Today is May 21st, 2012. This is Thuy Vo Dang with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project in Garden Grove. I’m going to be interviewing Mr. Anthony LeDuc.

First of all could you please introduce yourself—first and last name, your age…

My name is Anthony LeDuc, a name I took when I became an American citizen. My original Vietnamese name is Le Tran Duc, and I was born on October 5, 1940 in the city of Nam Dinh, in the northern region of Vietnam. My father Le Dinh Toan was a serviceman in the military while my mother Tran Thi Lieu was simply a housewife, and the two of them were married at the end of 1938 in Nam Dinh City, number 1 Ngo Van Nhan, in a house which had belonged to an ancestor on my mother’s side named Tran Van Vien who was a mandarin in charge of criminal cases for the province of Hai Duong which my maternal grandfather Tran Van Que also managed over but later was forced to flee when the Viet Minh government seized control. My paternal grandfather was a retired Hai Duong official thus we all learned how to be upright people. Especially after my paternal grandmother’s early death when we lost our mainstay of support, causing us to re-evaluate our lives which was the very reason my father volunteered for service in the French colonial army starting in 1936. Since we were entirely dependent on my father’s livelihood we moved around to many places, such as Lang Son, Bac Giang, Son Tay, Hanoi, Ninh Binh, and when we
migrated to the South we lived in Saigon, while he also worked in My Tho, Ben Tre, Can Tho, Chau Doc, and Rach Gia. I want to go back and mention the experiences of our childhood even though it didn’t last very long, just a few years, living in a rural region of the Red River Delta. We lived in a village in an area known as My Hung district, alongside the Day River, and nearby the Ninh Co River, which were the two main rivers in that part of the countryside. Because my father passed away early we were confronted with many difficulties from an early age. First I was sent to study at a few places in the surrounding area, what we called country residency (boarding school). I wrote a poem about that time entitled “Are you homesick”, recalling what it was like back then. I printed it in the book I used during my boarding school residency. Now I also recall one more important thing, I was also quite free to wander about. As a child I had no one controlling me, so when I would go tend the water buffalo I would just have fun and follow the other people to the far ends of the fields, from morning until evening. And whenever I felt inclined to do so I might even give piggy-back rides to a younger sibling and let them follow along as well. There was one time I regret, that’s because I followed the adults across the Day River by ferry to see the aftermath of an attack by French fighter planes on a riverboat, though all it was carrying was corn. I didn’t come home until nighttime after which I received a severe scolding. When I was 14 years old, I remember getting arrested and spending the night as a prisoner of war when the Viet Minh attacked the “Vo Dong” outpost next to Trung Linh school where I was staying, but by the middle of the next day we were released to go home, I had informed them that my home town was Nam Dinh, I didn’t dare claim to be from Dong Nghia, because Dong Nghia was merely where my mother’s side was from, but very close to where I was imprisoned, and I was afraid they might send me back there. Even
more noteworthy was that it took me 3 years just to finish third grade, that was a sad time away from school. However I enjoyed being able to play more, though there weren’t that many toys to play with in the countryside, all we played was kites, coin-chucking (danh dao), marbles, and particularly soccer which was played everywhere. Whoever played with me was an important competitor. But the most fun-worthy game during our childhood was the stick game tip-cat (danh khang), that’s a game somewhat similar to, well the rules are roughly like those in American baseball. Our house had a large yard so that at night, we would often have fun catching fireflies, or act out scenes from the stories in the book ‘Quoc Van Giao Khoa Thu’ (primary school reader). For example the story about catching a tiger then tying it up, because it wanted to ask what made people so smart, so when they tied it up they said this is why we are so smart. Those are the stories that stick in my mind. And I remember the stories when on moonlight nights I would sit on my grandmother’s porch, and my grandmother or mother would tell me stories and legends. Those are the stories I’ll never forget such as Thach Sanh, An Khe Tra Vang, and especially stories with morals based on the Catholic saints (the story of Saint Alexu). And one story which my mother would frequently tell to me was the story of our ancestor Tran Ngoc Chan, the man who diverted the course of the Day River at the Dai An estuary, and filled in the lake near Minh Cuong village. For his accomplishment he earned both praise and reward from king Minh Mang. “rewarded the honor of chief of civil service, along with the accessories that this title bestows” These were the words written on a plaque in my family’s ancestral temple. All these valuable items were later taken away by others, the ancestral temple had been quite beautifully constructed, it was built of precious wood but was destroyed by the Viet Minh, and the stone certificate of praise from the king was trampled upon and thrown into a lake.
Most of these stories are recorded in the various volumes of my family history, for example “Dear Tran Ngoc” is a story of a relative on my mother’s side. Or the story of my school days, with all 4 siblings studying at the same school, Ngo Can high school, of which I wrote “remnants from Ho Ngo Can high school, a thirty year school” It describes all the activities from the north entered the south until the school was closed in 1978. A date which we still care about and retain to this day is called gio ky. But it was more fun back in those days, we had more to eat and drink back then, whereas now we simply get together as a family and share stories. But in the countryside my mother’s grandfather was a former regent, a great minister, very talented, and compassionate, his funeral was a very solemn occasion, so this is an event I’d be happy to recall. That day was characterized by (the coffin) being carried in a fine western-style boat which they rented from its resting place over to the cemetery grounds, traveling along the Day River. Meanwhile there would be musical accompaniment, I recorded some of the sounds, like rapid drum rolls, along with the wind and brass instruments. As for the method of lowering the coffin into the grave they also used a pulley like they still do here in the United States. So in that recording you can hear ”two axles moving slowly for 4 seconds, and a while later, rest in peace.” Actually the religious rituals haven’t changed over the years, and because he was so highly regarded, the local people asked authorities to grant him special honors. This is because so many of his extended family members by marriage were district chiefs or provincial mandarins. For example one of my forefathers who was a provincial mandarin (Thai duong) was an extended relative of his. One thing I cannot forget to mention and which remains vivid in my mind from my boarding school days, is the memory of my teacher whose name was Giao Hiep, in the village called Giao Phong, who later went to live in Thanh Hoa, which is in zone 4. I later
