Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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TVD: Today is Friday, July 20th, 2012. This is Thuy Vo Dang with the Vietnamese Oral History Project, I am in Fountain Valley, California. I will be interviewing Ms. Bichlien Nguyen. Okay, can you please introduce yourself…your name, date of birth, and place of birth?

BN: My name is Bichlien Nguyen and I was born on September 28th, 1954 in Saigon, Vietnam.

TVD: Can you share with me some memories of Saigon…as early as you remember?

BN: Yeah, I was born in Saigon but actually, when I was young, I was brought to Dai Lang, or something like Quan Lan, and then when I was back, we lived in Saigon for awhile but I don’t think that I remember that well. Saigon is a very busy city, but I just remember the memory of Saigon before I went to the United States, before immigrating…was when I was actually a college student. I went to pharmacy school in Saigon, so I think that’s most of the memories that I had. Prior to that, I lived in the outskirts of Saigon in a place called Khanh Chon, which was the training grounds for the Vietnamese military young recruits, because my father was, you know, an officer in the army at that time. So I went to school in a place called, it’s like a county or it’s called Hup Yhum, Ba Diem or Co Chiem, it’s in that area. I did not have a lot of memories of Saigon until I went to college, until I went to the college of pharmacy in Saigon. And mostly just memories of my friends, some memories of teachers…I have to say that it’s been a long time and I forgot a lot of things. What impressed me most was when I came back to visit…recently 7
years ago…the place we called Saigon is much smaller than the place we call Saigon now. So, there’s more people. Back then, there was one thing I remember the most about Saigon. It was in 1968, Mua Tun, you know when the north invaded the south. We were in Cuan Choan, and of course Cuan Choan being a military place it was attacked by the north, or whoever. So, I remember my father because he was one of the officers and he had to go out to lead the counter attack. And he brought back a letter of a 14 year old northern soldier, a letter to his family and how he missed his family so much and this and that. So far that, I guess that we stayed there for a few days and then it was still unsafe so my father decided to send the family…he stayed back…to our aunt’s house in Saigon. And it was just the fear, and you listen to all the bombs, all the shootings, the shouting, and it was at that time 12:13 or something like that. Well, it wasn’t pleasant at all. And even Saigon at that time, you always hear stories about a coffee house would be bombed or stray shells. We didn’t really live the war like people in the country side would experience…I would say. We were pretty sheltered. People still went to school, go to shows, to movies, and went to…I mean, it’s a pretty normal life I would say.

TVD: So you mentioned that your father was a military officer…can you talk more about more memories about him? What rank he was in, what division?

BN: He was…I don’t know how to translate into English. A trung ta, maybe a lieutenant or sergeant. And I remember living initially in a compound where the officers lived, and we had a lot of friends and then after that, he was transferred to Li Kay, where there was a lot of fighting, you know he was an inspector or something. And then after that he went to Phuc Cuoi, you know we didn’t follow him, we stayed. So, my memories of him was he was a very...famous in our circle to be a very straight person. He was not corrupt at all. Sometimes in the military, people like generals or something we always talk about things like that. But I remember it is kind of
funny because we lived in San Cuan Jung. So it was very far, so I had to take the public transportation, xe lam, you know what it is? And so when he went to work, he had a chauffeur who took him, and he would pass by me walking but never pick me up. He was that straight. Only if it was raining really hard, maybe he would take pity on me. I thought it was pretty far from the house to where we would get public transportation. I could see that my friends could ride in their father’s car and my father would not do that. I was not angry, but that was just him. He was by the book, there are people who would go to my mom and tell her how he would not take this money, why don’t you…but she wouldn’t. There were good memories of him but we hardly saw him. When he was in Canh Jun was when we saw him the most but when he was transferred to Li Kay we never saw him. Actually when in April 1975 when my mom was trying to get us out of the country, he was in Phoi Cuoc. So he was on leave that day. I remember on April 29, he was at home. So he said, okay, I have to go back to Phoi Cuoc, but he could not find any transportation. And the rest of the families were already on the boats.

TVD: And how many were there in your family?

BN: So, I had 5 brothers and sisters. My mom, sisters, and brothers all went on the boat. Actually, my brother, he’s the oldest boy in the family, he’s younger than me and my other sister. He was third in the family, he was 17 then, but he could not get on the boat so he was left behind. We didn’t even know where our father was until later on. He was able to avoid the tanks. Because he was walking to our house from Viet Dic Dong, which is very far from Saigon, but anyway, my brother, the 17 year old was left behind and he was throw in prison for 5, 6 years and he decided not to try again. But anyway, back to my father. So he was a very straight, by the book guy and maybe that’s why he went to one of the very early military trainings…the truong Vo Bi, you know it’s like a military academy. It was like a West Point kind of thing, but at that
time it was *Vo Bi Hue*, it was it Hue that’s why it’s called *Vo Bi Hue*. The second one. So most of his classmates became generals so he was probably lowest rank. And I believe because he didn’t want to play with the system. He was a very good solider, you know when he was very young, before everything he was very high ranking…a major when he was young. But after that, there was the Monk *Di Yiep*. He was a Buddhist, so he didn’t want to join the party at that time that was *Cun Lao*, so I think that’s what kind of…he’s probably not a team player I’d say. That was his problem. It was good and it was bad. But looking bad, I’m very proud of him. He was a good person, he was very talented. He’s a very good handyman, he can make beautiful things…he makes cabinets, he makes a lot of things for his friends like remodeling their houses…their bathrooms, their bedrooms. He was a very good carpenter I’d say…in Vietnam. But when he came here he did that too. But when he came here he was older, and you know, he worked as an assembler in an electronic company. I remember he used to love the singing, song birds, but here of course. He did a lot of gardening, carpentry, stuff like that.

