Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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TVD: Okay, so today is July 13, 2012, this is Thuy Vo Dang with the Vietnamese Oral History Project. I will be interviewing Mr. Hung Viet Nguyen at his home in Torrance, California. Can you please state your name, date of birth, and place of birth for the record?

HVN: Yes, my name is Nguyen Viet Hung. And…

TVD: And your date of birth?


TVD: And what were your parents’ names?

HVN: My parents’ names…my dad was Nguyen Vinh Thanh, and my mom was Doan Thi Kieu Oanh.

TVD: My sister’s name is Kieu Oanh. And you said you were born in Saigon, did you grow up in Saigon?

HVN: Yes, I grew up there until was 24 or 25 years old by the time I left the country.

TVD: Can you describe Vietnam a little bit? What were some of your memories?

HVN: During that time it was a war time…but in Saigon in the city, it was peaceful. I lived in a neighborhood that was mostly middle class. There were good kids.

TVD: What did your parents do?

HVN: Oh, my parents…my dad long ago, I didn’t know what he really did but long ago, he kind of owned a hotel and operated it. Later one, he did bookkeeping like accounting. My mom was
mostly like she was like a middle woman…She did work to get the deal through between the supply and demand.

TVD: Do you have any favorite memories of your parents to share?

HVN: Like, they cared about the children. We had a big family, so on the weekends we took trips to Vung Tau, we played at the beach. Sometimes only during the daytime, for a few hours, sometimes we stayed a couple nights over there…enjoyed vacation. It happened not often but a couple times a year. It was a good time for us.

TVD: You said you came from a big family? How many brothers and sisters do you have?

HVN: Oh, I have 9 people total in my family. I have 4 brothers and 5 sisters.

TVD: Wow, that’s almost like me. I have 5 brothers and 4 sisters. So including you, there were 9. What were your neighbors like? You said you grew up in a middle class neighborhood.

HVN: Yes, my neighbors were very nice. Parents working, but some, the mothers stayed home and educated the kids. We had a lot of free time to hang around. We weren’t restricted to be friends and hang out. There wasn’t a lot of crime.

TVD: You said in your family, 4 girls, 5 boys, what was the age range? Where did you fall?

HVN: I’m in the middle, yeah, I don’t exactly remember my older brother, probably 60 now and my youngest like 40 now.

TVD: And why don’t you remember your oldest brother.

HVN: Because I am the one that’s not really close to my family. I know exactly someone close to me like my sister before and after me. But sometimes between I don’t remember exactly. I guess because I’m not into my family and the kids hang around with my friends more than my family.

TVD: Did you grow up together or did you do your separate things?

HVN: Yeah, we grew up together but my kids are different. I don’t stay with my family for the whole time. During the time I’ve been staying with my uncle for education so it was on and off.
TVD: Okay so where was your uncle?

HVN: Still in the Vietnam, he was like a friend of my family but I called him uncle.

TVD: Why did you have to stay with him to go to school?

HVN: Oh, because at that time…the family and sometimes we have to make a decision, come to different families for education, it’s very convenient to go to school. He’s a director of one of the schools and I can go to private school and without pay so that’s why is stayed with him.

TVD: Was it also in Saigon?

HVN: Yes, also in Saigon.

TVD: Can we also talk a little bit about…since we’re on the topic of school, can we talk a little bit about what your experiences like in school? What kind of school did you go to in grade school and then high school?

HVN: In elementary I went to public school. I could walk there because it was close. Only two or three kilometers. In high school, I couldn’t pass to get into public school. In Vietnam, you had to pass the test. If they did not pass to go to public school, then you go to private school and there were a lot of private schools there. And actually the public schools were better than private schools.

TVD: Really?

HVN: By my time, yes, public schools were better at that time. But now it’s different. I wasn’t a good student so I went to private school for junior high school and high school. But for university, somehow I passed the test so I went to one of the big universities in Saigon…Saigon University.

TVD: So you said Saigon University but what was the name of your high school?

HVN: High school…too many different high schools. I think I remember one of them called Saint Thomas, a Christian school.

TVD: Was it a French school?
HVN: Uh, Saint Thomas, Saint is more like I would say French yeah, originally. And another sister school of Saint Thomas is Tran Phuoc Liem, a small school, still in Saigon but a little farther.

TVD: So, any interesting stories or memories from high school?

HVN: Yeah, the most thing I remember now is during the summer when summer came, we have about 3 months off usually. Some people like it, but for us, because we had a lot of friendships, so for summer time it was always kind of sadness. You can look at the tree, every school in Saigon they planted the tree and they called it cay phuong, and they have the red flowers, the leaves is so green and when they bloom, the flowers are so beautiful because its green and red…and when they bloomed we knew it was time to say goodbye, it’s kind of romantic. I carry it with me, because we don’t see it here in America. Similar, but not the same.

TVD: Cay phuong…is it the same tree in Three Seasons?

HVN: No…

TVD: You know that movie?