learned that he was with the Viet Minh, in a movement called the youth vanguard. This Hiep fellow was a very fit young man, and one could clearly tell he was trustworthy, good looking, and we were extremely moved by him. His teaching partly reflected the methods, and lifestyle of the communists. When I later became a teacher I understood that. Mr. Hiep would organize performances, with all of us performing at a market in Giao Phong village. Actually this village was valued and commemorated since ancient times, for the music master, Pham Am Nghi, who founded the village when he went to work building on hilltops just like my grandfather did; and even though he was very educated he choose to live in an ordinary place which he called Giao Phong. To me that’s an experience worthy of remembrance, and I particularly want to add that a commitment to studying is also something which I’m determined to maintain as part of my personal life. So since age 4 until now I’m still studying. It’s something which I enjoy so I enrolled in Saigon teachers’ college and later went to teach in Long Xuyen, in 1966. Going to teach could also prove to be quite troublesome. When I came to the United States I resumed teaching, which was the first professional job I got here, and I worked for Huntington Beach union high school district. I also worked at Huntington Beach High School, Fountain Valley High School, and primarily Westminster High School. The strongest memory I have from there is of the U.S. space shuttle disaster, since there had been a teacher on board, and so when I turned 55 I didn’t work any more, so I rested up at home for a time, then was selected by a business department to work on a census which was produced in 2000. There was nothing hard about the job whatsoever, as long as I did a proper job teaching I was done, and I had a lot of fun. Afterwards I went back to school and studied at Cal State Fullerton. My goal was simply to regain the bachelor degree that I lost when I was still studying back in Vietnam. If I were to
look at myself I feel like I have inherited many positive things from my family and relatives who descend from either high officials, or teachers, engineers as well, for example there was one engineer, by the name of Tran Ky, who later on was given the name bac hoc (scholarly man). He was an exchange student who studied in France and upon returning home set up a power station since in the North there were only 3 such power stations, so he established one more power station in the Son Tay region. That’s where my father lived for a time. My ancestor who was from Thanh Hoa, and served as a Hai Duong provincial mandarin, whose name was Le Dinh Tuan, was a descendant of king Le Thai To, Le was his surname. Upon arriving in Hai Duong he got married to a young woman who was the daughter of a rich landlord in Mo Trach village in Binh Giang district, Hai Duong province. In 2001 I went back to visit this village, and went to Hai Duong as well. He only had one son, named Le Tu Thinh. I think Tu was his middle name yet was somehow related to one of the royal branches. He worked as a physician selling herbal medicine on Hang Thiet street in Hanoi, these days we still call him Lang Dieu. He had two wives, the first wife had a son, Le Van Trach, who followed his father’s occupation but was called Lang Nguyen, and resided in Hung Yen city. But the other wife was wiser, and had a child who was very educated and kind, both children were sons and took the surname Le Dinh, the oldest daughter was named Le Thi Hue, her husband was Luong The Van district official, who later worked in a rural district in the Vu Chu region as I had said. Another forefather of mine was Le Dinh Thanh, nicknamed Thac; and then there’s my grandfather Le Dinh Tinh, who was a judge in Hanoi; and the person carrying the family torch is Mr. Phan Khoa, who works in a bank. In summary all of us with the name Le Dinh continue to pass it along, even until now. I have another family relative still in Hanoi whose name is Le Dinh Tuan, he still keeps the name
Le Dinh, and is the son of my uncle who is Le Dinh Yen. My mother’s surname is Tran, while my father’s is Le, therefore they named me Le Tran Duc. The word Duc has meaning, perhaps it’s related to the second world war, which the Germans instigated, so they gave me that name to commemorate it. When my mother told me the story about the Germans it was near the time when my father died which was 1945, my father was killed by the allied army’s bombing of a prison camp set up by the Japanese, who arrested and imprisoned the French army officers there after the government overthrew on March 9th, 1945. As for us we later came to the United States and got jobs so things changed, yet while I was working, I was quite happy. But one thing I wasn’t very happy about was that we could not come together at the same time, hence a 10 year period of separation ensued. However for the 50th anniversary of our first meeting I wrote a poem, which we call “the dress you once wore.” Perhaps I still have a few passages, in which there are eight lines at the end of the poem, which retell our life story as follows: A love story of two delicately joined, when we love our hearts are young, and musical strings still vibrate, alas I am the musician Tran Thien Thanh. How is it the years pass so fast. Fifty years after a teacher’s love took form, and became 3 sons two daughters and eight grandchildren. Your grandparents happily remember their youth.” That’s an unforgettable memory.

TVD: Continuing along could you talk some more about the cultural traditions in your family?

ALD: That’s a topic I really care about, I especially want to express my innermost feelings regarding Vietnamese cultural traditions. I remember when I was already living in the U.S., and one of my friends from Vietnam who had been a pharmacist and was also living in Boston told me how he raised his children, so what he said was that, one must maintain
Vietnamese family values, therefore I still believe we must be strict with our children. But I don’t think that way. I have taken a more education-based approach, not the patriarchal route that my friend took. Because actually all the changes in teaching methods are due to college teaching programs I’ve been enrolled in, with new methodology, so I’m not influenced by the old educational system any longer. That’s why I still believe in allowing children to feel relaxed and free, so that they can easily express themselves. Or so that they will participate in family activities willingly. However this also creates obstacles for us. It’s especially unpleasant when there are conflicting ideas. Particularly with my wife, she doesn’t seem to agree with me on that. Even though she went to a teaching college, she taught younger students so her thinking is a little bit different than someone who teaches higher grades. She needs to wait and see change happen first. But one thing that she easily accepts is making sure that our family spends time together. That’s why we make sure that every Friday afternoon we have a family get-together. My grandchildren will come over to the home of one of my children, to have a meal together. That’s something we continue to do. We also have special family holidays such as death anniversaries, lunar new year, on the religious side we have Christmas and Eastern according to Catholicism, and have parties for various children. Actually we used to live in a bigger house, so we would host in my house. But now we want to cut back and simplify our life, so we moved here, where we are talking now. It better suits our situation. My son especially likes to go out and have fun. He likes to organize vacation trips with all of us together, sometimes for a couple days, sometimes an entire week. My older son has a time share at a resort area called Ko Olina in Tripolei town, or in the Hawaiian capital Honolulu on the island of Oahu; sometimes we go to the Caribbean or resorts in Mexico. My grandchildren invite me to go so I go along for fun.
However when my grandchildren only get a few days off they go someplace nearby like Las Vegas, San Diego, Yosemite, Newport Coast, Laguna Beach. This last time going to Laguna Beach was slightly unusual, because we stayed at a house right along the beach, so one of my granddaughters who went down there with me, named Danielle Le Duc, wrote an essay about it, and we kept it along with the family activities and other works I’ve finished writing.