TVD: Well, how about your mother?

BN: My mom, when she was in Vietnam…being married to an officer and the way that he was, we did not have a lot of money. So she had to work, and for awhile she worked as a drug rep. For awhile, our father was away and she was away for her trips to other cities or provinces to sell drugs…pharmaceuticals. So we stayed home, took care of each other and may or may not have like servants who help us, but it was okay. We took care of ourselves. She was very caring. My mom was like the typical Vietnamese mother. Really did not think of herself, she’s still alive and does very well. But when she was 38, she had cancer. And, so she had to have surgery…she has recto cancer, so basically at the age of 38, a woman came into the hospital and had a colonoscopy. And we talked about this, so she doesn’t mind me sharing this. So she had a
colonscopy and took her entire uterus out, she was in the hospital for 2 months. And it was very sad because I was about 18 at that time and I had 5 younger brothers and sisters and the youngest was 2. She was very concerned at that time, and every day I would try to come in to bring her food. Because in Vietnam there was no hospital food to worry about, she had to lie in the bed with another person. And the other person was a 29 year old woman. 29 year old woman who actually died…You know, in the same bed. It was horrible, so that’s experience…really changed. People ask me why I became an oncologist and part of it is because of that short experience…in doing her treatment for cancer. Prior to that, of course being a 38 year old, when she had the symptoms she never thought it was cancer and then she did and never talked to me about it back then and even know I don’t think she wants to talk about it. And she was taking some pills that was supposed to treat cancer, not that I knew about it at that time. I just knew the name of it, and later when I heard about…that’s why she knew, she was in denial. And finally because of the location of the cancer, she could not pretend that it was nothing…she had to get treatment. And I can still see that kind of attitude in a lot of Vietnamese women here, even in this time. And that experience, that experience really changed me.

TVD: Were you still a pharmacy student at that time?

BN: I was a pharmacy student at that time but in Vietnam it’s not like the first three years you did not study much about pharmaceutical kinetics, you learn about pharmacology, you learn about botany, basically trying to teach you the basics of science. Here, you go to a professional school after you get your bachelor’s degree but in Vietnam you go straight to a professional school after high school. So I was only 18 when I got into pharmacy school and in 1985, I was not quite 21.
TVD: Why did you choose, that you wanted to study pharmacy at that time?

BN: You know, at that time, I knew that I wanted to be in a health care profession. Actually, if I had my choice, and this is another thing. You know, typical Vietnamese. You know, my mom told me, number one you are a girl, so being a doctor is very difficult, and also I had severe allergies…always had a cough, runny nose, so my mom said I could not be a doctor because of all these medical problems. So my mom said why not become a pharmacist so that you can still be in the health care profession. So there’s always that bias, that women should not go into something…that women would become pharmacists and men should become doctors.

TVD: Were there a lot of men in pharmacy school?

BN: There were a lot of men too, yes, but like I said, in many families, the feeling was that if you want to go into a health care profession it’s probably better to become a pharmacist. Not only that, but also because some…one of my uncles was a pharmacist and was married to a pharmacist. So we thought it was in the family as well.

TVD: That bias still exists in the community today.

BN: Oh really, yes. I do see a lot of Vietnamese but I thought there were also men and women…you know women should just marry and become a pharmacist and lead a more stable life.

TVD: Yeah, it’s consistent.

BN: Yeah, and have children, exactly.

TVD: So, you were around 18 when your mom had cancer. And you were the oldest…so how did everyone else handle it. I know you were there supporting your mom the most.
BN: You know, my mom protected us. And a lot of the kids didn’t know what was going on. We heard about cancer but we didn’t know how serious it was to tell you the truth. Even at that time, even though I was taking care of her, I didn’t really… I was not scared, I did not think she would die. So, I don’t think that my brothers and sisters were really aware of what was going on.

TVD: So, when you were 18, what year was that?

BN: Let’s see, it was 1972. I think I got into pharmacy school in 1972.

TVD: And your family was living in Cuan Jun?

BN: Right, at that time, we were not living in San Cuan Jun because my father was already transferred elsewhere. But, we were in that area, you know what we called Nan Than Jun, you know Quoc Lo So 1, the intersection.

TVD: Okay, so can you reflect back on the experiences you had at school during that time? What were some of the relationships that you had… what was it like, you know what you did for entertainment… what was your life like?

BN: At that time since I went to school, I had to stay at my aunt’s house. She was married to a dentist and they had 7 children. They lived in house like 3-4 stories, each story was very narrow. It was very fun with my cousins and we are still close nowadays, I have a small group of friends… and we had fun, doing what we called Yun Vuns, you know, little shows, little get togethers, we practiced and performed. We may go to another school (TVD: Was it part of a formal organization?) No, not at all. And then we go to school and then pharmacy school is nothing like here. I can’t tell you much about the school of medicine but I can tell you a few buildings. And I remember when I tried to read up something and I went to the library and there
were hardly any books. And some of the books were really old, no journals at all…you know you basically get your knowledge from your professors, your TAs, you have to take notes or buy notes. So, it was mostly didactic. It was very boring. I really didn’t like it at all to tell you the truth. It’s so different from when I went to college here. You have so much more opportunity to explore and find out what you really like. Even if you have a question, you can still go to the library and look things up, and even, I told me children now, when I was in Vietnam, the library at the college could not even compare at the library at an elementary school. It’s so bad. I just wonder how we train…how we make up for that by being very diligent, we study hard and study long into the night, and try to make up for this.