HVN: Yeah every move talking about school times they always use that one, but it’s easy because every school in Saigon they still plant that kind of tree. They provide shade for students, less maintenance because every year it’s green and one side they bloom in the summer.

TVD: So did you have a best friend in the summer?

HVN: Oh yeah, I have many best friends. Not only friends but by that time you have a little bit of romantic interest things…some girls I like.

TVD: In your generation, did people date in high school?

HVN: Yeah they do date, but very secretly, not openly to the parents or public. We did date but mostly friends know but not families.

TVD: What would a romantic relationship look like, what kind of things would you guys do for each other or together.
HVN: We would go walking somewhere. I don’t know about other couples, but in my case it was very clean and pure. The more daring, it was to go to movies. Nothing more than that.

TVD: Did you write letters?

HVN: Yeah, I did write letters and I think some of the girls like me because of the way I write. I can express better with my writing.

TVD: So you were literary...So you took the exam and got into Saigon University. What year was that?

HVN: That year turned out to be 1975. Right on the collapse of the South Vietnam.

TVD: So do you remember that year, can you talk about where you were, what you observed?

HVN: Yeah, for that year…I didn’t know much from the news because I didn’t follow it, only 17 years old, and I’m in the last year of high school. So the day April 30, 1975…the whole country, in which communists took over the South, I stayed at home and we didn’t know what to do actually because I went out to the street and people had been running around and finding a way to escape. But my family, we didn’t do anything wrong so we just stayed home and we didn’t know what to do. A couple friends came over and we sat and talked. And we didn’t know much, we were only 17 years old. We put the whiskey in the refrigerator because we were scared of it for spoiling. My friends and I we sat down and drank. That’s one of the things.

TVD: Did you have any family members involved in the war or military?

HVN: In my case in my family, I would say we were lucky to have 5 brothers. But none of us were in the military. One of my brothers became a doctor after his education and after that you’re supposed to go in the military. It was mandatory. By that time, the war happened, only one of us. My uncle, what happened when he went to reeducation camp later.

TVD: Okay so you said only your uncle and brother. So your brother…what number son? What was his name?

HVN: He was the third. Nguyen Viet Cuong.

TVD: And he was a military doctor. So were you close to him?
HVN: Like I said, I wasn’t close to any of my family members. And he didn’t directly educate me, but the way he lead, or the way he had books for himself…but because of that, and I read that book, but indirectly I learned from him. Because if he didn’t buy those books I wouldn’t know much. Sometimes, like philosophy is too young for kids but he read it and so I learned from him.

TVD: So you said your parents weren’t around much to guide you. Were they still alive?

HVN: Yea my mom alive, my dad passed away several years ago.

TVD: Okay so earlier we were talking about April 30, 1975…you and your friends were drinking whiskey, what happened after that day, how did life change?

HVN: Oh, I think I can see a lot of friends…my friends had been changed because they were involved in the old government, so they lost a lot. In our case, we considered chance…suddenly something prevented us to go. Not only my family but the whole country, a shortage of food, the new government did not know how to deal with the economy. The economy could not run, supply and demand was messed up. A lot of people were worried about food mostly. But besides that, other families also worried about how their futures would be treated. And of course later on they would lose a lot of things. Their job, their homes, their family, because they kind of have a forearm to push the people to view economy as new.

TVD: And in your family, did any of those things happen?

HVN: No, because by that time, it was not a rich family so nobody cared. If you were rich, then you would lose a lot. I think some people have connections to pass through.

TVD: And you said in 1975 you also got into college, were you able to continue with your studies?

HVN: Yes, I think the end of ’75 is when I got in. The score of the tests, what your parents are doing, etc.If you have the best resume you’re not gonna make it even if you score high. Somehow they might have a connection to work on the other side. If your resume is not clean, you won’t make it to college. In my case, my family did not have anyone really involved in government…except my brother with the military. And also my dad, because when he was
young he serviced in Viet Min, not Viet Cong, not communist just another form to fight because
the Vietnam is the colony of the French so they fought with the French and so a lot of people
thought it was the right thing to kick the French. And by the time every young man joined that
and then they turned to be communist and that’s why he went out.

TVD: Do you know much about your dad’s history with Viet Min? Did he share with you?

HVN: No directly, but from my mom. He was from a wealthy family, and he thought it was
good so he joined. That’s why he had a record from the French people and they tried to find
him…got in jail and beat him up. My mom went to see him and collected his clothes, covered in
blood. But because he was married and had children, and so he thought the roots of Viet Min, he
didn’t think it was a good thing. He had the best record from the French, and he had a family so
they moved from Hue to Saigon. So they could make their lives again. Saigon during that time
was free.

TVD: So your dad was record as being part of Viet Min.

HVN: So that was a good thing to put on my record for university. Also my test was good.

TVD: So what was the University of Saigon like?

HVN: It was nice. If you go to university, then it would be proud for you and your family. At
that time not a lot of people went. It was for your good future. But university life was good
because more or less, you’re still young, you’re still 18-22, a beautiful age. But generally
speaking…my time was under the communists, so for schooling we had to be under control of
the new government, they want to control your thinking and talk.