Death anniversaries of ancestors are very important for Catholics. Catholics keep their filial obligation, and highly cherish their parents, so they always remember death anniversaries. The first thing we do is hold a prayer ceremony for our ancestors in church, then maybe have a family meal, and remembering to read a little from the bible, to remind my grandchildren that we are religious people and to show our piety. We also have other activities which we seldom can get the younger ones to attend, those are the death anniversaries of our relatives. But now we only have one such occasion, that’s yearly death anniversary for our immediate ancestors between January and the lunar new year, which usually falls around February. We’ve tried to reestablish the ancient traditions of the Tran family line, starting at the beginning of the 20th century in a village, what we call Dong Nghia village, in Nguyen Hung district, Nam Dinh province. It is organized differently now and isn’t like it was in the past. Our ancestors had property, were important men in the community, and held great feasts, but nowadays that’s no longer so. We each contribute, with each of us preparing some food to bring. This is an opportunity for us to remember our personal traditions. Such as eating pho, maybe eggrolls, springrolls, and banh chung (square glutinous rice cakes), because after the lunar new year we still have banh chung left over so we eat that, and particularly in my native land they have lots of fields, where they only grow sticky rice, sweet rice that is. They usually use this type of rice to cook xoi (steamed
glutinous rice), which is served at all the funerals and death anniversaries, and weddings as well. Usually it is cooked simply, called *xoi hoa cau*, sticky rice cooked with crushed green beans. But even more delicious is when they cook *xoi* along with a type of fruit, called a *qua uoc*, it has a really pretty red color. They sell it over in Little Saigon but it’s not entirely the same, since they’ve added coloring to make it appear bright red. Those are a few of the foods that everyone my family either in Vietnam or here has experienced. *Banh giay* (rice dumplings) and *banh chung* are like stories handed down to us from our ancestors describing the earth and sky. The earth is kneaded like *banh chung*, while *banh giay* is a type of rice cake, and *banh giay* is round like the sun. They called it *nhi vien thien dia* (dualistic representation of the universe). Particularly on Harbor street in Santa Ana here there’s a catholic church which built a prayer hall with dualistic architecture called Our Lady (Virgin Mary) of La Vang Church. Yet when people enter the church it becomes something called *tam tai* (three gifts), which is an aspect of Vietnamese philosophy. *Tam tai* refers to *thien dia nhan* or sky, earth, and mankind, in the form of a thick *banh day* cake. The church has a thick section which is similar to a piece of *banh day*. The ground around the church is formed into a square, and we are the people who go there called the *nhan*. Therefore they believe that *thien dia nhan* will be in harmony and become more beneficial. That’s the wish of the people who believe in that. The reason they named the church La Vang is to respectfully pay homage to one of the titles of the Virgin Mary (of La Vang), which recalls the story of when the Virgin Mary appeared in an area called La Vang, where there were a lot of trees called *la vong* (round leaf), and helped the sick people who had sought refuge from the anti-religious forces who were hunting them down, this happened a long time ago, way back during the time of king Le Chan Ton. But speaking on this
religious topic I had also said that our ancestor(s) was/were (from?) Thanh Hoa, the place where the early missionaries from Europe had arrived so he was a religious follower as well, and later on when he moved up north to serve as a mandarin it still mattered to him, so his daughter was very devout, and he had many patron saints that were martyrs and are still being worshiped in the parishes of Hai Phong and Hai Duong provinces, and these saints were honored in Rome in 1998. And on my mother’s side my ancestors Tran Hien Dao, and Hung Yen had been dispersed by way of Nam Dinh in a program implemented by the kings Trieu Tri and Minh Mang which they called di phan thap. Meaning that the Catholics would leave their villages, give away their possessions to the ordinary people, that is to say managed by people not following that religion, and they were sent to a different place much like a prison camp, with the bien luong nonbelievers watching over them. It was really no different than current communist theoretical practices, where the people coming back from reeducation camps are still put under house arrest, that’s one form of communism, taken from the oppressive methods used by kings in the past. They also copied ideas which are unsuitable for this time period, and just cause more misery for the people. This subject is noted in the written account called “Tran Ngoc yeu dau” (Dear Tran Ngoc) which we often refer back to. On the ten year anniversary of our collaboration, the Tran descendants in Long Beach, we came out with a number of special publications called “Tran Ngoc yeu dau” in 2005, in which many people participated in writing all kinds of stories about our forefathers along with the oral histories about the time they built the dyke, and filled in the estuary, and which were passed down to us, and so now I have recorded those in my book. All of those stories were written in Vietnamese, however there were a few articles that we had to translate into English for my grandchildren to use, and I translated one describing
family life called a record of our ancestors translated from Vietnamese into English. That’s a bilingual method which is helpful for children nowadays. Because I would like to create other cultural projects such as this I try to write as many stories as I can which we have stored on CD although I haven’t officially broadcast them. One such story “Theo chan to di Phan Thap” (following great-grandfather’s footsteps to Phan Thap) is based on the Tran family records in Nam Dinh, which were compiled in 1934. The story “Bishop Phero Pham Tan, of Thanh Hoa diocese” is about a relative within the Tran family line. First of all he was a victim of a malicious communist program called land reform. He was denounced and lost consciousness while being buried alive at night but thanks to the rain the layer of mud was made lighter, and tread upon by a water buffalo, suddenly freeing him from the muck, so his grandchild learned of that story and later retold it to us. And when going overseas we also had some exciting experiences so we wrote them down as well as many other life memories, from Lang Son to here in the United States. We recorded those in “Noi troi cuoc doi” (passing through life). And now I am writing a still uncompleted story entitled “Dau chan lang thang” (wandering footprints) and this volume will be translated entirely into English. Because my grandchildren will use it in the future. I will try to translate it into English so that my grandchildren can read and understand it, even though they have all studied Vietnamese, but when they read they can’t understand anything. One tragic event that happened to my friend’s family was when his wife and seven children all drowned at sea while escaping from Vietnam, and causing him much misery in his life. He recalled this in the story titled “Con loc thoi dai” (vortex of the age) which I myself wrote down for him. This was a story which recorded the innermost feelings of a reeducation camp prisoner. Besides these efforts I’m able to collaborate with various organizations which issue periodic
journals such as Nguyen Ba Tong high school, Ho Ngoc Can high school, and other local associations like the united talent of our Bui Chu region in Nam Dinh or for fun send articles to get published in newspapers like Nguoi Viet, or Viet Herald. I remember the time Viet Herald printed an article commending my mother, which we had written describing my mother’s feelings while reflecting on her life. After it came out in the newspaper I was so surprised by how many relatives and old acquaintances had read it, and even though I used the name Anthony, I knew right away it was my article. I clearly described the events that had happened back in Vietnam, so they all recognized it and called to congratulate me. It made me very proud to have had the opportunity to help my relatives remember my mother.