TVD: Was there tuition?

BN: Yes, there was. But I don’t really remember how much. But I guess it wasn’t much because once you get into the school, tuition was not bad at all because they are more like public schools once you get in.

TVD: So, in that time period…your late teens…somewhat independent cause you’re in Saigon and not with your immediate family. You talked a little about your social life, were you allowed to date?

BN: I guess sort of, but it’s not like dating here. It’s not very…besides you try to study so hard that you don’t really have time. Some of my friends did date but it’s not like here at all. It’s more like you can talk to them, you can closer than other friends, but still I did see, and it usually does happen in college because it’s more acceptable. I remember in high school I talk to the boys like it’s because they would sit on one side, but in college we were more free in our relationships. But
I don’t remember dating anyone seriously at that time. It’s not the thing to do if you were a good girl. And you study hard.

TVD: So, how long were you at the school?

BN: 3 years. So that was from 1972 to 1975, when we left at the fall of Saigon.

TVD: Did you complete a degree? How long is the program?

BN: No, not at all. It’s a five year program.

TVD: So, what happened in 1975?

BN: In 1975, I remember I was at school. At that time, we knew that some of the provinces were falling. And there was some talk in the class, my friend and I were talking…oh, the Viet Cong is coming, there were rumors that they would come in and make these college girls marry their wounded soldiers, and if you had polished nails they would pull your nails out…horrible things, so anyway, at that time…you hear a lot of things. Like in Saigon, you were isolated from the realities of war, you were protected from the war…any deaths in the war were like freak accidents, stray bombs, sometimes people would toss a grenade in a café or something. But for me I never went to those things so it was kind of removed from me. And then came April 29, my mom was being a mother and knew what was going on. So she was kind of protective of us, she didn’t discuss anything with us until the day before we went and she told me what to do and sewed some kind of bags to us, and we didn’t really have much money, we were pretty poor. My father was living apart and my mother left her job…and was trying to do some job and sell electrical stuff but that did not work out. So some of my uncles told her to raise pigs and she actually did that but yeah, I did help out. But one of my brothers was like 12 or 13 and was
helping her with that actually, so she became a pig farmer, so she raised pigs and we had piglets. When she grew up, she grew up…my grandfather was a head of a province in the north before the parting of Vietnam. She grew up in a pretty good but, that her history is a long history. She was stranded for several years when she was like 10 or 11 until she was 14, 16. She had to take care of herself by you know, **bun gao**, she would go and for many kilometers, miles to get rice…and then she would bring it back on her shoulders, **don gan**. And bring it back to sell it and support herself. Many times the **ming yin** would take them into the jungle and take their profits. So she had nothing. She was stranded in this area until she left for Hanoi. And then a couple of years later she got married and moved to the south. And that’s sort of why she’s so resourceful because of that period in her life. So she was trying to get us on a boat, it turns out that one of my father’s first cousins was a NAVY officer who was a commander of a small boat. But his boat or ship was disabled. It had four engines but only one was working, but we can still use it because Viet Cong is here and we have to leave. She was able to get all of us on the ship except my brother. So my brother was left behind…but his story is another story, that would be interesting because I don’t really know everything about his life then. (TVD: Is he here now?) He’s here now. So, we went on that boat for about several days. We had to be towed by another ship to, I’m kind of rambling…what were we talking about before?

TVD: What were you doing, how did you leave?

BN: Right, so that’s how we left. Because my mom knew what was going on. If it was left to me I probably didn’t know what was going on even though I was 18 at that time. I can see 18 year olds here who can take care of themselves and be very sophisticated but for myself even though I was a college student I was not very self-sufficient at all. I helped my mom, was able to get around on my motor bike but I don’t think I knew what was going on in a deeper level. I guess at
that time if I did not have my mom I could take care of my brothers and sisters. I know that at that time I was scared. My brother was left behind…when we realized that, my mom actually wanted to leave the ship to go look for him. I was so scared that she would be gone and that no one would take care of us. So, it was kind of at that time, you know on the one hand we want her to go look, but at the time she was not able to leave the ship because my uncle would not let her go at that time because it’s already left the dock.

TVD: So it was her and 5 children.

BN: It turned out that later one, he was able to get on the same boat. Even though he walked probably 30 miles to get there. and he had to dodge the tanks, you know. So, finally the last minute I think, he was there. He was actually able to take some of my cousins along, who happened to take in refuge. They lived in Nha Trang at that time and Nha Trang was lost, so they were able to come down south and live with us at that time. And so he was able to take the three boys with him. The girls, some of my other cousins had to stay back and came here way later.

TVD: So what port did you depart from?

BN: From bing dan lang. So it was not like boat people or anything like that, it was pretty much not dramatic at all except for the fact that you know it’ should happen that way because the way it happened was this: my uncle’s ship was docked at bing dan lang, but for some reason he did not tell the family to go straight where he docked. He had to tell them to wait because he was probably afraid that people would storm the ship. So we went there and he sent a little boat out to pick us up. So other people would push away children and old people and jump on the boat. So my brother and uncles would let children and women go first and finally the boat was disabled and no one could come out anymore. There was a lot of shooting and my uncle decided to leave.
My uncle-in-law, who married my aunt, the dentist – he died in prison. So he and my brother tried to leave the country 6 months later and they were caught. And I guess that he contracted typhoid fever in prison and so he died. And they have 7 children, even younger than my family. And my aunt had to raise them unmarried and they are doing very well now.

TVD: So how about your family? Where did you end up?