TVD: So what were you studying?

HVN: I studied biology.

TVD: And why’d you choose that subject?

HVN: Honestly, they only had two things for school – if you were good at mathematics then you
would go into engineering…and if you’re not good at math you can take the other field like
biology or medical. It was divided by two groups – group A for natural science and group B for
math and group C for language and literature. And they also had group D, like studying old language like Chinese or something... so when you ask me, it’s because I was not good in math.

TVD: You didn’t want to go for literature or something? You said you wrote good letters haha.

HVN: I’m also...you can’t really control things but you just go with the flow. Most people went with mathematics because it was prestigious and second it was biology. And other groups... same like here, people wonder why they learn that for. So I was more practical, even my parents don’t guide me or force me but I just wanted to please them.

TVD: So how many years did you go to college?

HVN: I went for four years.

TVD: So did you finish?

HVN: I finished but I didn’t have the certificate because they require that you have to work 2 years after that so you can have that diplomat license. But basically I finished.

TVD: So you were 20 something when you left Vietnam. So after college, what did you do?

HVN: After that I was looking for a way to escape Vietnam.

TVD: Just you or with your family?

HVN: It could be me, friends, family, but it was just me because on the trip to escape, a lot of things happened and I feel kind of not very comfortable to have my family members with me. I didn’t want it to happen to my family members... so I wanted to go by myself.

TVD: Why did you want to leave?

HVN: An idiom... well if the light post can walk away, then you will walk away.

TVD: So the light post can walk... is there a Vietnamese version?

HVN: Yes. So why did I leave... for freedom. Because I had education, I could work there. really, I’m in good shape. I can feel that people control my thinking, etc. I had to go, it was the way. So how did you finally get out? I’m a lucky one here, but it still wasn’t easy. A lot of
people can go like 30 40 times and not make it. It took me 6 times before I made it…some people scam you, one time I got caught and was in jail for a few months. It was tough but finally found a family that were good friends. If you escape by family, it was more true because if a lot of people joined then it was more easy to be betrayed. So, I was lucky. One of the families trusted me and picked me.

TVD: How many people were part of the group?

HVN: Like 25 people, I still remember.

TVD: How did they organize it?

HVN: My friends’ family was a fisherman. So they already had a boat. The policeman, was just a normal thing. So they organized, their family had a boat but sometimes needed other people to help and expend…like take care of the water, food. But relatives were there also. The family provided that, that's why they could go out. My role was direction. I learned from a Navy guy to calculate direction and read a compass. That’s what I contributed.

TVD: Did you also have to pay your way?

HVN: No, I already had the skill to see where we would go. And they were friends, I didn’t have to pay.

TVD: So you went by yourself? And when was that.

HVN: It was 1981, May 1981.

TVD: Can you describe that trip since it was your successful trip?

HVN: It was not a horrible trip but it wasn’t easy either. The first day, mostly people went during the night time. Police didn’t see you so you snuck away. But we did it different. We went during the day time, when everyone tries to do it during the night time…the cops were waiting for you and so they thought we were just going out to do trading and the market. And people went with baskets of fruit or something and we took it out there during the day time. The first day was nice. The ocean was nice. The second night was the problem. The second day, I could see clouds far away and when I saw that I knew there was a storm coming. If you see something like a big
storm in the ocean, you know they’re gonna get you and you cannot run away. Sooner or later the storm would hit us and you can see that terrifying moment. The boat went up and down, it was raining and storming, and so dark. Because of the lightning…everything was brightened up, but the pupils of your eyes turn out dark. Do you understand? Sometimes I see all the sky because the boat on the top of the well, sometimes I saw everything was like up and down. That’s what I could see. What I could hear, the structure of the boat, made by wood, I can hear the creaking cracking noise. Same thing like California when there’s an earthquake I can hear the cracking noise. So on the water, the sound crack, but luckily that boat was very new it was only 1 or 2 years. I think if we had another old boat, we would be lost if the boat was broken by that time. I don’t remember much but by the night time it was calmed down, so about 5-6 hours at least the storm lasted.

TVD: And how far away from land were you?

HVN: We were still a long way to go.

TVD: Where did you want to go?

HVN: We wanted to go to Philippines. I think it was 3 days, the most is 5 days but it turned out to be 7 days. But when you calculate the distance, you calculate straight line but when you travel it’s in and out.

TVD: So you did make it to the Philippines.

HVN: Yes.

TVD: Where in the Philippines?

HVN: oh the first island. Some fisherman only come out and we talk and they told our boat to go to the island. They’re very nice, not like Thailand fisherman. They wanted something first, but we had nothing to give to them so we gave them a watch. They’re not gonna give everything. But if I had everything I would give them everything. We rest a little bit, we eat a little bit and by that time we were not hungry because we had food on the boat and we caught fish. We weren’t starving, we continued to go. Finally they told us to go to another part of the Philippines--Batangas.
TVD: How do you spell that?

