is more of a coming together on certain occasions like you know, going to mass on Sundays, maybe celebrating, you know, New Years or death or something like that. Um but as far as trying to get that that community I think it's very hard to come together as a community, unless it's like-like a public community, even death is a very big deal in Vietnam, but it's not as big of a deal over here because everyone is caught up with you know, work and daily activities and just living.

NG: Would you say that your parents have experienced that same thing with the difficulty with community or with finding it?

PV: Yeah definitely. I mean, it's a struggle. It's a struggle to-to keep that tradition, you know, the things that we celebrate in Vietnam, or is very important in Vietnam. It's not it is important here, but it's not celebrated as much as a community, you know like I mean like, if you have a Christmas event here, everything is decorated. Everybody is geared towards "Let's go shopping." That kind of mentality but you know, when death comes around, oh I-I mean a lot of times I'm surprised it came around. I don't really pay attention sometimes because there's such a de-emphasis of those traditions, you know long time past things that we all do all the time and maybe it's because everyone lives so far from each other verses you know... I don't know what it is but it's definitely not-not pronounced, or it gets harder and harder each year to celebrate those things that are valued. And as time goes by, obviously you are more ingrained in the American values and traditions, and I guess it's on me to care on value and tradition, and I don't know if my kids will you know celebrate the things that my parents celebrated.

NG: So what holidays did you celebrate growing up with your parents?

PV: I mean we really didn't, I mean birth days are a big deal for you, for people here, but never a big deal for us. You know we never celebrate birthdays. But the New Years is a big deal for Asians, for my family, you know, just getting together eating food and playing games you know stuff like that I guess Christmas too is a part of American values that we celebrated, I don't remember celebrating a lot of stuff it's more of a... yeah... don't have much time.

NG: For the New Years, you talked about eating, would that be traditional Vietnamese food?

PV: Yeah, yeah, my mom would make the you know the Banh Chung, you know rice compact and green beans, and-and pork, and stuff like that it takes quite a bit of preparation to yeah... She makes, she makes a big deal out of that just to make it... My mom cooks everything at home and so... She... she loves, you know, when she doesn't have to make a decision on what to cook. It's like, "Oh it's death" so we're just gonna make Banh Chung so you fry it and you-It's fun to have that around.

NG: Now outside of New Years or some sort of celebration, does your mother usually cook traditional Vietnamese food?

PV: Yeah. She doesn't cook any American meals... That's ah, that's our... on Thanksgiving we'll make a turkey, but my brother will make it, or his wife will make it. But yeah. She always cooks Vietnamese food.

NG: So now you celebrate Thanksgiving, did you initially when your family came to the United States? If you had to guess when was your first Thanksgiving.

PV: Yeah, I don't know. It just gradually came on I couldn't pin point when we started that, maybe ten, fifteen years later or something. We didn't really celebrate Thanksgiving even Christmas...

NG: So would it have been before or after you were 18?

PV: Probably before, yeah. But much later than-than you know I don't know, pry like a decade later before we celebrated Thanksgiving.

NG: But Christmas would be a catholic holiday, would you have started celebrating Christmas prior to Thanksgiving?

PV: Yeah, yeah. I think. Well, we you know we didn't get each other gifts or anything like that I think in Vietnam, they don't have a tradition of giving gifts either, but through some charitable organization they-Some secret Santa came to our house you know and gave us gifts and that's how we were like introduced to Christmas and giving gifts and stuff. It was pretty cool and just receiving toys at that time, and somebody out of that I don't know where they came from and why they were doing it but it was a great feeling to have those presents.

NG: So, one year you got presents through some organization, um, were there... I assume the organization was targeting Vietnamese immigrants?

PV: I don't know, I mean you know, I see... Nowadays you know, I see all of these organizations trying to target the poor or trying to target, you know through a church group we have, they treat giving gifts you take a number and then you have a family that you know you chose to donate to. We do that now to families you know who are less fortunate who don't have the money, um but you know I couldn't tell you who-who you know who the gifts were from or who they targeted, but we were definitely poor you know... No doubt about that... And we lived in a two bedroom apartment that we shared with another you know family you know, our family was two parents, I mean 7 in all and there was another family who you know they had a father and son, but it was pretty crowded.

NG: So you all in one bedroom?