BN: We ended up…so we were towed to one of the other NAVY ships. Towed us to Subic Bay, Philippines. And from there we went on a merchant boat. There were thousands of us on there for a few days to Guam. We stayed in Guam for a month, month and a half. Roughly about late May or early June we flew to Indian Town Gap in Pennsylvania and we stayed there until July. In the middle of July, I can’t remember exactly either on the 7th or 8th we went to Albuquerque. We were sponsored by a Lutheran church.

TVD: So it sounds like in those few months there was a lot of movement. Do you have any moving standout memories from that time period?

BN: You know, when were on my uncle’s ship we did not know where we were going. We did not know it was permanent, we just thought we were going. I don’t know even if my uncle knew, so we just thought we’d move for awhile and when things settled down we’d come back. And then we found out, that’s it. Several weeks later again, we found out that it’s over. And so it’s kind of scary, but it’s amazing that young people…I didn’t know what my parents were thinking. We were hopeful, and so we sang, and had little get together, talked, sang together, and we did not have any…amazing that you don’t worry when you’re young. We wanted to have a good time regardless and when we went to Guam and Subic Bay for a few days. When we were on the boat we didn’t want to eat because if you eat and have to go, the other functions, and where
would you go, especially for girls. And what they did was put extensions…the ship was really huge and they put planks so if you had to urinate or whatever you had to do it out there.

TVD: Where everyone can see?

BN: Yeah not only that, it’s above the water! And you know the ship was running. No way, I’m not going near that. So the solution was that you don’t eat or drink.

TVD: For how many days?

BN: For several days. So it wasn’t that bad. But you know when you are pushed to extremes you can do it I guess. And when we were in Guam, I remember the beach there was a lot of sea cucumbers. Some of the people there went to the beach. The water was shallow. There were thousands of sea cucumbers and so people dried them on top of their tents and they probably wouldn’t be able to bring them to the United States or wherever they go anyway but I saw that and it’s funny.

TVD: To eat?

BN: You know the sea cucumber, the sea creatures that was supposed to be aphrodisiac and they are very expensive and they serve it in Chinese restaurants. And so these refugees when they saw that they couldn’t help it but they have to dry them. Just hopefully they can take it with them and make some money. And we didn’t have bathing suits but old clothes that were donated. We fashioned bathing suits out of that, we were dark and skinny and ran around. And the days you just go to the beach and do whatever. There’s nothing else to do…learn some English but there wasn’t much there either and you go to…getting in line for food. That is most of the time what we did. Just getting in line and okay, is there chicken today? Chicken was the best you can get.
TVD: What kind of food did they serve?

BN: Okay, of course rice but it was terrible because it was soggy. We had a lot of bread. I liked bread at that time. I ate a lot of bread and butter. We didn’t like fish at all. It wasn’t like Vietnam where you fry it. It was like boiled and the smell wasn’t...we weren’t used to that kind of fish. If there was chicken then great, people would go like three four times. For the young people there was a lot of singing and getting together. We made a few friends but we don’t know where they are now.

TVD: You mentioned that you were learning some English. Did you know that you were going to the U.S.?

BN: Well actually not a lot. I didn’t really learn a lot because at that time people did do that but I knew some English in Vietnam already being a college student, you have to know a foreign language. I actually did go to Hoi Viet Ngu; you’re probably not aware it’s an American, but basically they have English teachers from America or Australia, and afterwards if you want a certification from University of Michigan, you can take a test for proficiency…and I have that. I still keep the certificate and I show my son-in-law who’s a grad of U of Michigan and I say see! I’m also blue and gold. I have this. So it was kind of fun. So I knew some English already. And you just try, you knew that were going to the United States most likely from Guam. I was trying to refresh my memory, you know practice as much as I could. But I don’t, you know there wasn’t any organized classes or anything like that. Not that I knew of. It was too early. The Americans didn’t know what was going on, and they did their best. It was orderly and I think they did know that something was going to happen that’s why, but I don’t think that they did plan in advance in teaching us English not at that time.
TVD: So, did your family know that you wanted to go the U.S.? Or how were you selected?

BN: At the time it was because we went on an American boat. I think only the boat people…for the first wave, for us we didn’t plan to go anywhere, we just had to get out of Saigon and so we did. Because of my uncle’s ship we were able to get out and we were lucky to be picked up. So while we were on the boat there was a communication between an American boat or headquarters or that’s why we went to Subic Bay, which is part of the U.S. bay. And that’s why we go to the United States and so we didn’t have to go through selection.

TVD: So when you arrived in Indian Town Gap, what was it like?

BN: It was in the summer, so it was pretty hot. But it was beautiful. I mean this is the first time…I saw barracks, it was quite empty. Not empty because there were first wave of people before us. So each family was assigned a barrack and we lived with other families and we took turns and took turns caring for the restrooms, sanitation inside and outside barrack and they have places where we get our food…a mess hall, whatever. There was a very good, there was this guy, Bill Back. Just like the composer I remember his name because of Back. I think he was from Illinois, much older, but he spoke Vietnamese very fluently. Maybe he was in the CIA or we didn’t know. So he helped some of us in camp, if we spoke some English he was able …we were sent to a Girls Scout camp in Pittsburg….

BN: …doing things in that camp…so we learned some songs, I still remember some of the songs from that.

TVD: American songs?
BN: American songs. Girl Scout songs. So it was in Pittsburg somewhere…I don't know where because I thought it belonged to the Girl Scouts but now knowing, but I'm not sure anywhere. I'm not sure exactly where in Pittsburg. But it was very nice, we went for about a week. I remember the name of some of the girls that went with us, and then…

TVD: Do you remember what was the purpose of the camp?

