Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: NGUYỄN TRỌNG PHÁT
Interviewer: Thúy Võ Đặng
Date: May 15, 2012
Location: Huntington Beach, California
Sub-Collection: Thuy Vo Dang Oral Histories
Length of Interview: 02:38:05

FIELD NOTES

I was connected to Mr. Nguyen Trong Phat (whom I will refer to as chu [uncle] Phat) through his son, Phu, on Facebook. After launching the Facebook page for the Vietnamese American Oral History Project, several 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans reached out to me to preserve their parents' stories. Phu messaged me on Facebook and told me about his father's audio-recording that he had made some years ago about his boat journey out of Vietnam. The recording has been played often on Vietnamese-language radios around the time of the April 30 commemoration of the Fall of Saigon.

Phu told me his dad is the founder of HoaPhat Money Transfer, which has over 30 locations nation-wide. It is one of the most established Vietnamese American businesses, and one of the first to start shipping packages and transferring money to Vietnam.

Phu set up the logistics of the interview for me, so I never actually spoke to chu Phat on the phone. I drove out to his home in a gated community of Huntington Beach where an attendant had a parking permit ready for me. Phu and chu Phat were both en route to their house from their work place in Little Saigon and were worried I would arrive before they made it home. Chu Phat was waiting for me in his spacious home and graciously offered me water before we settled at the dining table.

After I set up my recorder Phu arrived and helped his dad with filling out the consent documents and we made small talk. Both father and son seemed pleasant, upbeat, and personable. Once our interview began Phu left us and we had a very long conversation that spanned nearly three hours.

I enjoyed hearing about chu Phat's life and I could see that he also enjoyed telling his story. He seemed very committed to not forgetting the details of the past. We spent a great deal of time on the journey from Vietnam, where he played an important role in navigation, caring for others on board as many began to suffer and die from lack of food and water, and dehydration.

He also spoke in great lengths about his early years and the struggle to make a living and build a future for his family. Along the way it seems he has been hurt by others who have looked down on his poverty in those early years. His current success has been a way for him to show that he can overcome the derision of others.