PV: Yeah basically all one bedroom, and we had the living room as well but the other family paid their part so they had their room, father and son so it was pretty tight.

NG: Um given those conditions, would you say that your parents felt that America lived up to the stories they had heard that motivated their immigration? Or would you know that?

PV: Um, well I think they you know they're glad. There was a point when I wanted to stay, when they decided to go they wanted to, um my parents wanted to take everybody, you know even the kids. But I wanted to stay, they say I was adamant to stay because I really loved my grandmother, ha. According to them, you know, my grandma said that "No he wants to stay. Let him stay." But my mom said no "We're gonna go as a family." She knew the risk, you know, of going 'cause we were one of those original boat people who ah-It was really dangerous, and I don't know why they took that risk. To me, thinking back to take all that risk to come here, and then have nothing. No trade, no skill, no English. It's really... It's a really big risk that I can't really fathom to this day if I had to do it. I don't know if I would do that and have-You know I'm being the oldest at that time, and I had three siblings, and my sister wasn't even born yet. She was born in rout so for them to take that amount of risk... I really don't know the motivation either. It was for a better life or chasing that dream, or a combination of the... But then they were doing well in Vietnam: buying coffee in Saigon, and bringing it back to the village. They said they did very well for their status, for their condition, and that kind of provided them for the means of buying their way out to go on this journey.

NG: So how would you describe their status in Vietnam? And did that go up or down or stay the same as they came to America?

PV: Well you know they had a means of providing for their family. They had a business you sell and buy, and obviously the conditions are better here but as far as-I would say that they are not as happy, you know being here, because of that, disconnect with the community, you know, here. All they do is work and come home work and come home, you know, whereas in Vietnam, I can see with visiting my grandma. She just pops into another neighbor's house. The doors not even locked; they just come in and just greet each other like it was their own home. And it was how it is here. It's very lonely to not have that connection with other people of a similar background, but I think they always considered themselves very fortunate to have made it to have come here through our successes, and through our lifestyle now compared to our cousins and younger brothers over there. It's a very stark contrast if I was there now. I don't know what I would be doing I would be I wouldn't have an education I would be working a farm if that so their very glad that they came over here; economically they feel like they made a good choice.

NG: Do you think that your parents expected the lack of community that they have here in America?

PV: I don't think that anybody expects that. You know, I mean why would you expect something going into it like that? But I think more important to them, they wanted us to have that future that chance with or without community. I'm sure they realized that I mean my dad says, "We could have been anywhere could have been Australia, Malaysia, but we ended up here. So really it didn't matter where we went, we would have been alone." And being in America... And being in America is just as alone as being in Australia, because you know your homeland... is... you can...

NG: Um so you said you're the oldest of your sibling, and you said that growing up for homework in the US your father would make you translate into Vietnamese and Vietnamese into English. So you're fluent in Vietnamese, is that true of your siblings?

PV: Well I wouldn't say I'm fluent... But yeah. I mean I can converse with in Vietnamese. My writing is not, you know... I can read, I can write it, but there will be errors in spelling. There will be, you know, some words I won't understand but you know, I can get by my obviously. The younger sibling will be... They're not as fluent, you know, just because they grew up here, but then again, it's not true for other people who were born here. You know I have friends who were born here and they speak better than I do, and it's because Houston is very much more populated than where I grew up. In Salt Lake City, the population of Vietnamese is very um... It's very... small compared to Houston so, but yeah. They actually, over the years they've been great. I mean nowadays they speak word here and there, intermixed with English. My parents are the same way. They speak Vietnamese, but then they'll mix it with English too. It's like a collusion of two languages just trying to communicate, you know. Communication is an art and you're trying to say the basic things. But trying to communicate ideals with us, it's very hard and that clash where you talk about individualist verses the community and family and respect. You know respect is a very big thing with my parents, whether you graduate a scholar or where you've been, they demand that respect and here... You experience more of a of what education and sometimes you feel like, you know more, it's true, but you know... But the wisdom that they have and the life experience that they have you know deserve respect and a lot you get lost in terms of... what is really more important. You know, that knowledge that you gain or that respect that you need to have for your elders who traverse the lines of wisdom and virtue.

NG: So you mentioned that the Houston Vietnamese community is larger or more developed and you said that friends who are Vietnamese from Houston might be more fluent than you in

Vietnamese. Um from what context have you gained that information? Did you actively seek out Vietnamese in Houston?