BN: I guess it was just to help us to strive to understand more about the American culture and hopefully that would help us assimilate better at that time. No one really explained they just said okay there was this opportunity to go and why not? It was kind of good. I was kind of shy then even though I spoke the language but I think that, and I remember when we first were taught like how are you? I'm fine thank you. And then you say thank you and you are welcome. And we talk to each other and we said thank you and she said sure, and we were like, why did she say sure? And so you know that was good. Even that little bit of things, we saw a difference in culture. What we saw in the book was different then in real life.

TVD: So how long were you in Indian Town Gap for?

BN: For about a month.

TVD: Oh, that’s it?

BN: Yes, and I remember Ca Si Khanh Ly was there too. And because there’s one night that she sung there. I have to ask her if she remembers that. And they have movies at night, and you can…I remember, I think there was a very famous Vietnamese guitarist, Ong Dun Phung. So, he played for us, just sitting outside on the lawn outside the barracks and we just sang together, and he played the guitar and it was very nice. You know being nice, we don’t really worry about
tomorrow. At that time I wasn’t worried about what was going to happen to me. At that time you just live day by day, you’re just like okay I’m alive, I have food and shelter, my family’s okay even though we do miss our brother. We just went to the flow.

TVD: Were you able to get news about him?

BN: No, not even showing. We did not know whatever happened at all. I can’t remember exactly how we got the first news about him. I don’t remember. It was probably months later before we found out what was going on. At that time one of my uncles was able to escape and we found out what happened to him and my other uncle.

TVD: So, where did your family resettle? Why were you sent to Albuquerque?

BN: Well, so my father, being the head of the family, he went to look for sponsors. When you go as a large family it’s hard. Not everyone will be able to sponsor a large family. So there was a church in New Mexico, a Lutheran church and my father was a Buddhist. My mom is a Catholic. But, so he decided to sign up with that church and that’s where we went. He just told us we were going and there was no discussion.

TVD: So it was an American church.

BN: An American church.

TVD: So was there any big wide resources?

BN: When we got off the plane and was greeted by these nice people, they took us in this car…they already rented a small house, a 2 bedroom house I think and they had some rice there. Already some basic food there, and then they took us, 2 weeks…1 week after that, my mom dad, sister and myself…so at that time I was 20 and my sister was 18, so we all went to work. They
were able to get us jobs at the Levis Strauss factory in Albuquerque. So my mom and myself sewed the pockets. My sister, I can’t remember what my sister did. My dad also sewed… I think he did the belt loops, so we worked there for about six months and I got another job. I met my husband there… from there. His dad was working there and of course he did not know any English at all. We helped him, and when we found out… he and his wife was sponsored separately from my husband. My husband was sponsored by his own air force advisor. So, his parents was sponsored by a couple of elderly Americans and you know totally nobody can communicate to each other. And there was missing Vietnamese males. When we met, my future father in law at that time said okay, and he didn’t tell us that he had a song. We just knew that he lived with an elderly couple and so we invited them to our house for a Vietnamese meal and my husband took them, so that’s how we met.

TVD: Okay, so you were working in the 6 months… during which when you met your husband. How did that happen, did you just happen to know each other? Was it the family?

BN: And we got married! That’s was fast. I guess it just happened quickly. My husband decided that he wanted to get married and we were like okay, what’s there to lose? Somehow, we didn’t even have time to… we just decided, okay, I’m a seamstress, that’s probably what I’ll do the rest of my life. Here comes this guy who seems to be… very self-confident even though I probably knew more English than I did. He did most of the talking, I was very shy. I would not go into a store, or a restaurant, he really took care of me and the family too. He helped a lot, and I think that he was a great guy and I still think so.

TVD: So, you were 21?
BN: I just turned 21 when we got married in November 1975. It was a very whirl-wind courtship.

TVD: So what was the wedding like? Did you have an official wedding?

BN: Yes, my mom made ao dai for me and my sisters. We bought stuff from the store to buy the veil. Because my parents in law were very devout Catholics and I was baptized as a Catholic when I was young too. So we were married in a Catholic church and it was funny, the priest told us to wait three years to have children. And my husband laughed because he said that he told us what to do but not how. So of course a year later I had my daughter.

TVD: Were you still in New Mexico? So whirl-wind courtship, marriage in the church, you wore the ao dai in the church too? Was it red or white?

BN: Yes, yes. I only had one ao dai and it was white. I wore a white veil, I can show you the picture. I can show you later. And then I think at that time, we were Catholic…my husband’s sponsor had a beautiful Cadillac and that’s how we traveled, in style. The guests were mostly sponsors, people from the church and it was done at the Catholic church hall, not the Lutheran church. Of course they were invited and came. Most of the Vietnamese community in Albuquerque was there.

TVD: How many people?

BN: I don’t remember…there was a lot of people because people would bring in…My husband still laughs because we only spent 50 dollars for our wedding. You know 50 dollars because the rings probably like 50 dollars each but it was donated. The food and flowers were donated or people would do pot luck kind of things. The church hall was free for the reception, and that was
free of charge and we had the only 50…we had to buy a suit for him and that was $50. It was very nice and that was the first time that somebody brought champagne and I was drunk and I was dizzy and I almost passed out. The cake…there was also a cake and it was donated and the newspaper, had a picture and it was funny because we weren’t traditional. The day of the wedding at our house, the reported came and said this is the first Vietnamese wedding here and they were so excited and asked when we were going to drink tea and they asked us when the team ceremony was. So finally they said we had to have some tea. So they went to go get it.

TVD: Do you still have that newspaper? So that we can keep it in your record.