And lastly I would like to mention some activities from my childhood again in this part of my talk, since I just remembered. During the years when we sought safety from the war and returned to Nam Dinh between the years 1946-1954, in Dong Nghia village, I participated in many religious activities because within the village we were 100% catholic, therefore there were several (religious) societies that had lots of members. I refer to them as practicing Catholics. Young emperors was reserved for children, and I’ve heard that in church activities in Orange County, young emperors wear uniforms with proper scarfs. Or there are other various club activities which we know about that are organized for the adults and teenagers in our extended catholic family. Specifically speaking mothers often join a club called Saint Mary’s army. Then there are the associations which discuss being reverent and training oneself to become holy. We call that the three order committee for example.

Besides that the association finds ways to create religious activities that are extremely interesting. So many local people are drawn to participate in these organizations and events. Ruoc kieu (procession ceremonies) are just like parades, with a special introduction in which
people carry along a palanquin, similar to the performances on January 1st every year in Pasadena, in the rose parade. Our catholic festival in Nam Dinh which uses palanquins made of wood and painted scarlet red and gilded with gold, with two shafts carved into dragons, and has escorts helping to carry the square canopy holding carved religious statues, has perhaps even more participants. *Ruoc kieu* is a type of procession which isn’t strictly limited to Catholics, non-Catholics can also participate, as well as active members of a pagoda.

Many Vietnamese temples these days still retain palanquins and I know that the Hanh Thien village of my native region is famous for literature, what we refer to as *tu tru trieu dinh* (for highest-ranking court officials), and nowadays there’s still a man who celebrates the *tu tru*, he’s a privileged member of the communist party, with the surname Dang. He has allowed his property to be used by the village in the building of some beautiful structures. Returning to the subject of *ruoc kieu* processions, the most important element is the palanquin, after that there are the association service committees, like the flower team, flag team, drum team, and the security team. Each team wears its own uniform, often with a specific color, and performing their individual roles. In richer areas sometimes there are teams of entertainers, and of course not without singing groups, like choirs. These processions are quite orderly despite their large crowds, but just in case there is a security team to prevent any civil disorder and to make sure the procession stays on track, following along to drumbeats, which are played according to the commands from the palanquin carriers who raise can raise it up or down back and forth. The church in Rome also carries out processions similar to this. And that’s exactly why I want to also mention another religious activity which is a unique catholic ceremony called --------. These festivities are already quite common in the United States. Especially here in Garden Grove where even the reverend Schuller held spectacular
staged performances based on stories from the bible during the Christmas or Easter seasons which attracted large television audiences. Nowadays some Vietnamese religious communities in Orange (County) also put on performances in which they enact scenes out of the bible in a similar manner, and will probably be more likely to continue than reverend Schuller’s since the Crystal Cathedral church was already sold off, hence will no longer hold performances. But we hope that religious activities at church will remain. I still remember that there’s one important religious week during the year called holy week. It starts on Palm Sunday and ends with Easter. During this week there are many common festivals or special ceremonies these days which occasionally take place at various places such as Westminster church, or Santa Barbara church. Those are scenes depicting events in the life of Jesus during his time on earth doing missionary work. They may also show the evils he encountered so that his followers can learn from his life, and have compassion for the life he had to bear. Because he said that: “whoever wants to join me must carry their misery and follow me.” That’s why Catholics really take doctrines like these to heart. We have also had the chance to participate (in these kind of activities), and although we no longer have the same performers as in the past, the younger generations now do quite a good job, which is something I’m very happy about. However I do need to mention one cultural activity that is commonly performed these days called the chac dance, which I myself have participated in. It can be said that chac is a type of dance seen at certain events such as processions. Chac are long thin bamboo poles, with decorative claws, that are struck together to make sounds. Usually the chac dance team forms two rows, then the two sides strike (their poles) together making a loud noise, and follow the person in front of them, or dance side by side. All the dance steps must be followed to the rhythm of a flute, and I still
remember a few notes of it: sol sol la, sol fa sol do, sol sol la, sol fa sol do.” And perhaps followed by: “do re mi, do re mi.” There are other parts to it but I can’t remember, anyhow this *chac* dance is performed year round. Meanwhile the young girls perform in the flower club, the harmony club that is. Nowadays in Orange diocese, all the Vietnamese catholic churches have these clubs which celebrate the visitation of Mary in May, called the flower month. This flower club wears particularly pretty clothes, with brilliant colors, and carry multi-colored flowers that they present as an offering to Mary. In regards to this particular veneration dance, these days scarves are often used in place of flowers. The main catholic festivals usually have special services during which traditional cultural performances are demonstrated. But now I would like to introduce another journal that I participated in the publishing of in 2005, it was a special edition called *Xuan dau* here in Santa Ana, there were a few articles related to interviews on religious activities like *dang hoa* (flower offering), *tiep kieu* (religious procession) or reading books… Within this journal we also introduced several *ca vang* songs, like congratulatory messages in the form of songs, in which the notes are raised in a protracted manner, since in ancient times everything was transmitted orally, and yet the people who contributed on this collaboration were quite renown musicians. For example there is the musician Hai Linh: he has been a very accomplished musician even from an early age, and was even the top student in his class at a music academy in France. In Vietnam he established a chorus, or what could be considered a choir ensemble like the choir of Mr. Le Van. Besides the *Ngan Khoi* chorus, there was one group called Hong Nuoc chorus, who performed many worthwhile songs, with a complex harmony, that not just any person could sing, only someone with years of practice. In the past Hai Linh instructed many young people in becoming choir directors. He passed away about 6 years ago and is
buried in Louisiana. Hai Linh also was friends with the catholic priest Ngo Gioi Linh for one. He also had other priests such as Nguyen Thanh Binh, or local choir leaders, who gladly collected the songs which are in this book. I also had the honor of introducing them with the organization. Another topic I would like to talk about is paying homage to our ancestors. Many families I’ve met have the idea that once a person stops worshiping their ancestors and converts to another religion they don’t need to revere their ancestors any longer, yet even my wife who is from a non-Catholic family and converted to Catholicism, must acknowledge that we still need to pay homage to our ancestors. That’s why we still maintain a family shrine to our ancestors. And even today in the catholic religion we retain certain rituals like leaving offerings to the ancestors just like our fellow Vietnamese do. We have an altar, we pray to them, and in my family’s time period I remember the ancestral temple in Nam Dinh, it had a shrine to Han Vien, an ancestor of mine, it was a really beautiful shrine, painted red with gold adornment. There was always a shelf holding weapons like the ones the ancient Vietnamese used, as if to protect the ancestors. However that type of altar set-up is not very common. In general Catholics make a point to pay respect to their ancestors in special houses of reverence, similar to churches, what we call ancestral halls. These ancestral halls aren’t restricted to Catholics alone, but are buildings commonly used by all Vietnamese. Let me repeat that Catholics also make use of the same things that our countrymen already have in order to honor the ancestors. I remember that ancestral hall is the exact word in its truest sense, with columns made of ironwood, beautifully painted in red and gold, the revered ancestral altar, where (images of) the ancestors are placed, all with items bestowed by the king, such as garments, and during the
lunar new year, January 15th, the descendents will gather there to recite prayers, as well as to listen to the elders’ stories, along with celebrating death anniversaries.