PV: Yeah. The original reason that I came here was that I had a friend that came from Houston, and he went to school in Utah to get his MBA. And he originally was from here so when he came back here, he asked me, "If you wanted to come here to Houston to check it out? You know, you've been in Utah so long, maybe you can broaden your horizons and see what out there." And I came here and through him you know he... I was thrust into his circle and his network, and he's very involved with the church so I ended up helping out with the church a lot so that's where I met a lot of people. And it's obviously a Vietnamese church.

NG: Would you say that the church is the main gathering point for Vietnamese?

PV: That's been my experience. The whole time I've been here it's revolved around church activities. You know, whether it's on Sundays or helping out, or you know with Sunday school or doing just yeah, mainly church activities and I-I really don't hang out with my co-workers for whatever reason. I just more gravitated towards the Vietnamese community at the parish. Obviously there are other communities too but I guess I was just really taken in by that community, and I've spent a lot of my time helping out with the church.

NG: So what sort of social or recreational things do you do? And I would assume this is with other Vietnamese; you suggested that's maybe your closer friend circle.

PV: Yeah. Um eating is the big thing here in Houston. I like the outdoors by itself. Back when I was in Utah, hiking and camping out and skiing. But here it's more of just getting together with friends and sharing a little moment and eating together. It's very intimate here and there when you can. Everyone is so busy. It's not really conducive to a spontaneous sort of schedule but yeah. Here, I used to play basketball until I had my knee injury. I've played tennis.

NG: How long did you play basketball?

PV: I've played basketball ever since college days but I've had two knee surgeries in the last couple years so I'm just running now to stay in shape and playing a bit of tennis, you know less probability of getting injured with other sports like basketball or volleyball. But activities wise, I get more interaction in one on one basis with close friends I want to keep up with. We'll jog together or share some stuff or I'll get invited to family night with a close friend. But a lot of my time is spent by myself working or just tending stuff at home, or some of my rentals or taking care of business. Nothing out of the ordinary. There's a night life here but I don't really go out or drink.

NG: So you referenced you had recreational activities like skiing or hiking, those would be very American?

PV: Yes definitely.

NG: In your get togethers now like the family dinners, do you eat general American food?

PV: I would say generally Asian foods. But you know every now and then, you know we'll try something different it just depends on the group but I think for the most part they chose Asian food.

NG: Is it Asian food in general or Vietnamese food?

PV: Yeah yeah. I guess Asian. I mean Vietnamese food. Chinese food is a lot of influence so Chinese

Vietnamese. It's very similar.

NG: Would you say you maintained a very Asian diet throughout your life? I mean you said growing up your mother always fixed.

PV: Yeah. My diet was very different when I was living with my mom, obviously you always get a home cooked meal. Um but here I find myself just getting by whenever I can, wherever I can. You know, my habits of eating are very poor just because of the business of not taking time out to prepare. You know, it takes a lot of time to cook. It's not feasible to cook these days you know, where you just buy stuff and bring it home or take out or and so that's been very sporadic. And especially at work, you really have to plan ahead to eat well, to eat right you know? So now it's been more of a fast food kind of deal. It's a luxury to actually come together as friends, to chose a place and sit down and eat. It's kind of sad because it's nice to have that home cooked meal and to ask everyone to come over. And we used to do that, and I think everybody is just getting busier these days so my diets more of a fast food diet these days.

NG: So would you say your diet changed in entering the university?

PV: Um yeah. I was still living at home when I was at the university the University of Utah. I lived in a dorm my first semester so I kind of had to provide for my own then but even then, I would cook rice or noodles you know basic stuff that I can do. But then I went home after that after the first semester. I couldn't stand my roommate. We were best friends but when you're in tight quarters, you can find something to bicker about. Yeah so... It's good to be at home. You have all of these things that you don't have worry about. The food, the shelter. All of that's taken care of so that provided me .Given the fact that my parents worked for you as an assembly line worker, we were fortunate that they had a scholarship program through the company so the company provided for my education free of charge, so we were very blessed to have that-that they actually had that program. Avid Laboratories a very nice pharmaceutical company.

NG: You mentioned your brother making turkey for Thanksgiving, is he married to another Vietnamese?