HVN: Batangas. I don’t know exactly but it sounds like that. From there that’s where we went. But let me tell you about my trip, we went a little too far, but after the storm the weather was calm, the ocean looked like a lake. It was very calm and we kept going and the thing is we saw a lot of boats and ships…international ships, we call for help but nobody stopped.

TVD: From what countries did you identify any flags?

HVN: Some I think like, I’m not really sure. But more like European. One ship we come close and they stop. Big ship. Like those that transport oils. We got closer and closer, we stopped. But we saw the sign, the sign of communist, you know like the sickle and the hammer. And I told them to turn around. They stopped. They didn’t bother to follow us. If they rescued us they could have sent us back to Vietnam. If we had some problems we may have stopped for them to take us back. After the storm, one of my friends who controlled the boat…his wife was pregnant and had children and he wanted to go back to Vietnam. And I told him that we had to continue. He accepted my advice. After that some people lost their minds and thought they were losing their minds. So for the ship, we saw a lot of boats but none of them helped. There was one boat who we followed and slowed down. They kept going somewhere and they wanted to be in international water and so we followed them, if they did not intend to catch us then we recognized that it was the flag of Taiwan. Because when I studied, I had to study the flags of the country. I remember that and we got closer, but the captain did not allow us to get close, so we had to be distance. I gave the signal, so I swam from my small boat to the big ship, I come there and actually I have a little bit English, but they spoke now, but with body language they told us that we had three days to go to Philippines. I understand that their government did not allow them to pick up the refugee. They stopped because of humanity, I respect their rules…whatever you have, can you help us? They gave us water. And we really needed water. Because people didn’t know how to use it for the first couple days. And they gave us fruit and what they had. They gave us something to wear for good luck, like a talisman. I gave it to a young kid. We kept going until we saw the fisherman of Philippines.

TVD: So did you have enough water?

HVN: It was kind of a shortage but it wasn’t terrible like we think. The food is okay.
TVD: What kind of food did you have on the ship?

HVN: The organizers were nice. We had rice. We had wood, a stove, and water to cook. When fishermen go out to the water they cook, there was a wood stove. One of the food organizers brought Chinese sausage, it was light weight, high energy, and also it did not spoil. And there was condensed milk, all high energy. They prepared good, we had a lot of fuel left. Only the water. We never know how much people need water. Water is the most important. But during the storm it helped because we had water to store. There was a shortage but another good idea was that when we had a storage we stopped in the middle, and people jumped in the water because the sun is so intense and the sun makes you dehydrated. You went in the water to cool down and survive.

TVD: So besides Chinese sausage what else was there?

HVN: They probably had dried fish. And also during that time we were able to eat fresh food because the fisherman caught fish. Everyone made it and were healthy.

TVD: So when you got to Batangas were there any refugee camps there?

HVN: Batangas owned a sort of police station so we stayed there. We stayed there for a week and some of the Catholic nuns came to help us. Finally, after filling out paper, all the records sent us to a refugee camp.

TVD: Which refugee camp?

HVN: We went to Palawan. The big refugee Vietnamese camp there.

TVD: And how long?

HVN: I was in Philippines for 10 months so for Palawan probably 6 months. Cause then I went to another camp.

TVD: And which one was that?

HVN: Bataan.

TVD: So why were you transferred?
HVN: Oh, they called the last camp more like orientation because I think the experience of a lot of boat people, when they came to a new country they didn’t know much. Even using a toilet they didn’t know. They taught you English, about what the new lifestyle would be…it was orientation. Of course, people create that so they can have jobs. They have to use the money and I think it helped.

TVD: What was life like in the refugee camp?

HVN: It was very complicated. I think its not supposed to be but I saw a lot of things. The psychology of things was very different. You come to a refugee and you have no control. They don’t see their future. Even though they left Vietnam as a good point. But if you do not see your future then they let go. Then your ethics can be low, I can see one of the women, she got children, she got a husband in the United States, but many like that…they can sponsor her sooner or later. They can have a lot of boyfriends. Sometimes its funny, and a lot of people go to refugee camp, being good mothers and kids and learn how to dance and have boyfriends and girlfriends and I mean they let go.

TVD: So no structure or discipline.

HVN: Yes, I don’t understand that psychology.

TVD: How about for you? What was life like?

HVN: I was okay. I think I was innocent, just enjoyed the nature and went out and played sport. I wanted to get out and start something. I cannot live in refugee camp…it’s hard to say. Even if you work, something temporary where you have no plan. I can learn English and read, mostly enjoy myself. I’m too young I have no problems, by myself so I was fine.

TVD: So you played sports, read, and took some classes for English. So you had some structure to your day?

HVN: Yeah, some people did too. But class was only like for 2 hours.

TVD: What other activities did you get involved in? I know some people who were religious were affiliated with religious organizations.
HVN: So some people went to built temples and stuff…but I wasn’t involved.

TVD: So your family had no religion?

HVN: In the new year we might go to light incense or something but we didn’t practice. I would say Buddhism but not really practicing, just ancestor worship.

