

## Race and Oral History Project, UC San Diego

Narrator name: Thanh Pham

Interviewer: Thuy Trang Sabrina Pham-Vu

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Location: La Jolla, CA & Da Nang, Viet Nam over Zoom

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Length of interview: 00:46:05

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Sabrina Pham-Vu: My name is Sabrina Pham-Vu, I'm with the Race and Oral History class at UCSD. It is 9:38 PM on June 9, 2020 and I'm interviewing Thanh Pham from La Jolla, California. And Thanh Pham is currently located in Da Nang, Viet Nam. So may I ask you to please spell your first and last name?

Thanh Pham: T H A N H, last name P H A M.

SPV: Okay. And then, what is your date of birth and place of birth?

TP: I was born in 1956.

SPV: And place of birth?

TP: Viet Nam.

SPV: So, can I ask what your biological parents' names are?

TP: [My dad's name is Pham Theu?] and Truong Thi Tan.

SPV: Okay. Okay. Can you repeat your biological parents' names for me please?

TP: Okay. My father's name is [Pham Theu?] and my mothers name is Truong Thi Tan

SPV: Okay, what can you tell me about their lives?

TP: They were rice farmers.

SPV: And then, how many biological siblings did you – do you have, and what are their names, and what is – what birth order are you born in?

TP: My birth order would be number eight. Actually number seven. My sister is number eight. That's from my mother's side. My father's side I'm the second.

SPV: Can you explain to me more what you mean by like, on your mother's side you were eight, or seven, and on your father's side you were second?

TP: They were both married after their first marriage.

SPV: So, do you – would you want to list the names of all of your siblings?

TP: I don't remember all of them. I can only remember the – my dad's son from his first marriage is Pham Tai.

SPV: And -

TP: Most of the siblings on the mother's side, I grew up, did not really know them.

SPV: Okay. Do you know where some of your siblings are now?

TP: All my family are deceased. Including my youngest sister. So I'm the only one left in the clan.

SPV: What stories do you have about them that you remember and would want to talk about?

TP: Well, growing up with the family...very few...since I'm the second of their marriage, so they [like me and...youngest...ah, my - the oldest...?] and, we grew up pretty much, very poor. And during war time, so, combined the com- the two, life was very rough.

SPV: Okay. Can you tell me about your adopted parents?

TP: My American adopted parents are in the Bay Area, California USA. They're both...died now. No longer with us. [Quiet laugh]

SPV: What can you tell me about their lives?

TP: My dad was an Episcopalian minister. He had four children of their own, before adopted me. So I'm their – considered the fifth child.

SPV: So, what are the names of your adopted siblings?

TP: They're Cathy, and Doug, and Tom, and Steve.

SPV: And where are they living now?

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TP: Everyone live in California except for my brother live in Nevada. Las Vegas

SPV: What do they do?

TP: They're all retired now. [Laughs] We're old people. [Laughs]

SPV: Okay. So, how often do you get to see your – or, how often did you see your siblings – adopted siblings – when you were in the U.S.?

TP: Not as often as I'd like to, but usually we'd get together on major holidays. Like Thanksgiving and Christmas.

SPV: Do you have any stories about your adopted siblings that you would want to discuss?

TP: Oh, there are many. [Laughs] But, I think the most experience and memorable thing was when they came and visit me in the hospital, when I first arrived in the U.S. Before I was adopted into the family.

SPV: Can you tell me more about that story?

TP: Well, the two brothers, the two twin brothers, Tom and Steve, they were in high school. Early years of their high school. And, one afternoon they came and visit – visit me in the hospital. And I hated them. [Laughs] I hated everybody. It was a terrible time of my life. I don't trust anybody. All that because, you know, the war. U.S. soldiers was destroying Viet Nam. U.S. government was destroying Viet Nam. With their so-called, the Viet Nam War policy. [Light laugh] Yeah. But, you know, after I was adopted – wasn't really adopted, they were my guardianship. I was never officially adopted. So, after they brought me home, I had a rough time accepting their kindness and love, at first. But then...we slowly gained that trust. I gained that trust, from them. And, became the fifth child of the family, and they loved me and took good care of me. Yes.

SPV: How about your current family right now. Who – who do you consider as your current family right now? Or talk about your current family right now.

TP: My current family? My immediate family or my wife and children? [Laughs].

SPV: Wife and children.

TP: Wife and childrens are here in Da Nang. I'm living with them right now. Not only that, my daughter just had a son, almost three years old in July.

SPV: Sorry, can you repeat that? You cut out a little bit.

TP: My daughter just recently got married and she got a son, almost three years old in July, and I'm loving every moment of it [Short laugh]. I enjoy that little guy, when he comes by the house. [Laughs]. His name is Chip by the way.