PV: Yeah. They have three kids. They recently moved back in. My parents, originally they bought this big home for everyone to live in and as everybody getting started, I mean, I moved out here, and then my brother moved to Seattle, and then my other brothers moved out on their own, the, you know, I mean they had a family. We all lived, we all lived in this big house together with seven bedrooms. And then slowly everybody started moving out and so then they're left with this big old house by themselves, Um so I encouraged my brother to move back in so they live with them now with their three kids in the house, but you know they're obviously more Americanized, and the kids expect a turkey. They expect Thanksgiving dinner, so things like that get passed on and with the kids. They-It's definitely part of their holiday traditional.

NG: Do their children know any Vietnamese?

PV: Yeah. They know Vietnamese, which is surprising. I'm surprised that they know Vietnamese but through the interactions, you know, with my parents interacting with them, they obviously have to speak Vietnamese. There's that broken Vietnamese that they have to learn and same with my parents trying speaking to them in that broken English, you know. So there's still that connection and still that utility in learning a different language. I don't know if they stress, I don't know if my brother stresses,

you know, Vietnamese. I don't think he does because he barely speaks Vietnamese himself, but my mom takes

care of the kids a lot so she's like a nanny. So she'll educate them in, you know, in speaking Vietnamese. She always speaks Vietnamese to them so they learn some bit of some wad of Vietnamese through my parents.

NG: So neither of your parents are completely fluent in English?

PV: No.

NG: Is one more fluent than the other?

PV: Yeah I think my dad is more fluent. He's had to learn, I don't know. You know his background being a teacher, but you know he definitely, he took classes, you know, in college. One of those, you know, community offered English classes. He really strived to learn the language. He'll read newspapers just to learn the language, whereas my mom's not as concerned around educating herself.

NG: Around when did your father take those classes?

PV: Whenever he could. He first he worked, he worked a lot when he first came over, just whatever jobs he could take. But whenever an opportunity arose where he could go to school or night classes, he would. You know, nothing in a standard course, but just to learn more about English, so it's very sporadic, very spur of the moment. Whatever opportunities came up for him. He didn't expect to graduate as anything or with any meaningful credit or anything.

NG: So going more on the family thing, um your brothers married to a Vietnamese woman, will you look for a Vietnamese person as a spouse?

PV: Yeah. My preference would definitely be someone Vietnamese, more so than I just feel like there's more of a connection, more of an instant background where you guys have similar understanding. It's hard to... Relationships are hard enough as is without that common background. If you have a similar background... I can't explain why I would prefer. I mean people are people, you know? But there's just that gravity towards somebody towards somebody that has been through similar things that you can connect to that attracts me. I guess that the values that they may or may not hold. At least they come from a family that has similar background. I mean they had to come here somehow and knowing that they've gone through similar things they may value some things that I hold dear.

NG: Do you think that the same would hold true for most of your siblings?

PV: You know, I think we're I couldn't really speak for them. But my brother, in talking in some occasions, he really, he knew what he wanted. He wanted a family. He wanted someone with similar values. He wanted someone to take care of the kids and value the family and being a church major community area. You need... Obviously you have more opportunities with people around you and so being in that area, so being in that area in that environment, you're going to spend more time with people you might meet. I mean with school and work you do meet people, but I-I really couldn't speak for themselves.

NG: How about citizenship? Have your parents obtained citizenship?

PV: Yeah.

NG: So you and all of your family would be citizens?

PV: Yeah.

NG: Did that happen fairly immediately when your family came to the US?

PV: I don't remember exactly. It was probably years into it not like immediately... I couldn't tell you exactly but they did get citizenship for us. When I was younger, I was like in my teens when they got citizenship

NG: What would you say citizenship means for your parents?

PV: I think for them it probably means they were thinking, you know, worst case scenario you know they were just making sure nothing out of the ordinary would propel us back to deported. I mean for them it's just a matter of survival and safety.

NG: So would they show much interest in American politics? Would they vote?

PV: They keep up with it. They talk to me about it. But voting, I couldn't see them voting. They've never voted, but they do show an interest in who's you know they keep up with politics. But they wouldn't actually go out and vote.

NG: I don't know that I have anything else. Is there anything that maybe we haven't talked about that you think is important to understand immigration?