BN: Yea, I think we do.

TVD: So you said you worked for 6 months at the Levis Strauss…

BN: Okay, so my husband is very assertive. I was doing very well actually, I did 100%. They give you the minimum wage and tell you that you are not really worth it for this wage unless you’re proficient. And you have to sew a certain amount to get there. And I made so many pockets. It’s very rough when you do that. My knuckles were raw and bleeding but that’s the way that it was. My husband was talking to other people and talking and found a teacher’s aide job. And he said it was good for me and I said good, so I had to go in an interview because they wanted to see how good my English was. I didn’t want to go and I was very shy. And so he went and said he would interview for me and so he said see, I can talk with you and her English is better than mine! They wanted a bilingual teacher’s aide because a lot of children were bilingual. And at that time, when I was a teacher’s aide of course I was carrying my daughter also, I was pregnant. Some of the kids were very undisciplined to say the least. But they listened to me, which was amazing and I guess because it was new to them and they did not understand the
language. So they acted out. And then I spoke with them in Vietnamese and told them to show them that Vietnamese people were nice. And then they calmed down and it was really good at that time. So it was a good experience for me, I can’t remember. I think I was there for a term or two, and I decided after I had my daughter to go back to school.

TVD: Were you living with your family still?

BN: No, after we married then, we moved to my husband’s apartment. He had his own apartment at that time and when I got to UNM, University of New Mexico, we moved close by and I had my daughter when she was…I went back to school, actually before that I worked for the Vietnamese Refugee Resettlement Program. Or maybe after. I went back to school and took the ACT, so I was able to go to UNM, and I got what was called the basic grant there. They paid for the tuition and so I have to put my daughter in day care. First day, she was crying like crazy. And everyday, when you ask me about college life, I didn’t really have any college life I just went to study and took care of my children.

TVD: What was your husband doing?

BN: Okay, my husband started out…so he was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam, he did go for few years in college. He never really got a degree and when he came, he was referred to a company, I can’t remember. An electrical company, he started out digging holes and digging things to put electrical stuff. He became an electrician and worked his way up to become a general manager for them. And then when we moved here, he joined another electrical company and took over and he finally started his own company.

TVD: Doing the same thing now?
BN: Doing the same thing in energy, yea.

TVD: So why’d you decide to go back to school? What was the catalyst?

BN: What I really have to credit my husband for all the good things that happened here. Because he could see the type of person that I am. And he knew that I probably would not be good to just stay in one place. He thought I had the ability and he challenged me. He said I have to go back to school, and I asked whether he would help me with that and he said yes. Besides we have parents on both sides, so my husband was one or probably the first refugee in Albuquerque to buy a home. Probably did not have enough money, but I think he was lucky cause his sponsor was a real estate agent. And he told him that right here we don’t rent, cause you’ll lose money. So he was able to buy a home so we were staying with…my mom, parents, and siblings were living nearby. We bought a home for ourselves after a year…for $20,000. Of course, we had to make payments we didn’t have a down payment. Like $200. So, we were able to buy a home so our parents in law lived with us, and they cooked to their hearts content. And so they took care of my daughter, they were working too. So all of us were working, and the young ones go to school. Initially my daughter had to go to day care… I think after a few years my mother in law was able to help out at home because she didn’t work anymore. And then we had cousins and my sister in law came...because they were originally sponsored in Pennsylvania and then they came to live with my parents in law. And then we were able to buy another house. The first house, my parents in law lived there and we were able to have our own house. But it’s amazing how did we do it? I don’t know. We didn’t make a lot of money. And I was going to school. So that’s why I think my husband was smart…I don’t think that I’d be able to go back to school and be successful without my husband and extended family’s support. Not at all.
TVD: So what did you study?

BN: So, the first few years I took some classes of course…general education. I took some Spanish, for two years. I was quite good, so I said maybe…what should I do? Become a Spanish teacher and my husband laughed. I think now, if I made up my mind I still could do. But there were other things distracting me. In the meantime, I took some music classes, biology, math, those are not difficult for me at all. English was sort of. I took Latin of course. After a year, we had a resettlement…the first wave, and they needed people. So I dropped out of school and we took women around to their apartments and help them kind of like Social Worker stuff. Translation, we did that for about a year. And I think I went back to UNM for a year and then my mother moved here. Because my mom moved here…my sister got married to a guy in California. In 1980, we decided that we wanted to come here. So I transferred to UCI. And my husband got a job too in his field here. So that’s what happened.

TVD: So you completed what degree at UCI?

BN: I completed Bachelor’s degree in sciences…Biological Sciences.

TVD: Still the most popular degree today at UCI.

BN: Really? Still? At that time I had no other choice. Because I think with my English and culture barrier, there’s really…I thought hard about what else but I thought that was the best. I guess that I do have some aptitude there even though I like the arts too. At UCI I was exploring things a little bit, I took some singing classes and art appreciation classes but really you have to be realistic. I think my children would have more choices than I do. My daughter went to UCI too and she decided that she’d try Biological Sciences too. But she turned out finally becoming a lawyer.
TVD: Do you remember much about the campus at that time?

BN: Much smaller than now. We had Aldrich Park there. But there was only a few buildings…we had the administration building where the student center used to be. The student center was later. The library and the courtyard, and they started to build the student center there. A few buildings in the back…the arts department in the back but they have more buildings now, the Bren events center. I don’t remember that it was that big before. They have a few small theaters. I don’t think we had the Bachlay at that time. we didn’t have the other theater at the time. I graduated in 1982. So, I mostly went to physical sciences and biological sciences…two buildings there, not a lot.

