Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: NINA MAI
Interviewer: Amanda Nguyen
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Length of Interview: 01:31:10

00:00:25 Nina introduces herself and her parents. She was born in Nha Trang in 1979.
00:01:07 She explains how her upbringing in Anaheim, California was different than her friends because of her Vietnamese culture.
00:01:50 Nina explains how she went “full circle,” after graduating from the University of California, Irvine.
00:05:00 She describes how she felt when she visited Vietnam for the first time since leaving and the differences between Vietnam then and now.
00:03:55 Nina talks about how her parents and grandparents were back in Vietnam. Her grandfather always made the decisions despite not having work when moving to America.
00:12:23 Story of how her father decided to stay back in Vietnam for her mother instead of taking a flight to America. Nina begins to tell the story of her family’s attempts to leave Vietnam.
00:24:00 Nina describes why her father wanted to live in Australia and not the United States. In the United States they were first green carded and then her parents and her became citizens by way of testing, naturalization.
00:27:00 Nina talks about her family and how they living in America and being accustomed to American ways make them Vietnamese Americans.
00:30:36 Nina tells about her 10-year-hiatus to Japan after college where she met her husband and had her 1st wedding out of three. In Japan Nina was part of the Japanese Exchange and Teaching program.
Because of her travels, she is determined to enroll her sons into what she explains is a dual immersion program. Nina explains a metaphor of how America is a salad bowl of different cultures rather than a soup.

Nina describes in depth how she and her husband met in Japan at a village’s festival where she was selling muffins for her non-profit organization, Ethnic Minorities Outreach.

Although she graduated in biological sciences, she faints at the sight of blood and so took a different approach to real estate, following her mother’s footsteps by creating a family business.

Nina explains that she enjoys her job because it is challenging, however, resents leaving her children alone while she is working.

If it had not been for the war, Nina explains that her parents’ occupations may have been very different.

When asked about her refugee camp experience, Nina describes her stay in Sembawang, Singapore and Galang, Indonesia before her family was sponsored and flown to Kansas City, Missouri.

Nina describes her family’s first thoughts in Kansas City. Because the weather was so cold Nina’s family had a road trip to California where they settled permanently.

Nina tells the story of how her grandfather was put in a reeducation camp for 6 months in Vietnam because he owned the largest bricking company in the entire province.

On topic of leaving Vietnam, it took 3 attempts to flee the country by boat because there were difficulties with the boat itself. When they were finally out at sea, the men who sold them the boat did not know how to actually drive a boat. Luckily, her father was able to steer the boat.

Nina goes in depth explaining her non-profit organization, Ethnic Minorities Outreach, that fundraises to build fresh water wells and schools in Vietnam.
01:10:17 Nina tells a funny story about her experience in a gay club on the beach in Nha Trang.

01:12:45 Nina says how she is grateful for being in America and greatly appreciates her parents decision to leave everything they know from Vietnam to come to America.

01:13:30 Nina also explains the different priorities given to children based on their parent's belief in communism in Vietnam. Nina would not have been able to go to school in Vietnam for not being a communist.

01:15:57 Nina’s first time experiencing racism was at a Denny’s Restaurant in Lake Havasu. Her family was on vacation in the area and the restaurant denied them service.

01:21:30 Nina explains how her grandparents had a difficult time adjusting to American life.

01:26:25 Nina taught her husband and her two sons Vietnamese. She says if it had not been for meeting him in Japan, to this day her family would solely speak English.