SPV: I see. And, so he's your first grandson?

TP: That's my very first grandson. One and only right now. [Light laugh]

SPV: Okay. Talking about, like, youth and that, and so on, can you describe your childhood home to me, and some of your favorite childhood memories?

TP: Childhood growing up in the rice paddies was a very natural...fun...being young and have nothing of responsibilities, so, I spent most of my time -

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TP: - in the fields, and jungles, tending cattles. And, and playing with my friends, of course [Laughs]. Those are memories. Childhood memories. Those – all those friends are now gone, except for one. Still living.

SPV: Do you still get to meet this – like, this one friend that's left?

TP: Yes, I have. Recently. He have many injuries, just like me [Light laugh].

SPV: So after your arrival in the U.S. – how old were you when you arrived in the U.S.?

TP: I was twelve years old when I arrived in the U.S.

SPV: So what were some memories and memorable events you have from your time growing up in the U.S. then?

TP: I think the memories of those days was – was many. Many memories, good and bad. I think the sad part of it [is that I?] never had any intention of going to the U.S., but after I have agree for the committee of responsibility to bring me to the U.S. for medical treatment, and then, having no family left in Viet Nam, so the committee decided that it was best that they keep me in the U.S. indefinitely, at the time. And then, after 1975, the government that I left Viet Nam under no longer exists, so, soon after that I became a U.S. citizen.

SPV: Okay. Let's go back a little bit now. Can I ask about your memories and experience of the war in Viet Nam?

TP: Well, there are many memories of the war of course because I was almost in my teens, so I saw a lot of it and...nothing was good. Believe me, war is not a – not a good thing. But being a child, surviving through the war is like...having to witness death and destruction. And those memories will never end. I played with explosives, I played with bullets, I played – I played with death as well as facing deaths. [Laughs] Those were childhoods of mine. Yea. In – in the village of Quang Nam, Viet Nam.

SPV: How was -

TP: After – after coming to the U.S., childhood memories there was like – playing soccer and baseball. And having lots of fun. [Laughs]

SPV: How would you say the war affected your family and community?

TP: It affects a lot. War displace people, it brings bad memories to people who lose – lost their family members, and the communities been uprooted. Destroyed. [Pause]. Yea. Friends and families and immediate families and extended families and communities, all displaced [at the time of war?] I was – the village I was living in was many times bombed and attacked, and at times was uprooted and relocated into all those, names that they created, those camps, in order to –

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TP: - deprive the enemies of their supporters. Those camps were called strategic hamlets, in the English language. In the Vietnamese it called Ap Tan Sinh or Ap Chien Luoc . Basically it's concentrations of people into – in to barbed wires. Yeah.

SPV: What was a – or like, as much as you can describe, what was a daily day like? Like an average day like during that time?

TP: Up until the time I was wounded, life was like, you know because we were rice farmers, so we spent most of the time in the fields, tending to our animals and our fields. Planting rice, potatoes. Which was later, had a hard time because of the constant raids from the U.S. and their allied forces. And so, food was not...something that was, what they call, abundant, because we couldn't produce that.

SPV: And then you mentioned being wounded? Can you tell me that story?

TP: Yeah, I was wounded in – in spring of 1968. Under a attack by the U.S. forces into the village. On that day, many lives was lost. I was heli-vacced out of the areas by the U.S. soldiers.

SPV: So what happened between the time you got heli-vacced and you arriving in the U.S.?

TP: After they took me to the field hospital, they patched me up and then they helicopter me out to the Da Nang medical center. And from Da Nang medical center, I spent many months living on the streets, begging for food and stuff. And, one day, a committee from the U.S. called C.O.R., short for Committee of Responsibility, they had their members came to the hospital, and I was fortunate to run into them. And they asked me would I allow them to take me to the U.S. for medical treatment. At first, I didn't agree to it because I thought they were – all Americans were bad. But people – doctors and peoples at the hospital convinced me that I better go along with them if I want to live. So, after many contemplations I decided that I better accept their offer and have them taking me to the U.S. for medical treatment. They took me from Da Nang to Saigon, and then they – from there, they processed getting passports and stuff for me, and then they sent me on a military evacuation airplane along with all those wounded American soldiers. I arrived at Travis Airforce Base in California on December of 1968. From – from the military airbase, doctors from the UC medical center came and took me from there to UC medical center in San Francisco. At the center –

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TP: - that, that treated for my wounds...released to my guardian family, in January 1969. I went back several times to have my wounds worked on by doctors. Eventually I would recover fully and lead a normal life.

SPV: So after you got released to your guardian family, where did you guys end up living?