TVD: So life, the average day of in camp…what was it like? Can you describe what you did from the time you woke up?

HVN: Yeah, they give you food, and certainly times they turned water on…they didn’t have water on for 24 hours. People lined up for baths, to take showers, and during lunch time you’re gonna line up for food again. But certainly they don’t do it often, just one day…food for three meals, and only one time. And a lot of times I would go down to the river or the stream. I went to the ocean also. Also played basketball there. And I think the day was longer, and prepared for the meals…dinner…after that people went out to the café and talked. There was nothing else to do. But you can say, everyone goes there equally. But after awhile it wasn’t.

TVD: What do you mean?

HVN: Well some people had relatives in Vietnam who sent money to them so they turned to be indifferent than people who had nothing. The class would be divided between rich and poor. Some had supplies, form Germany and stuff and they had everything! They lived like kings. They have money, they went to local people clubs.

TVD: So can you get out of the camp?

HVN: Lately they were very strict because some people did bad stuff but if you ask permission then you can get out into the town but if you were rich then you pay tip. No curfew for those guys.

TVD: So when you were transferred to Bataan, did you know where you were going to go?

HVN: Yes, I knew where. My brother was already in the United States. He came here for education and so he sponsored me. I knew where I would go.

TVD: So which part of the United States?
HVN: First time, when I came I went to San Francisco Airport. My brother lived in Santa Clara, which is in northern California. I stayed for a year.

TVD: At this point you were 24?

HVN: Yeah, I was 25.

TVD: Okay so you were sponsored and lived in Santa Clara, what was your first impression of the U.S. when you first got here?

HVN: I don’t know what to say. When I first came, one of the sights that hit me from the airplane. We flew on an airplane to San Francisco. It was at night. I looked down and there was red and yellow snake and I was like what happened?

HVN: The big light of the car was red…and when I realized it, it was cars. Because in Vietnam there was not a lot of cars. I was impressed.

TVD: So you were impressed by the cars…so your first year living in Santa Clara, what was it like?

HVN: I was kind of home sick. I don’t want to go back there, but I miss something. I consider because the language is nothing I can guess…the culture, I didn’t know much. Only thing I took some classes when I was there, and so it turned out that I hung out with Vietnamese too. It was difficult. I wasn’t comfortable at all.

TVD: So that first year in Santa Clara, you just went to school?

HVN: But the school was more like…I may mess up because I lived in Los Angeles also. I came to Santa Clara first and then moved to LA and went to vocational school, like draft man which was like an engineer’s sketch…so they gave it to an draft man to put in the dimensions and description orderly. So other people would understand it. So I turned and studied draft man in LA. After that, I went back to Santa Clara for another year.

TVD: Why did you come down to LA?

HVN: Oh because of my sister. I appreciated what my sister did for me. They took care of me, but my sister didn’t know much about the jobs or education. I was kind of…I didn’t know where
I was going at that time. Good thing was that I went to vocational school but nobody hired me so my brother called me back to Santa Clara and continued school for awhile.

TVD: What did you study?

HVN: I went for like engineer. I studied and somehow I still have friends down there in LA and Orange County, back and forth like that. I met my wife down here and so we got married and I moved down here.

TVD: How did you meet your wife?

HVN: Oh, I knew her sister. We go to the same school. My wife lived in France and so I met her when she came here. It’s nothing romantic.

TVD: Well you got married so something happened. What was the courtship like, dating her? Did you go to movies?

HVN: I don’t know if my wife will approve of what I’m saying…but we met for two weeks and got married!

TVD: Wow…so how old was she?

HVN: No she’s older than me one year.

TVD: So you met her for two weeks and then moved to L.A.? What were you doing during that time and what was she doing?

HVN: She was a nurse in Europe, she was Red Cross certified so she could work in any European country. When she came here she was tired of hospital work and nursing and so her sister already had a nail shop so she started doing nails and her jobs now is to take care of women. Massages, facials.

TVD: And what were you doing?

HVN: I was doing like some minimum wage job. I’ve been working a lot of low jobs at that time. Looking back it was kind of fun. You know Orange County Swapmeet? I started doing jobs like unloading and loading but it was heavy. People have merchandise, come early morning, I
worked weekends…load up and down, hand around and then help them. You can see people like standing at Home Depot…heavy day labor. And later on I got promotion to be salesman but I also did load and unload. I got paid more for that. But that job, weekends…Saturday and Sunday, people enjoy that but it’s no fun cause I had to work. But I needed the money. But later on I worked for 7-11 as a cashier. I got robbed a couple times and I feel okay, because people say I’m lucky because I could have got killed. I worked as a mechanical assembler, that’s why I met my wife. But still a minimum wage. At least she accepted me. We started from nothing to build up everything. Later on, because I had a skill as mechanical graphing, I started to find a job and they accepted me so that’s what I’m still doing now.

TVD: From that you are also a practicing artist. How did you get there from all the minimum wages to make beautiful art?