TVD: Was there much of a Vietnamese population?

BN: There was, I don’t know…at that time we did stay together most of the time. Probably about 50 or 100 of us, scattering around and over the four years that I was there. A lot of us were studying computer sciences, engineering or biological sciences.

TVD: I think that’s still the case today. So what happened after UCI? What did you do?

BN: After UCI, I tried to apply to medical school. I didn’t think I’d be able to because I was older…but I did very well. I graduated high in my class. But I thought maybe I’ll go and become a lab tech or something. Again, my husband said why not try for medical school. But it was too late so I went around and took some classes for OCC, just music, some kind of things to occupy my time and I decided, okay. So I did the MCAT, and I applied and I was on the waiting list and I found out I got accepted to UCI. I only applied to UCI. That’s the problem, because of a young child and my husband’s stable job. And so I said okay, I applied to UCI and if I’m meant to be a
doctor I’ll get accepted. So I did, and that’s it. So I graduated 4 years later in 1987. I started med school in 1983. So I did my residency and decided to become a medical oncologist.

TVD: So where did you do your residency?

BN: Also UCI, where else? Haha. At UCI Medical center, so we have to go through UCI Medical Center, the VA, and also Long Beach Memorial.

TVD: I had a friend that just finished her residency there. So as you were going through medical school and residency, what were some of the challenges that you faced? You said that age was one of the main ones.

BN: Medical school was pretty hard because a lot of my friends have to study together. And a lot of them live around in the apartments and so they got together and had some kind of way to distress…for me, it was to go home and take care and sometimes it was difficult to do group study…time in the labs, and well I think I did okay. I did have some problems initially in my clinical rotations because I was shy. I’m an introvert, not an extrovert. People who know me now would think that I’m a social person but I’m not. I have to really push myself to talk about myself or to talk with other people and exert myself. It’s not my nature at all. It’s something I had to learn and I learned it during medical school, doing my residency. It’s like an ongoing process. In the third year when I did my psychiatric rotations, one of the attending said I was really good, but that I have to get over it. So I just have to sometimes, it’s funny because and I always try to tell other people this…once you push yourself, then it was so easy. It can become your nature. Once you get across that boundary, across that barrier, it’s a wide road for you. Nothing to fear. Every single new situation, I still have to push myself like that otherwise I couldn’t do it. Public speaking was difficult but it was easy after I got over it. I think that’s what
I learned from medical school. Not only the knowledge, but to change as a person also. I don’t know if it’s for the better or worse but it did change me.

TVD: So I know that you had a second child, so when did that happen for you?

BN: It was 13 years later, that’s when I was in my third year of residency. At that time we decided okay, so the worst is over. Internship, the second year, doing all that work, so when you’re in the 3rd year, you are a senior resident and so you become the chief resident so I was doing clinics only. Or when I am in the hospital I would be the chief resident so I was there to supervise. So we decided to have another children. I got pregnant and had my son when I was 35, 36.

TVD: So during all of this, where did you live? You said that a lot of peers lived closer to campus?

BN: Actually we lived…so, when we came here we rented an apartment for awhile and then my husband said, that’s not the good business. So again he bought another house, in Fountain Valley actually, and then when my daughter was ready to go to high school we decided to move to Irvine. So we bought another house and sold the other. At that time we were able to afford houses in Irvine. And we’ve been in Irvine ever since.

TVD: So, you’ve probably seen the Vietnamese community growing over the years. Did you participate in community life?

BN: I guess we are very involved in the Vietnamese community life in many ways. There are things that we try to stay away from, but so of course we shop there. We go eat in the Vietnamese restaurants, we go to community events, book signings, concerts. Most of our
friends are Vietnamese. My patients are right now, because of my profession, are mostly Caucasian but I still have Vietnamese patients. Our works are more removed from the Vietnamese community but my charity is for the Vietnamese community. So I founded the Vietnamese American Cancer Foundation because I see that in the Vietnamese community we have a lot of barriers for cancer patients and knowing what my mom had to go through, and you know, as I grew older I understood her situation more fully and with my training as a physician. I think I appreciate it more. I thought it would be nice to contribute by establishing something that can help these people because cancer…I can see that over the years, with the effort in the community, I think a lot in the VACF there’s an improvement in knowledge and awareness of cancer in our community. We are very involved.

TVD: What year did you found the foundation?