TVD: Next can you talk some more about your experiences and memories of war?

ALD: Two-thirds of my life had been connected with war while living in Vietnam. For example during world war 2, my father was a fighter during the allied air raid and sent to a French prisoner of war camp held by the Japanese in Lang Son, near the China-Vietnam border. The second war was the war between the French and Vietnamese, when my grandfather was a victim of a raid on Dong Nghia village (BC) carried out by the French army and Le Duong and regular soldiers fired a bullet which passed through his forehead and out the nape in back of his neck. Particularly during the war against French domination there were foreign Le Duong soldiers, which was a force of recruited mercenaries, so I just wanted to briefly mention that. And the third and even more important war which affected us and many other families, and virtually all Vietnamese people, especially those who came here to the United States, is the war of liberation for South Vietnam, by the northern Vietnamese communists. No one in my family was killed in battle but my younger siblings did shed their blood. For example my brother Cat was a pilot, and was shot several times. My brother Canh was an infantryman who struck a landmine, and had to have surgery to insert metal rods in his bones which still causes him much pain. As for me even though I was not a regular soldier, I still carried out my duty referred to as nghia vu cong su (defensive military service), now the vietcong term is used. It entailed 9 weeks of training with the rank of private in army of the republic of Vietnam. We were teachers therefore we studied for 9 weeks at the Chi Lang training center in Chau Doc, helping the teachers in the western region at that time. I was teaching at a high school in Long Xuyen at the time.
Going back to the question about the Vietnamese American war it wasn’t easy to say the least. Because we actually served side by side with the American soldiers fighting the Vietnamese communists, and we each took turns supporting each other. This is something which American captain Colin Powell himself, he later became the top ranking general Colin Powell under the talented leadership of president Reagan...He was an eyewitness and knew very well the precise objectives of his mission during the war in Vietnam. It was recorded in his memoir entitled “My American Journey.” He wrote the following: “…Ngo Dinh Diem, president of south Vietnam, …..., facing communist attacks, had appealed to President Kennedy to save Vietnam from “the forces of international communism.”

President Kennedy sent more American military advisors “counterinsurgency advisors, all the rage...” and by the end of 1961 the number of American military advisors in Vietnam had risen to 11,000 from 3,205. But after 1975 I was actually not happy about the former presence of the American soldiers. The presence of the American soldiers from 1965 did not help defeat CS Hanoi but merely intensified the war and caused the deaths of even more American soldiers and of course took the lives of many more Vietnamese. That’s what I remember most. What a pity! The phrase “Vietnamization of the war” that American president Richard Nixon made our VNCH lose its cause and I fell into disgrace just as the CS said especially after 1975 when having to take reeducation classes: that it was a changeover of bodies- with the corpses of VNCH soldiers simply replacing those of the American soldiers. That’s why I can say to the American public that the war in Vietnam which Americans call the Vietnam War is not really accurate which led to the phenomenon whereby the presence of American soldiers in Vietnam caused the American public to become divided and even for Vietnamese living in the free territory of South Vietnam to be
despised. Of course the American participation in the war had a profound emotional affect on me, someone who had voted for the CSVN and emigrated by foot from the North to the South in 1954 and I remember that I was a victim of that migration, after 1975 I was punished for it. Furthermore I had to suffer through an unnecessary war. An example of this is when I would go to teach in Long Xuyen from either My Tho or Ben Tre and I would have to risk my life traveling along a road full of landmines and booby traps, it was no less a scene of war than other areas of battle like Ap Bac, and sometimes they even fought in the middle of the road and we had to stop the vehicle and wait for the fighting to cease. Sometimes we were even exposed to direct fire coming from the foliage alongside highway 4 from the MTGPMN opposition, standing under the yellow star flag with a half red and blue background, later on that flag disappeared after 1975 and only the flag with a yellow star and red background remained in use. It is very regrettable that the specter of the MTGPMN became a reality after the Americans recognized them as a government causing misery for the VNCH, and both the Americans and republic in the south were tricked by the CS Hanoi. Speaking about memories of the war, I witnessed clearly with my own eyes, the Tet offensive of 1968 in Saigon. My family was residing in district 10, Saigon where a gun battle took place. And I was so naïve that when the fighting ended and I didn’t hear any more shots I went out to have a look around, and I observed debris and dead bodies of the CS soldiers who had attacked a police station at the intersection of Nguyen Kim and Nguyen Van Thoai streets on the second day of the Mau Than lunar new year in 1968. And worse than that was when two communist soldiers carrying machine guns took shelter right in front of my house before moving on to another location. This Mau Than offensive occurred once again in 1968. At that time I was standing before my class at Thoai Ngoc Hau
high school in Long Xuyen. After that we went to the discharge center and were dispatched properly. And because of having gone into the field of battle I was qualified to immigrate to the United States. I was reported to participate in summer Saigon teachers, a new teaching regime which I was given permission to use. We asked questions about why the north and south didn’t coexist as nations and develop at the same time. But Hanoi had to mobilize a war of liberation and the Vietnamese government concerned themselves with the involvement of the much bigger United States, which then sent combat troops over to Vietnam. They asked me who it was that taught me that, and I was forced to be quiet. And then after coming to the U.S. I was punished further. I was given a D grade on an essay, in my English 102 class. I had expressed my viewpoint that the war in Vietnam was tied to the president of the U.S. which was president Kennedy. Because that essay was written in November, and was therefore connected with two particular assassinations, which had affected me emotionally, that of Vietnam president Ngo Dinh Diem, and the American president Kennedy. Actually when Kennedy was running for president, I really respected and admired him. But when he didn’t have the courage or ability to prevent the actions of his advisors, who ordered the assassination of our republican president Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem, which led to the landing of U.S. troops into Vietnam and caused the war to become more important, and more serious. I think that if the war continued with (military) advisors like Colin Powell then perhaps president Ngo Dinh Diem’s policy would have succeeded. If only the Americans weren’t so rash, and had the patience to take more time to help us Vietnamese. As I already mentioned, I deeply regret all the American soldiers that had to be sacrificed in Vietnam but I still have more partiality towards the soldiers of the military advisory groups like that of Mr. Powell, because their roles fit well with “the real situation