HVN: Well, art is something for myself. I don’t know how to determine who gonna be the artist but for me, because I appreciate the beauty, when I escape from Vietnam I got caught and put in prison…so we were working labor and when the day ended we came back and when I came back I looked at the sunset, go down to the mountain, very green and sunset is so red and I said how beautiful. In that condition you still see the beauty, still appreciate the beauty. In that condition, people say they want to go home and sleep, they don’t care anything else, they’re so tired. And when I escape over the ocean, the ocean comes very calm like a lake. A couple drops of water is left and the ripples…I looked at it and said wow, how beautiful that is. I am so close to death and still see the beauty. And when I worked minimum wages…shipping and handling, I see through the windows the clouds and sky…so I see beauty everywhere, that’s why I’m an artist.

TVD: So when did you make your first creation?

HVN: I draw something for my friend in high school. And they liked it. I drew on my friend’s shirt and people wore my creation. It turned out that it would fade after a couple washes.

TVD: So what kind of medium did you first use?

HVN: Mostly pen, point pen, ink. Because of course that’s more permanent than pencil. I wanted it to stay but of course if you wash it, it is going to fade. And then collage, I cut paper and made collages. A couple of pictures to my girlfriends.
TVD: Did you ever get any formal training for art?

HVN: No, but maybe not because here in the United States I did take some classes here but I did not go all the way for a degree or something. I just took the class and quit. I did everything as self-taught.

TVD: From ink to collage…

HVN: Watercolor and oil painting.

TVD: In your early life in the U.S., as you were adjusting did you find time to make art?

HVN: Yeah good question, I always wanted to do that but especially for jobs…its so demanding and I could only create art a couple hours during the weekend. If you do it couple hours on the weekend you’ll get no where. And luckily I got a job. And I had energy at the end of the day.

TVD: How old were you when you started focusing on your art?

HVN: When I was young I did art but wasn’t focused. But after that I’m so busy with life and family, I also see my health, it’s not that good so I wanted to do a lot of exercise at home. I did Iron-Man, hiking, hiking to the mountains and 7-10 years I never touched art but then I came back. And I can say that lately I have so much energy to create…because my job got better I didn’t have to spend energy during the daytime. I also have energy from when I go out to the nature. Nature like mediation, you don’t have to talk to anybody…you think deeply. I would say it’s successful, I like the way I’m doing.

TVD: So it sounds like nature inspires you. What else inspires you?

HVN: Yes, I would say everything. Nature is a part but when you look at art history, that can inspire you. Photographs, movies, novels…everything. You can get inspired to do that but somehow they come unconstantly. You don’t plan for it. And then I can see the link as to how everything relates to make my art…not just nature.

TVD: So then can you describe your purpose and in making one piece, how does it begin?

HVN: Mostly I am short of ideas but then when I get an idea and sometimes it takes longer to do that. I walk every weekend I feel good, I see the view, I want to put it in a picture but somehow I
cannot do it right away. I think it takes a long time to do that. When it comes out its too many variations. It starts with one painting but then comes with so many. I need time to paint an object. I need time to paint with an object first before I look at it to paint. And when I have enough time, I can do 20-30 of them.

TVD: Can you tell me some of the places that you’ve exhibited your art and what were some of the special places?

HVN: I exhibit many places but mainly local, in the area. I did have a show in New York, actually 4 times. The other two are galleries. Just one small, but one of the galleries in New York. He’s a very nice guy, he always gives me a chance to show, the only problem is that I didn’t go to New York. So I got a show there, that’s bad. I need to go there to see the show, especially opening, but somehow buy airplane, find a hotel, I think it’s a hassle. New York is good but I mostly like around L.A. I show a lot of different places. I think the galleries in Southern California are good, like 825, I am a member now, Korean Culture Center, is a good place to show, La Brea Gallery, is a good beautiful gallery also...San Diego...Museum of the Living Artists. But the most I like, is Laguna Art Museum.

TVD: Laguna Art Museum is that affiliated with Laguna Art College?

HVN: I’m not sure about that. The art museum, they have a good show, a good program. The people are nice.

TVD: So maybe I should go back a little bit and ask you when was the first time you exhibited your art and how did that happen?

HVN: Okay, I think let me see...I remember. I think I planned a lot of miniature paintings, 4 by 6 size. I painted a lot, I went to France and took pictures...and I didn’t know how to participate in art. I knew that if you did something, I want to show off myself what I can do. So I looked at the Torrance Library...so I saw the case and people displayed stuff there. So I talked to the library and they looked at the sample and said I could have the case. So they gave me the case to show my look. It was my first show! I think one or two cases, I put all my small paintings there.

TVD: When was this?
HVN: It should be…1990. About 20 years…is that right? Miniature.

TVD: Since that show, you must have exhibited a lot more?

HVN: After that show, I stopped and did sport for 7 years or 10 years and go out to nature and hiking. I didn’t participate at all, after that I came back. I saw the need to paint and saw a lot and did a lot of trial and error.