PV: Well I don't really know what your assignment is about trying to archive. When I went to the event that Rice usually held about Asian Americans, and just the lack of interview the lack of history of Asian Americans. That's why I was compelled to talk to you about it. I've never really concerned myself about it. I've never really had the time to think about those things. I've always been caught up in doing what needs to be done in the moment and we're all guilty of not thinking far enough ahead or big enough, just trying to take the time and sometimes I think "Who would want to hear my story?" And there's so many pieces that I don't know about. I mean living here is definitely, it's a challenge. It's a challenge to just be a part of society in general, and then to be a part of, you know, to be Asian and try to mix in, and try to find people of similar background. That's hard. That's hard for me to-to achieve in this society at this time, to be connected somehow. And these days the only amount of connection that I really get is through technology, you know, through just social platforms. And occasional, you know, meetings with friends. And it's really hard to just jump into that community, you know, where I'm home and I really don't feel at home. I feel at home when I go home and my family who greets me, but going to work and going to certain events I feel I'm the visitor. Still I don't really feel I'm at home, where I'm comfortable where I can be myself. I'm not sure if that has to do with being Asian or what, but I'm sure it does, otherwise I wouldn't be hanging out at church a lot or eating Asian food or you know, I mean there's that inner calling, I don't know why I do those things. I don't know why I eat the things that I eat or you know, I mean I'm here in America. There's all these other influences around me too. How come I don't you know order those things and do those things? Everybody's different but just trying to find that identity, but I think a lot of Asians will go through that identity crisis more so than the loss that everybody has right now, trying to be, trying to find yourself and trying to realize where you came from in order to find yourself is the difficulty in a lot of Asians have I think.

NG: Well I really appreciate your taking the time to do this interview. I think maybe I should ask a little bit more about your move from Salt Lake to Houston, because you said a lot about home. How do you feel about that immigration?

PV: Yeah well. That's-Yeah it goes against everything I've said about being part of family and being at home, because home is Utah where my parents are, and most of my family. And you know sometimes, I ask myself why I came here, but it was very easy to move from Utah to here. You know, I'm a pharmacist and at the time it was very easy to find a job as a pharmacist. I think that's why it was so easy because at the time all I did was call up a pharmacy and say, "Hey I'm looking to move to Houston. Do you have an opening?" And they said, "Yeah." So they gave me an allowance to move here. I packed up like three or four shirts, and I go here. It took me two days to get here, you know. I stayed at a friend's house for a week, and then I got my own place. But I guess it's that sense of adventure sense to be alone and trying to see what's out there, and maybe find someone of significance, a significant other that may be here or there, because the probability is she may be here, because the density of the Vietnamese population is so much greater than in Utah. So that could be a driving reason. But you know a lot of times I feel like, I don't know if I made the right decision because um... Just being away from home. You know, I visit them on an annual basis but just missing the little things my nephews and niece growing up, and not being able to spontaneously take them out for their birthdays and just those American things that I'm sure are ingrained like how come my uncle is not here my special day. And all of that, you know, whatever the tradition is, I still want to be there for them to remember and share those moments. Those are the things that I miss most that I regret about moving here. But moving here I've also spent a lot of my network and friends and being exposed to new things I am grateful for those things as well. I don't know if I've answered anything that close to resembles what you're supposed to talk about or what your goal is.

NG: I think you've far exceeded expectation. Are you pressed for time, I could ask a few more questions.

PV: That's fine.

NG: I really like what you've had to say about your move from Salt Lake to Houston, and they are definitely very different places just for Americans. For Vietnamese, do you find Vietnamese in Houston different from those in Salt Lake?

PV: Definitely. I think in Utah, it's more conservative. It's a conservative state just the, I mean it's more family oriented in Utah, just because the state is very conservative and it's dominantly LBS morman, and they're very family oriented so it kind of trickles down to the rest of the society. Here, it's more diverse, and I was totally culture shocked because you know... I was put in a pharmacy where everybody was black you know like, I hardly saw anybody in Utah, you know, that wasn't white or Asian. Mainly white people in Utah so it was culture shock when I came here to meet all these different ethnicities. You know, Nigerian black, white, Asian, Korean. And so it was very... It took a long time for me to try to assimilate and be a part of this new you know melting pot over here, which was an eye opener more so then moving I guess... I mean moving to America from Vietnam was big, but you know, you're so young that you don't really remember anything. You know kids adapt to anything but as an adult, it effected you in a lot of ways and we, you know... Socializing yourself, you know, trying to fit in with the different groups and mentality, and clicks and stuff like that it was... If it wasn't for the friends that I had, you know, that provided a lot of support, I probably would have moved back you know but they were really supportive and very tight knit and you got... I'm very blessed to have such a good group.