TP: They were living in Daly City, San Francisco. I was there for a very short time – for one school year. And then, my father got a job offered in Lafayette, California. So we moved there

for two years, until the summer of 1972. He also got another job offer in Berkeley, California. So we moved to Berkeley, California. He was a – he became a professor of theology at CDSF, which stands for Church Divinity School of the Pacific. Yeah. He also retired from there.

SPV: Speaking about schools, what schools did you attend, and what memories or memorable events do you have of them? And your time at school?

TP: Okay. Well. The very first school that I was placed in was Westlake Elementary School. It was like going to like first grade, at age twelve. [Laughs]. Actually, worst than that, I did not speak the language or understand the language. But because of my age, they have no idea what to do with me so they place me in the fourth grade. And, from there I got special teaching of English and teachers practically became my mother. [Laughs] Yes. And – so I had a mother at home and mother at school – everybody was trying to help me. They were very – all wonderful people. I was only - only at that school for one year and then again, I moved to Lafayette, California, and went to Berrywood Elementary school from '70 to '72. And then, at Berrywood elementary school, my sixth grade teachers sent home a recommendation to parents – to my parents – that I was to be placed in a much higher grade because of my age. Not because I was smart – I was [Laughs] – because I was much older than most of the kids. So that was a challenge. Going from sixth grade to ninth grade with very little formal education in the background. So, I struggle but I manage through ninth grade and kept on going to graduate from Berkeley High School. In 1976.

SPV: What are some of your favorite memories of Berkeley High School or from that time period?

TP: My headset just went out of batteries.

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SPV: Okay, we're resuming after slight technical difficulties. And so I believe, we were talking about – the question was, what are some of your favorite memories or experiences from your time at Berkeley High, or just during the time period that you were in high school?

TP: Berkeley High School was wonderful. It – I would not have wished any other high school really, because Berkeley High was fun and a joyful experience. Made lot of friends, participate in lot of social, sport activities. So, school life was good. No complaints. I was very active in school, socially as well as in sports and academics. So, I was never bored. By the way, I took my yearbook with me to Da Nang. [Laughs] I still have it. Yeah.

SPV: Do you have any funny stories about culture shock when you came or like, even like, when you were growing up, were there any particular experiences where you were pretty shocked because of like, the change in culture?

TP: Oh yeah. Well, I mentioned earlier, I – because of the war and because the U.S. policy towards Viet Nam, I thought – When I arrived at the hospital and they put me – I was on the

stretcher, and they wheeled me into the elevator, and I thought they were gonna kill me. Yeah. That was – that was the first bad experience. I resisted death all the way. [Laughs] They even give me extra anesthesia because I fight so much to stay awake. [Laughs] But that was the experience in the hospital. After the, y'know, got out of the hospital and begins a normal life, the family was so loveable and forgiving, and all my hostility toward them – eventually those hostilities surpassed, and I became considered the child of the family so. My brothers of course had to put up with me, but life was good. Many, many good experience. Many memories of growing up having the love of my life. Yeah.

SPV: And, while you were in the U.S., how were you able to keep in touch with family, relatives or friends? Or how often were you also able to keep in touch with them?

TP: Up until the end – end of the war, I was not able to contact anybody at all. Until after the war, I got back in touch with family by coming back - going back to the village where I was born and raised, and reconnected with relatives and extended family and friends. That was back in the 1980s.

SPV: Okay. So, let's talk about holidays and what were your favorite memories related to like, your favorite holidays? So, so which holidays are important –

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SPV: - to you, and why are they important to you?

TP: I think, in the U.S., holidays are special to me, especially Christmas, Thanksgiving, because those were the times that the family were together. I think those were important. Right now, I'm living my life in Viet Nam, so of course there's holidays here too, and they're special too. Especially New Years, because culturally, Vietnamese tradition, New Year's are the best. You know that. [Laughs]

SPV: Yes. Okay. Speaking more on your time in the U.S., what changes did you see in the Vietnamese population in America?

TP: The Vietnamese community in the U.S. are changing a lot since the war. Because now that the two countries are in good standing, good friendship, cultural exchanges, businesses. So many Vietnamese are looking towards Viet Nam as their roots, as the country of their birth. For so many that was displaced or had to leave Viet Nam for many reasons, now they can freely return to Viet Nam and reconnected with their pasts.

SPV: And then, what do you think are some of the most important political issues Vietnamese Americans should pay attention to in the U.S.?

TP: Politically, they should be active, they should be aware of what is going on, especially during this time of election, they should understand the issues and the problems that the country is facing. So, make sure that their vote is for the future of their children and grandchildren.

Especially during this hard time of COVID-19, they should be aware of the fact that - health issues is among the things that they should be voting for, understanding what is healthy for them, medically and politically and culturally. Economically of course is important, to maintain a strong economic, political – with the countries is by understanding the issues that they're facing today.