in Vietnam” such as Ngo Dinh Diem’s policy and approach to running the war as “a war against liberalization.” During the time the American army was in Vietnam I felt very concerned; I travelled frequently along the main roads with American military convoys because of my work, and I felt the threat no different than that from the opposition and I actually had a close friend of mine that was a philosophy professor at Tan An high school named Kieu Manh who was a victim of overly impetuous horseplay by an “American soldier” on highway 4. An American soldier sitting on a military vehicle pulled down the hat on Thi’s head covering his eyes and causing Thi to lose control while he was driving whereby the following vehicle then ran over his motorcycle crushing him. When I was a kid I saw a GMC vehicle used by the national army of Vietnam under Bao Dai, travelling at high speed down the stretch of road in front of school to avoid Viet Minh sniper fire (before 1954) which could easily have caused a deadly traffic accident so I sympathize with the movements by the American convoys during the years American soldiers were fighting in Vietnam. What really angered me however, although I couldn’t do anything about it but I was still deeply saddened by was the general order to mobilize American students for military service and participation in the war in Vietnam. And one memory that’s hard to forget, and sympathetically shared with me by the professor of my American Character class at Fullerton college, was the disturbing story about the man she loved who out of duty and patriotism, left even his girlfriend to fight in Vietnam which would become his final resting place. I myself was drafted and sent to the Tan An recruitment center but was released because I was allowed a student deferment, since I was a student at the teachers college. Then after that I was allowed another deferment for employment reasons while I was teaching high school. And so it was extremely heart-wrenching for me to see the American
president Richard Nixon along with a contingent of university students come to Vietnam because that was just a useless waste. For that very reason I sympathized with all my teachers. Of course I also sympathized with my friends who sat together with my in the same lecture hall, some of whom “followed the call of the wilderness” and enlisted, some sacrificed their lives, some became disabled, while others survived the war, and are here today. They were the ones thrown into re-education centers, like my younger brother, pilot major Le Tran Cat, who was interned at a re-education camp for over 9 years in Son La then Thanh Cam- Thanh Hoa, sent to do hard labor and underfed, and had to carry water for the kitchen daily. He was also jailed for two weeks at connex for daring to help the Catholic priests hold mass, and was bullied by the inmates who emulated Bui Dinh Thi who once caused a stir here in Little Saigon. The second among us (who was imprisoned) was captain Le Tran Canh who was imprisoned 7 years at the Thanh Phong – Thanh Hoa camp, specialized in cutting trees and vegetable gardening since he was isolated due to a skin condition. Fortunately my brother Tran Loc who was living up North, didn’t have to fight in the war, nor relocate to the South thus avoiding the plight of our family having to live day to day. Tran Loc’s brothers were also soldiers in the army, rising to the ranks of major, and lieutenant-colonel, and I think perhaps that’s due to the virtuous legacy handed down from my forefathers. Tran Loc was not a communist party member but rather a member of the democratic party, which was simply a political faction connected with the communist party, so he wasn’t permitted to fight by the communists, but could serve in law-enforcement. Because of this he eventually became vice-director of Hanoi university, and in regards to his family, which includes his parents as well, if they had not later escaped then they would have fallen into the hands of the forces known as land reformists which we commonly
referred to as teams. The reason I was able to do that is because the party leaders didn’t know I had a family. He said that my father died way back in ’45, therefore I had not been able to know him. Also my brother hadn’t attempted to reconnect with us. But he made up for it by getting all his students to take part in a large funeral for our mother. Now we can say that something unexpected has become a reality, after the prediction of one communist soldier, who spoke with those of us in the re-education camp, whereby he said: “the leaders we have now, feel that within 20 or 25 years, the Americans will return.” So it’s evident that they didn’t do like they said, fighting against the American empire, fighting against the people at home. But they only defeated the puppet regime, while allowing the Americans to pull out. Their slogan was to fight until the Americans pulled out and then someday the Americans would return and help them. That’s why there’s all the political turmoil here in the U.S., more and more the United States keeps clashing with Vietnamese communities thus causing extreme difficulty. To me the best thing to do now besides participating in a few political demonstrations down on Bolsa street, would be to try harder to join various activities within the Vietnamese community, here in Orange County, and help other Vietnamese communities. From senior citizens to ill patients, for example at the VNCO center, also known as the Asian health center, or help out the children, at daycare centers where the parents bring their kids to learn, and there are also activities for helping the poor regain their rights, such as the cultural and social center in Westminster. Afterwards I will speak more about the organizations in the Vietnamese community here if I have the chance. TVD: Could you please talk some more about your experience as an immigrant living in the United States?