NG: How long have you been in Houston?

PV: Since 2004 so about 8 years.

NG: Would you say that you're assimilated to Houston now?

PV: I don't know about assimilated if I would be assimilated. I would probably do the happy hour thing or the night life thing... You know you adjust where you have to get by.

NG: Have you maybe plateaued for the changes in coming to Houston?

PV: Yeah. Definitely. It's part of life now. I still don't like Houston. I don't like the humidity and the lack of outdoors, and the traffic and the drain system. But it's harder to move now than it was then, when I came here, I only had a couple of shirts and my car, you know? And I didn't own anything back there, you know. Now I have a mortgage and a house and a job. And the economy is not as good. I can't just pick up the phone and say, "Hey do you know have a job?" You know so you've got to work to all of those things I don't know if I'll be here for the long term. I don't know what the future holds but...

NG: If you were to move somewhere else would it be back to Utah or just somewhere with green space?

PV: I've always wanted to move to Seattle mainly because my brother is there and his wife. I want to move somewhere where I have family, some sort of connection. But Seattle is also beautiful with greenery and you know mountains and vegetation, one side ocean and one side mountains. I mean what more could want but it's a long-term dream of mine, but if my brother moved away... He's actually considering a job. If he moved away... He actually talked about maybe moving down here, and I'm like, "Come on I wanted to move up there." But if he stays up there and the economy gets better and... Then I wouldn't hesitate to move up there and be re-assimilated again haha.

NG: You said in Salt Lake you only saw white people and Asians, and you came to Houston and everyone at the CVS was black. Would you say there's noticeable differences between how you and other Vietnamese around you growing up view people of different races in America as opposed to how Vietnamese in Houston view people of different races? Did that question make sense?

PV: Um I guess the exposure is, you know because of the lack of exposure back in Utah, which is predominately white and so, I've never had to deal with you know interact with other than, you know, my coworkers or friends who either white or Asian so it... I don't know what other people's views are about it, but it was difficult for me to... I was just trying to fit in and the way I was taught and grew up in Utah, I feel like, you know, if I treat people with respect that they'll obviously treat me with respect too. But I didn't get that sometimes, and the tone that was directed at me was very harsh, and you know, belligerent sometimes. And sometimes it's just how it is, and I wasn't used to that roughness and dealing with that in my line of work as a pharmacist, you know, and people always respected me as a pharmacist when they come in. Sometimes I get talked down and I get bullied. Sometimes I feel like, you know, they're very aggressive here that's the main thing I had to deal with, and just their wretchedness and pushing to get what they want here verses you know when I was working in Utah.

NG: Here in Houston is everyone aggressive or is it some groups of people more than others?

PV: Um I think in general people are more aggressive here than they are in Utah. Maybe just because you know, I mean Utah is 4 million in population the whole state, whereas Houston is 4 million by itself so you get all of these people bumping each other. You've got to be more aggressive to get what you want you know? But just in terms of dealing with the public people are more aggressive people

are demanding. They're less cordial than what I had to interact with in Utah. It was definitely-That was the hardest transition, I mean socially. I didn't really care for the social aspect. I mean, you know I came here and I just felt called to this mission at church to help out in what way I can, and so you know socially it just came as a result, and I built great relationships through that community.

NG: Do you find people through that community in the church to be more aggressive than the people in Salt Lake or is it just in interacting with the general public?

PV: Um I thought their mentality was very straight forward, you know more forward than I'm used to, you know? They're nice, very kind, and very loving but they're more expressive in what they want, and more proactive in doing so, versus I feel that there is more of a traditional, maybe the people that I hung out with you know over there were more timid and more conservative, more, they're more Vietnamese speaking, whereas here all my friends speak English but they can speak Vietnamese. They just chose not to. I mean a lot of them grew up here, and their Vietnamese is actually better than mine. Now I'm totally surprised by that I'm not sure where they get it from. Maybe it's because it's a larger Vietnamese population, but I'm really surprised that their Vietnamese is so well here given that they chose to speak English, and they interact in the English language, whereas in Utah I'd have all Vietnamese friends and they all speak Vietnamese all the time and I spoke Vietnamese back to them. You know, if they speak Vietnamese to you-you have to speak to them in Vietnamese. So my Vietnamese was very good. But when I came here everybody that I hang out with was Vietnamese but they speak English so my Vietnamese gradually faded, and I still speak Vietnamese but it doesn't come naturally as it did when I hung out with my friends who all spoke Vietnamese. I don't know I guess just the small population over there it really effected the mentality you know people are more timid, more conservative, more, less pushy over there, even among the Asians here, they are definitely more go get her types.