TVD: I know that you’ve also exhibited in the Vietnamese community in Saigon. Did you ever intend to be more active or show your work as a Vietnamese American art scene?

HVN: I love for that to happen. But I know my ability, I wouldn’t do that. The best thing to happen is to have at least one art gallery. I can donate by volunteering my time or give away some couple art works to raise the funds or take a high percentage as commission. That would be nice but I have no idea how I can help that by myself.

TVD: Are you connected to any other Vietnamese America artists?

HVN: Connected by friendship or something like that?...Yeah, I have some friends, Ann Phong is one of the artists we’ve been working together. Some of them I really respect, you know like Dong and Hop, anh Dong, chi Hop, we do connect…but we do respect each other, and whenever we have a show we want to work together, it’s not a problem. But for more, ambition, I don’t see it now. I do have some friends in Vietnam, but I don’t know if the collection could be strong because it can only be strong if you work together all the time. For American artists, mainstream, I have more friends there. because they organize the show and we work together…

TVD: You mentioned that you have friends in Vietnam, have you been back to Vietnam?

HVN: Yes. In 2010 I went back. After many years, I finally came back.

TVD: What was that trip like?

HVN: I put myself more like a tourist. First of all, I enjoyed because the organizer Jason did a good job. They won American dollars and so kept everyone feeling comfortable. I can say more about that but I didn’t stay long enough to know. When I came back to Saigon after 28 years…I came back there and I feel it change, but not change. Yeah, actually I feel not change at all. It’s
kind of funny I saw people still go out to eat breakfast in the sidewalk. I did the same thing. People still wear pajamas to walk on the street. And some thing is funny I feel the same, I feel comfortable, convenient and internet everywhere. I feel the same, but not the same from Vietnam, the same here. I still see something very comfortable. I stayed only in big parts…its so modern now. I don’t know if people understand or not, hotels, restaurant, internet. I feel like Little Saigon. That’s why I felt no change.

TVD: Did you go by yourself?

HVN: No I went with my wife.

TVD: Oh and I forgot to ask you, I know that you have children. When did you have your children?

HVN: Yes, after married for…we married in 1984 and after 3 years we had my first son. And 15 months later we had another second son. We have two sons.

TVD: Two sons. Can you tell me their names and what they do?

HVN: Yeah my first son is named Philip Pham Nguyen, he’s a mechanical engineer. My second son’s name is Paul Pham Nguyen. He’s a biomedical engineer.

TVD: And do you talk to your sons about your experience?

HVN: No, I don’t talk much. I didn’t talk much with my sons. I guess they understand me by what I’m doing, by what I do, my art and lifestyle. I don’t talk much.

TVD: Did they ever ask? Do they want to know?

HVN: No they never asked. But I think they want to find out. They are curious to find out by themselves. They are too busy with their own lives.

TVD: I think they’ll get to a point in their life where that will matter.

HVN: Yeah I’ll let that happen naturally.

TVD: So now they’re grown up…where do they live?
HVN: My second son is still living in Irvine. He’s done with school and stayed there for a couple projects. My first son he finished school in Pomona and came to live with me. He’s working but still living with me. And I don’t want that, I want them out and independent.

TVD: It’s hard now.

HVN: But yes I understand that, too many bills to pay. But also if they live with me, they kind of slack off because someone to take of them.

TVD: You don’t sound like the traditional father who wants their children to stay.

HVN: No I want them to be out. But if there’s nothing here, they can move to another state.

TVD: So it sounds like you really encourage independence.

HVN: Yes, independence from a young age maybe you don’t have to because it’s too rough, but suddenly we provide the best thing. They’re educated. And you have to learn how to be independent. Living in United States, the more older you are, the more independent you have to be. Nobody will help you.

TVD: So how would you describe your relationships with your sons?

HVN: I would describe that we are more like friends. A little bit like a leader but more like friends. I can guide them in certain things. And I appreciate sometimes they ask me my opinion.

TVD: Were there challenges for you and your wife raising two sons here?

HVN: It’s just raising them to not be challenged. We put them in private school. The more challenge is that as we grew up, I don’t know how they handle their life. Growing up, after growing up…how they will handle. Especially now I can see people, they may be smart, thinking how they balance. The kids. Their lives. You have to find kind of like progressing yourself…to work in better conditions and salaries. And not only there, but how you balance. How you know where you stop. Aggressive. Sometimes you got to go to get better, but sometimes you know where your ability to stop is. I can see some younger friends who have good education and aggressive but after that cannot handle it, break down, and turn out to be losers.

TVD: So it sounds like you’re interested in seeing your sons live a balanced life?
HVN: Yes, balanced life. Independence. They don’t have to be very rich but I don’t want them to be poor either. Comfortable.

TVD: But you, it sounds like they went into pretty practical jobs and fields. Are either of them interested in art?

HVN: Yes, my first son is more interested in wine tasting. I don’t know if that’s called art. But my second son paints and draws. Besides engineering. I think by my age, his age, I didn’t do good like him. I think he’s more talented than me.

TVD: Does he pursue it? Or does he do it aside?