ALD: Although I worked with the communist government, I later felt it didn’t suit me so I left. Some of their actions like creating a proletarian dictatorship, along with loss of democratic freedom, and terrorizing citizens by setting up road-blocks and detaining suspects, and then there’s the red flag forces, or smaller units comprised of children, the junior youth reformers. That can be considered the biggest blow to capitalism in Vietnam. All the rich people lost their property after it was seized. If the owner left, then they would occupy their property, many Chinese boat people left their houses for them, so they could have permission to leave. That’s also how we were able to leave. Even though we had made preparations for our journey it was not an easy one. I had spent up the money and fees for the trip four times already and for the last attempt I had nothing left, and had to rely on my relatives for help. Only then could I leave. Even though we planned our trip in a relatively steady manner it was still quite dangerous. During the trip our scheduled landings and meeting places were unsuccessful, so we had to circle around for another day and night which was extremely dangerous, because we could have easily been recaptured. Luckily we were able to land so that on the day we left, I remember we escaped off the Vietnamese coastline at around 12 midnight. And during the period of time that followed, we were always on the lookout for the unexpected appearance of patrol boats, so we steered our boats accordingly, constantly changing directions. We had to travel North, from Saigon, then off the coast of Hai Phong we headed for international waters before turning around again, heading for either Malaysia or Indonesia. But because of this we became lost. We spent the following days at sea, sometimes the waves were calm, and other times they were really big but fortunately for us those storms provided us with water, and thanks to that we were able to survive even without food, since all the food we had brought along had to be
discarded when a boat called ---- pulled us out from the sea. On the morning of September 15, 1980, the ship stopped for the night to pick us up, we were 91 Vietnamese on board, and they fed us until we reached Okinawa, where they picked us up was near the Truong Sa archipelago, and we spent 3 days among those islands. We know this because a crewmate aboard the ship told us those islands belonged to Vietnam. He was an Italian of French ancestry who verified that. Truong Sa has belonged to Vietnam in the legal sense for a very long time. This ship was very generous to us. They fed us and let us off in Okinawa after taking care of us for 10 days, and after we had eaten up all the ship’s food. Even though it was a dangerous journey thanks to god we received help, when the engine broke down we still had someone help repair it and get it running, in order to keep up with either war ships or cargo ships. In 1980, it was very difficult to leave because I left during school, so that when I left and there was no teacher they would know right away. That’s why our trip had to be carefully planned to ensure success. Also when we arrived in Japan we were formed into a group of 10 specialists comprised of teachers, doctors, and lawyers who went to Tokyo to stay at the Kominato refugee camp for a time. We then filed petitions to settle in various countries. This refugee camp only held 50 people, and was like other refugee camps in Japan in that being a small country Japan’s camps were also small, only holding several dozen people each. We met many people from Vietnam, from places such as Cam Ranh, or Nha Trang which is how they ended up in Truong Sa, during a storm they were picked up and brought to Japan, and then brought to the camp. The Kominato camp was high in the mountains, next to a religious temple, that religious institution wasn’t very widespread in Japan but still had a large congregation. It’s director was Mr. Alky, who we called father, he did his utmost to help the Vietnamese and sometimes even called outside business owners to
come hire us for odd jobs so that when we had the chance to leave, we would have extra spending money, which enabled us to live easier, with more independence, such as living in a dormitory and cooking for ourselves, going to the market by ourselves, and working for ourselves. That’s why I’m very comfortable when it comes to religion. Every week we would attend mass at a church called Kamorowa, a large city about a half hour electric train ride from where we were staying, and our children had the chance to attend church there and experience the city’s sights and sounds. We shopped at a supermarket, so it was easy to buy food, which we later cooked at home. I paid for every aspect of my independence, for example gas and electricity for cooking, furnace, all those things we had to keep receipts for and split the cost. Regarding living here although it could be called heavenly, it has still been a difficult struggle. For some people it’s easy, but for me it has turned out to be quite hard. Although my son Le Tuan Dien, who is now living with his uncle in Texas, is completely settled in the U.S., yet he was only 3 years old when he came over. Back then when I put that in my U.S. immigration file they immediately informed me that was a little backwards according to United Nations policy. The high commissioner for the United Nations advocated family reunification as the top priority, therefore children must follow their father wherever he may be. In my case it started out with the Japanese allowing me to reside, since we were educated people particularly in regards to science so they readily accepted us, and we got work right away at some camps which were also oil refineries. They were willing to provide us with work and allowed us to stay, thus they wanted us to remain in Japan. Unfortunately my son had to go the opposite route, moreover my wife didn’t have any way to get sponsored, because the permanent residency program was only implemented in a few nations, but not Japan so I had no way to bring my wife and children over to Japan.
So my wife also tried to flee the country, but after getting caught once, then escaping from jail she didn’t dare try again, so my struggles to come to the U.S. were not an easy matter whatsoever for me, I even had to interview 3 times. I finally found the personal strength to get it done. Not only did I rely on help from others, to deliver my file to the interviewer, I even asked the staff there directly if we could talk in English. She said that if I could communicate with her, then I wouldn’t need an interpreter anymore. So that’s when I relied on my instincts and used whatever knowledge I had to speak or write, and even used body language when needed and because she was also adept at language she could easily understand, and therefore empathize with all my statements. So I left out the matter of reunification with my wife and children, and I reversed the issue by meeting the conditions required to qualify to go to the United States. First of all I was a teacher, but I worked for the Vietnamese republican government. In the countryside our activities were heavily influenced by the American worker programs. We had American friends working alongside us. There were student peace workers from the IVS program teaching us English. Even though we weren’t great, we still knew some words. Although we couldn’t say very much we could write, and I even told her how my situation was slightly different, that I had American friends who had come over to teach my family members, and opened a language school in Saigon, and that we still kept in contact with them. Therefore I had no shortage of American friends. And secondly I had been a soldier and even though I had never been an officer, I was still on the defense department payroll, not the department of education. And I specifically worked in the general office for the national police in Saigon, in the department of psychological warfare and had to entirely adhere to police regulations. Therefore we were simply a type of police, both soldiers and members of a special branch of the police.
Therefore if all the military men and police officers were allowed to go to the U.S. then I should be too. The lady interviewing me agreed, and then she also asked questions from the notes of my previous interviews. She asked me: “If you are a teacher, then why aren’t you a democrat like your wife who was also a teacher?” The democratic party was established by president Thieu, which supported his campaign to become president of the Republic of Vietnam. Therefore all the teachers automatically became members, while in our case, I answered, we worked for the police and there was no reason to have to join the democratic party, we were already soldiers. So no need. All these details were correct, and we carried with us our police service cards. And I remembered the names of some of the people that served with me. That’s why she agreed to introduce me to the American staff which processed our file to go to the United States. Actually it was quite easy for them to issue us a visa, all 4 of us, so we prepared to leave right away. I remember that on April 13, 1981, Mr. Alky took us to Tokyo airport to see us off. After we met a man who verified our health certificate, and then signed an IOU for the cost of the air tickets, promising to pay it back later. In fact we paid off our debt sometime back in the early 1990s, in order to complete the sponsorship of my family, we first had to pay off the ticket debt. That was quite an effort. During my stay in Japan I was able to learn many things, besides observing, I learned about many scientific advances, so coming to the United States was really good for me. Through my activities here in the U.S. I’ve learned even more, I took language arts classes at Santa Ana College, and in one class we even discussed how the Vietnam war divided the American people, and because of that I became an assistant teacher, which gave me some income, and declare my taxes because I was an instructional aide for Union High School District, teaching at various high schools such as Huntington Beach High School, Fountain
Valley High School, and Westminster High School. And after I graduated I had to
opportunity to get other jobs. Finding work was not easy, without much experience, but I
got a job in the pharmaceutical industry. After working for awhile I was hired to do drug
research, back then I worked on two types of Glaucoma medicines, but after losing it’s
support that company was sold to the Ethyl Corporation in Richmond, Virginia, and because
of this at first my life depended entirely on public support as part of the refugee assistant
work program, later I became more self-sufficient working on my own, raised my children
and sent them to school, allowing them to study in college. 3 or 4 of them studied at UCI.