SPV: And so you had a very different experience with COVID-19 seeing as you spent your time in Viet Nam while this pandemic happened, so how has COVID-19 impacted your daily life?

TP: I got back in Viet Nam in December of 2019, which was right before the high point of the COVID-19 – caught up around the world. Viet Nam was very good at dealing with the problem from the very beginning, so we were – in fact, feel very safe and secured. As we all know, Viet Nam right now in a very good situation, protecting their citizens by protecting –

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TP: - the boarders and entries to the country. So any cases that come into Viet Nam will be isolated from the – right at the airports, right at the point of entry. So there's no issue of widespread here. As we all know, it happens around the world. During the high point, the whole country of Viet Nam was under lockdown. Every community was not supposed to be running around crazy like the U.S. or many other countries. So we were very safe. The first two months, we were in the house. My wife had bought enough foods to last us three months. And anything we really needed, we ordered and had them delivered. That's how we were able to deal with this pandemic.

SPV: So what will you remember the most about it?

TP: It happened right after – during the Vietnamese New Year, when it hit. So we were unable to celebrate it like previous years. So we felt kind of upset that we couldn't go out and have fun. [Laughs] No, no parties, no drinking, no wild parties, so...yeah. It - it was a sad time. But, you know, just the last couple weeks, Viet Nam was back pretty much normal. Yeah. Right now, the whole country are able to travel. Air travel is back to normal. And we are going to Da Lat this week for short break. [Laughs]

SPV: So, this quarter I worked with the Oakland Little Saigon community. And so, what are some experiences and memories that you have with Oakland's Little Saigon or Eastlake district?

TP: Living in Berkeley, next to Oakland most of my life, I watched the community changes and growth. East Oakland used to be just a place that people can't even drive through without having to worry about their life. But, East Oakland of today has many, many changes – and good changes. Communities are strong, with many mixed cultures – Latinos as well as Blacks, Whites, Asians – are able to live together and enjoying the culture of those communities. I spend a lot of time in East Oakland up until last December, eating and just running around Lake Merritt. Lake Merritt today is wonderful compared to Lake Merritt of the seventies, where people literally had



to fish out bodies – stuff. So, it has lot of good changes. Positive changes. Oakland is becoming a very – very competitive against – with San Francisco. Yeah. So, citizens of East Oakland should appreciate the – you know, the life they have right now. Minus the negative points.

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SPV: And what does that area mean to you?

TP: It – recently it meant a lot to me. Because it provide a lot of positive feelings. It give me a chance to go there and enjoy the multi-ethnic cultures foods, drinks and being able to mingle among the people there. Lake Merritt is a wonderful place to go now. I recommend people spend lots of time there. [Laughs] Not because I love it, I think other people will love it too.

SPV: So you said that recently it means a lot to you? Like, when did you start finding a lot of meaning in the area then. And like, what did – why did you start gaining that meaning?

TP: Just when Oakland was building up. And cleaning up places like Lake Merritt. And making a lot of changes – positive changes. Yeah. Like, lot of newly renovated and new buildings and renovations of Lake Merritt was one of the greatest changes in Oakland's history.

SPV: Okay. So, to wrap up – yeah? Okay.

TP: Yeah – you paused.

SPV: Okay. So to wrap up, is there anything that we haven't covered that you would like to talk about?

TP: Oh, there's a lot of things that I can talk about. I can talk all day about being – growing up and living in the Bay Area. I think, you know, traveled around the U.S. as a child, growing up, but growing up in the Bay Area was a high point of my life. Understanding that not just California, but especially the Bay Area provides a lot of opportunities for people to explore and enjoy life. That would be the point. [Laughs]

SPV: Okay. And then, what are some final words or advice that you would have for future generations?

TP: My advice to the future generations, especially the Vietnamese communities in the U.S. and in the Bay Area – try to be open. Trying to – not to be biased, as much, but trying to understand other cultures. Respect other cultures. And learn more about other cultures and people among your community. Vietnamese-American especially need to understand that – where they came from, and learn about the history of their culture, of their past, as well as now and in the future. Viet Nam and the U.S. are now at very good standing, and Vietnamese people in the U.S. need to understand that, and learn more about that. And look back to their homeland. Many, many Vietnamese in the U.S. have made major contributions to the economy, and they should look back to Viet Nam and appreciate the past, because you cannot accomplish the future without the past. It's all connected. Understanding your culture is a – a very important. It's part of life. Yeah.

Remember your roots is part of life. If you cut off your roots, it's like the tree that dies because of the roots no longer there. Yeah. For the Vietnamese in the United States, the roots are here, in Viet Nam. Yeah.

SPV: Okay. Cool. Thank you so much.

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