NG: Is there any context here in Houston in which it's common for Vietnamese to speak in Vietnamese? How-how would you know that your friends Vietnamese is better than yours here in Houston?

PV: I think the Vietnamese interaction that I have is mainly with the elders and my friends. One of my best friends, you know, they have family night on Wednesdays and he invited me over, and I'm always welcome on those days so when I come over there to visit his parents or visit the family or have dinner with them, and when I interact with him I speak English, but when I interact with his parents I have to speak in Vietnamese. I mean they can speak in English, but their preference is Vietnamese so you try to speak in Vietnamese to them, mainly it would be with the elderly or... Yeah I don't have much interaction with my normal friends even though they all speak English, even though they can speak Vietnamese. I think it's that transition. I mean their parents are still mainly Vietnamese speaking so they still maintain that Vietnamese fluency, and then whenever I come to their house obviously I have to converse with their parents in Vietnamese. And I speak to my parents in Vietnamese. I'll call my dad on a regular basis, or I'll talk to my mom. But yeah for somebody born here I wouldn't expect them to speak Vietnamese at all, but the fact that they can... I'm just amazed that they have that fluency, but I don't know if it's for better or worse but I'm just amazed that they can.

NG: Would you say that the Vietnamese population here in Houston is more or less or the same on the scale of how Americanized they are than the Vietnamese population in Salt Lake?

PV: Oh um, Americanized... I'm just wondering if... Yeah some reason I really haven't kept up with my friends in Utah. I kind of like pick and choose who I these days I focus on people that I

really care about. I don't have time to hang out anymore. my family is the only observation that I have, you know my brothers... My brother's living in Utah and my friends here we talk about the same things we talk about the NBA all star, all the major things that are happening... I'm not sure who's more Americanized. I think they're all Americanized and influenced to the traditions and the media.

NG: Amongst your friends here in Houston would it also be common that they were raised eating Vietnamese food from their mothers?

PV: Yeah. I would think so. That's what mothers know, that's what they know how to cook and they'll cook what they can. I mean to this day like my friends get together on Wednesday, their parents still cook for them. They never cook any spaghetti or Italian. They always cook Vietnamese food.

NG: Would people here in Houston have better access to Asian food?

PV: Oh yeah. It's just a side effect of capitalism. We have more demand so we get more supply. In Utah you're hard pressed to find Asian markets and restaurants. But here there's plenty of that because there's a market, there's a population for it. It's harder for me to go out and buy stuff to cook because they can do it much cheaper and more fast. It's harder for me to spend much time.

NG: Getting back to American politics, would your friends here in Houston tend to be interested in American politics? Would they vote? What about your siblings?

PV: You know for some reason my siblings aren't as interested in politics as some of my friends here. And even me I find myself more involved in what's happening in politics, verses when I was in Utah 8-9 years ago. Maybe it's just growing up. Or maybe being involved in a large community where people do talk politics. I have friends, I guess they're more involved in politics, or more interested in politics so maybe that effected my thing. But as far as when I lived in Utah I didn't have as much interest in following politics. But here I definitely, I, there... More of my friends are interested in that arena so maybe I guess I'm influenced too.

NG: I don't really know myself much of anything about Houston politics. Given the large Asian demographic, are there areas where representatives are predominately Asian?

PV: I mean it's definitely more conservative. It's a conservative state here too but uh you know, there's like Hubert Vo. He's... I haven't really followed him but I guess he's popular amongst the Vietnamese or Chinese. I don't really keep up with the local politics. I may be interested in the next president and so forth but yeah, I really haven't been caught up in the local...

NG: Thank you very much for doing this interview.

PV: I appreciate you coming out and taking an interest. It's really awesome to see other people, to see them having shown an interest in my life, and other peoples' life that are similar to mine.