HVN: Aside. I didn’t encourage him to do anything. I just let it come naturally. Art for me, you don’t have to start early…you start when you think it’s right.

TVD: How do you think your wife feels about your art? And maybe even your son’s interest in art?

HVN: I’m not sure. I do my art even though I have a day job. I think now she thinks that my art is very unique.

TVD: Does she come to your shows and exhibitions?

HVN: Not very often. A lot of things I do myself, you know like, for other people it’s a big deal, they have support…even when I go to the race of IronMan, there’s people cheering them. Sometimes they don’t come. I don’t need that, I don’t need that support. I like support but I don’t want sympathy. I don’t need that, I can deal with that…with the handicap of the support. I am looking for more people, different, people I don’t know. That’s what my art is about.

TVD: Okay so let me ask you a little bit more questions about the…and then we’ll wrap up. About the Vietnamese community in the U.S. You live in Torrance which is close but not too close to Little Saigon. How often do you go to Little Saigon to paint in Vietnamese events?

HVN: Okay so I work in Huntington Beach which is close. So go to Little Saigon? Mostly every week, just stop to eat something…I go to Lee’s and buy bread to eat so my wife and son can enjoy. I don’t hand around much. The activity…I don’t like the idea, organized people. when
people have that I do stop by sometimes. To contribute in the Vietnamese community? I do that. Like VALA has shows and I contribute to that. If they have some event I can go to support them.

TVD: I do see you a lot at the Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association.

HVN: Yeah, like Viet Bao or Nguoi Viet, I do have something with them once in awhile. Whenever they need, I can participate but it’s not like…the basic regularly.

TVD: How about your sons? Do they ever go to Little Saigon? Are they involved in the Vietnamese community?

HVN: I think my sons…my first son has a lot of friends in Pomona so he’s not involved in the Vietnamese community. My other son…he was president of a club at UCI, I don’t know what club and I don’t know if there were Vietnamese friends or not…I think they might have friends, but I don’t think they’re involved in any Vietnamese organization.

TVD: Do they speak Vietnamese?

HVN: Honestly, no. They don’t. They listen, they hear, they understand. But they don’t speak.

TVD: So in the household, did you ever make an effort to teach them or was that not important?

HVN: Some people might not like this but when I married my wife she didn’t speak Vietnamese fluently. Now, she’s good.

TVD: So she spoke French and English?

HVN: Yes she spoke French and English. We communicated in Vietnamese too but when she raised the children, the spoke to them in English because she’s more comfortable with that. Like I said I don’t talk to my kids a lot. I’m alone, I work, I’m selfish…for me talking about language, my views of course…can be against with a lot of people. I think always good if you have more then one language, but I don’t make it very priority to make my son language. Maybe they can learn later…some people go to Vietnam and speak Vietnamese with a local language. I don’t push them often. If they want to learn, they’ll learn.

TVD: So last question. Looking forward, what are some of your hopes, expectations for what life will life be in the next 5, 10 years?
HVN: For who?

TVD: For you, for your family.

HVN: I’m almost 55 years old. For a lot of people, it’s not really old, and I don’t think so either but I think I don’t have many years left.

TVD: You still have to work a decade or so!

HVN: Yeah, working. I’m a workaholic but it depends on what I want to work. I only work what I want. I don’t have to, but I keep myself busy. Come back to what I expect. When you reach a certain age. My point of view, I’m not a businessman so I don’t see any hope in progressing. I don’t think I’m gonna get stronger for my health. I’m in good health. I just expect to maintain at the same level, that’s my goal. I’m not gonna get better. The only thing that’s gonna be the same is my art, that’s gonna get better.

TVD: So your art, how do you expect to get better?

HVN: Oh, just working…your waiting for the better one later. I keep working, networking with people, keep a good relationship, the last two years I’ve had good relationships with people in the art field. They look at your art and they like it…a lot of things happen. Like reselling. Before I had to look for shows, rejected all over, it happened. But now more like…I don’t have to apply, they invite me. But I do have to apply for the show, invite is not enough, but more and more you can see people invite you.

TVD: Yeah, people respect you.
HVN: If I keep doing the good work, they will build up better overtime.

TVD: Related to that, do you want to use the same medium or continue with using the one now?

HVN: Over time I want to do sculptures, like clay. Even if I don’t make sculptures I want to build ceramics. But painting is still the main part of my life. You cannot develop your medium anymore if you think you’re at the top. I don’t think anyone’s at the top. If you have more new ideas you always have something new.

TVD: Okay, that’s all the questions that I have. Thank you.
HVN: Thank you Thuy. Thank you. I know my English is not good.

TVD: No, I think it’s good.

HVN: You understand like me, you still have a limit but if you’re patient, then you will understand.

TVD: We covered a lot today, and in English.

HVN: Yeah a lot of people are interested in the Vietnamese and it’s good so that they can understand. If I do it in Vietnamese I can use better vocabulary, fancy vocabulary, but it’s a document for a lot of people not only the Vietnamese. Thank you!