BN: So, in 1993 when I completed my medical training, in hematology, oncology, I was recruited by Dr. John Lang, who was a breast oncologist at that time…for breast cancer because I rotated with him and he told me to join him and so I did that for three years and I didn’t know what was going on. But then, I was probably the only Vietnamese medical oncologist at that time. And a lot of doctors in Orange County. I was in Long Beach at that time and doctor friends called to ask why don’t you come down here. So I opened my practice in Orange County and immediately I could see that there were many problems. The thing that I learned from my training, just to show me that there’s a big gap in access to care and the way that our community perceived cancer…cancer care, treatment, attitude, outlook, and there’s a lot of taboos about talking about cancer. People would not talk about being a survivor, diagnosis. Something that you just hide. Something that’s not nice to talk about, it’s a curse. Not just ung thu but in our culture what you say about illness, it’s bi, but cancer when we talk about it, we always think that
we’d die and we have a lot of false perceptions about treatment and I think that a lot of times when you go to a doctor there’s also additional cultural and language barrier. Cancer is something so scary that a lot of doctors don’t want to explain to patients. And for my experience with cancer care, the health care provider, especially the physician has to be spend time and be patient to help the person, not only the patient but his or her family to come to terms with it and to really help…I think that the level of anxiety or fear would be alleviated. I think the patient would be able to accept treatment in a more intelligent way instead of Oh my god, I’m going to die. You have to take this pill, herb, running around…making decisions and sometimes the wrong one. And this is less and less common now, but I remember my mom originally she did not want to have surgery and at that time she was taking some pills…because she thought if she was cut, then the cancer would spread. And that was the same way people were thinking at that time. so one of the things I was trying to demystify cancer at that time. So at 1996 I was on staff at Fountain valley Regional Hospital. I talked to the administration there. There’s a large Vietnamese community and I just started, I didn’t have money, I was my own doctor and nurse. I did the chemotherapy in my office by myself and I had a few patients a day. I said you know we really have to talk about this. All the Vietnamese patients here, they don’t really know much about cancer and I think not isolated incidence. This is a cultural, social kind of problem here that you need to address. For them it’s a way…to give money for and we started to have the radio at that time. The Little Saigon radio was only two at that time. I started with Little Saigon radio and then I started talking about cancer myself on the radio and so after awhile I said this is not working. People know about it but then what? Patients called back and I could not help them because I had no infrastructure. I don’t really have staff, I have just one MA to help me…how can I do? But some people, a few more people they said okay, we are interested in helping you,
so we sat down, and I said maybe we should put together some kind of…okay we put down some money, we tried that. We started to have computers and we sort of did it and then finally someone talked to us about being incorporated and have the tax-exempt status, 501C3. So finally myself and Dr. Nguyen and HueTran, we asked a lawyer to draft us a bi-law and out together an application and that was in 2002. So it took awhile, but during that time we did a lot of things. Besides the radio show, I recognized that people did not talk about cancer. So I said that we should do a celebration dinner, I learned from the American way. So we started out and we said, okay, so again we did not have money. Some of us donated and we went to the hospitals and sponsors and asked and they helped us. Ever since, we’ve been doing this every year. When we started out, we did it in February or March, but it’s been changing it over the years. And we call it Cancer Survivor Celebration party…for dinner. So we invited, for the first 5-6 years, we never charged anybody. We got donations from whatever, they charged minimal price basically. And we had fun, and last few years we decided that funding is going to be down so we starting charging tickets, but not for cancer survivors. So we are going to have one in November this year.

TVD: So it’s been a decade with the foundation. How has it changed?

BN: It’s been a decade, yeah. So we’ve been lurching. Initially, even though we have the name, that sounds grandiose, we had no staff. Just myself, some of the people who were sort of volunteering their times, Hue Tran Leonard, was also a founder yes, so we worked from my office and got some grants, we were able to get tobacco grants. We had ups and downs because none of us were professional…organizers for non-profits. We didn’t know what was going on. We just did because we wanted to do something good for the community. We learned along the way and I think despite the mistakes that we went, despite our experience, I think we made an
impact in the community regarding cancer. Maybe 3 or 4 people would raise their hands. The first time, we had 400 people and only 4 raised their hands as survivor cancer. Before we thought no one would come, but the first time there was so many people. Every year there are more and more survivor cancers who are willing to come…and some of them would be even brave enough to come for the fun and share their stories. And we see that all the time now, and I think that is important. The first thing we have to do is recognize, so if people don’t talk about it, then we don’t make any progress. So what has changed, I think that we are one of the organizations that are trusted. That we really are trying to help, and our infrastructure is more stable now, we are very transparent we keep our books clearly. Over the years it’s not because we were not transparent, so initially we did not have a lot of the keeping records…but now, so we learned that along the way, we know how to do our budgeting more now, if we don’t have money we just ask someone, and we are more and more professional. We are more and more stable and have the potential to go, and help more people. When we started, we started in the O.C. but our vision was to help everyone, all Vietnamese. But the majority of our clients now are Vietnamese. You know, L.A. and the area surrounding it. We are still going strong with our radio program…(TVD: Are you still doing it?) Yes, I am. There are more people who are participating now. I used to be the only one…doing it every week for weeks but now we are able to invite others, and interview other doctors. And they are recognized by other mainstream foundations…to give us grants…Susan G. Komen, like…BN: …the healthcare foundation, Cal-Optima, they recognize our work and very much appreciate it. And you can see that in the community as well…the fundraising, we do have a lot of support…businesses, from individuals. For example, like Little Saigon marketplace, they have this program where they donate some of their money, so though we have to let them know what
organization its for. And so they might take 5% of their receipt and give it to us…for the last three years, they’ve been giving us $15,000 dollars…actually it’s a reflection of a support from the community. It tells us that the community wants to support VACF.

TVD: Okay so I’m aware that we went over 2 hours and I just wanted to wrap up and ask you about the legacy that you want to leave…that you have children, you will probably have grandchildren…and there is something that you want to be remembered for and what is that?

BN: And to me, it’s…I just want to be a good person and if they remember me that I’m a good mom and even though I know, being a doctor and all the community work…sometimes I see other moms and dad spend so much time with their children…but I guess I didn’t do that good of a job but they grew up fine. And now I have a grandson, but again my children…my daughter is a working mother also, and I don’t know, it is a big question. I never really thought about it. I guess that if they remember me and if they don’t that’s okay too. I mean, like with my mom, I would think of her as someone who sacrificed everything for her children. My dad was very straightforward, and did his best, so maybe I, all I need from my children is that I was able to provide them with a happy life…maybe, leave them with a legacy that they can be proud of, whatever that may be. You know, it is hard for me. I don’t know what I want. I don’t know what they want…I guess being a good person and maybe that they can learn from my experience. That would be what I want.

TVD: That’s great. Thank you for your time.

BN: Thank you, Thuy.