And my last child works as a pharmacist, my youngest daughter. Even though she’s worked
here for 10 years, and spent 8 years before completing her studies, we were very
encouraging and happy, and I also hope that she will make us all honored by her
achievement. I personally have done simple work, without a high income, but it was enough
to raise my children, but enough to sponsor two more members of my family, which the
department of immigration agreed to. During my interaction with the department of
immigration I was informed about a few beneficial opportunities in particular. It is
important to declare taxes properly by answering specific questions. It turns out I had an
unfortunate problem with my earlier interview, they had committed an error. It was not
because of me but happened because they wrote someone else’s name on my file, and the
interviewer couldn’t find my file, so I complained, that’s why I had to speak English, she
didn’t need to read my English. She asked me if I had studied history, if I knew who the
American president was, and I answered Ronald Reagan. Then she asked me another
question which I wasn’t expecting, if I was an immigrant, which I misunderstood as a
pilgrim, so then she simply said that people like me were anti-communist, so I must have
been through so much, since I was a boat person, and told me to go back, I was quite lucky. I got lucky at the most unexpected times. For example if I hadn’t complained then she would not have known, and that my English was good enough to pass the interview. Later I worked and had enough strength to study for my GE degree, and I even had the chance to study about medicine and learn a little more about my family’s activities. I steered my children into that field, and I came here to study pre-pharmacy first and take regular pharmacy classes later. Particularly I took extra language classes so I could take part in other activities of the community like jury duty, which I’ve been called for 6 times already. They said that this Anthony fellow, he mentions too many dangerous cases, so the lawyers have to excuse me. He asked if there were any problems, I said my son operated on this ear and was a great doctor. I said thank you and left right away. These are some of the things which happened to me. Even through chance, I have had many experiences here in the United States. Because of this I am even more passionate about actively volunteering here in the U.S. During election time I get quite exhausted. I vote by mail ahead of time. After that I’m free to work at the voting stations. Especially after Mr. Le Phat Ly proposed that I work for at least 6 elections and then after that I could quit, yet they keep calling me. But the most interesting memory in my life was going out on the streets, doing census work. I was curious what statistics meant, because in Vietnam I studied math related to practical statistics, but only observational theory. Only after coming here did I understand what statistics work was really like. I learned how to make reports. Luckily I eventually got to work in inspection, This was a fun job because I was serving the American government, before I only worked in the private sector but now I was working for the American government, so I understood what the trade department was for therefore the more
associations I got involved with the better it was for my work. I participated in all kinds of Vietnamese associations, first of all to pay back the association which had helped me when I first arrived, which helped me apply for welfare benefits, and so now there are other people in need so now I help them out. I am also able to help out with other cultural activities such as teaching Vietnamese language, we were the first to organize Vietnamese classes, which I heard about through the director of *quoc bao*. The man who replaced her was a retired social worker, so he took over, and didn't teach anymore, he was retired so he saved all his energy for language, he was a very positive person, and I also helped him. We even voted, in order to get something done, or make a group decision then we must be eager, participate and then vote on it. Therefore whenever we had special activities or associations requiring help, we would work with them helping to provide services like dental repair, and medical exams at the hospital which was part of a federal statute. We were willing and able to do all that without any problems. I would also like to mention the fact that my wife and children could come here shows the generous spirit of the United States, which has supported the Vietnamese tremendously. This is also a chance to pay off debts, and I also sincerely mean to say that I felt that the United States owed me a debt as well, because it was the Americans who accidentally dropped the bomb which killed my father, causing me endless misery, leaving my mother a widow and leaving us confused about our future. I said I would come here to make the U.S. repay its debt, which it has done, so now my children must continue to pay the debt for me, by paying taxes, which makes me very happy. One place that I remember most after first coming over here was Upland where I went to stay with family, and I went out with another cousin one afternoon. He knew how to speak English so he took me to get my green card, since he knew the way there, but not the way back. So after getting
on the bus, we asked the driver, but he couldn’t show us which street, since he didn’t know, and neither could my cousin, he hadn’t noticed which way it was. The driver was quite a peculiar man, he didn’t utter a word, he just sat there and looked at us as we traveled back and forth several times. We would make another trip around but he never tell us to get off, he just let us sit there, how funny. We were dumbfounded by the ridiculous predicament we had gotten ourselves into, when we should have been able to tell him where to take us. So after riding onboard awkwardly for awhile we finally got off, then hopped on another bus and asked that driver who gave us directions, and told us when to get off, and then told us to take another bus for Upland instead of continuing straight. That all happened because we thought we were so clever, that if we knew the way there then surely we would have no trouble getting back. My cousin had come to the U.S. 8 months before me but still didn’t know the streets. It was a surprising and funny experience, when we got back and were asked what took so long, we replied that we got lost. In the U.S. one might even get lost on the way to school, since back then we had no cell phones, but if we did then things might have been easier. As long as I have food at home, that’s the most important thing, I just wanted to share that. In regards to our culture I propose that we need to preserve it. I took a class called American Character in which the teacher said that is an issue for immigrants, since Americans have many strengths and capabilities. If they don’t then they will band together to fill in the gap, and help out. Americans like to participate in various wars that way, mobility is their innate nature, they like to be active, and like to do things like keep immigrants suppressed. I can’t say whether a community as small as ours can maintain its sense of community or not. She told us to be careful of the intense power of assimilation in the United States, not to take it lightly. So I think that now we must be even more
constructive. For example Little Saigon is a center of Vietnamese activity, so there is more opportunity for it to strengthen cultural, economic, and social development even further. Activities in the Vietnamese community should be dedicated towards that goal, to support cultural activities such as the lunar new year. This area is populated with many people coming from far away. That is to say it attracts Vietnamese people with its cultural activities no matter how far they might be. People here only need to take an extra step and open their arms, give a hug, keep in contact. For example going up to Seattle to collaborate and create similar programs. For example if over here they start up a movement then over there they will do the same. Just like the association director I just mentioned did, that would be wonderful. This area has the most Vietnamese and it is a meeting-point for young people, and people like you can teach them more, so they will understand their community better, retain their culture, and keep their ethnic food. That’s one way to preserve our culture. And also gain experience from our 1,000 year history of being enslaved by the Chinese, Vietnamese people had the habit of chewing betel-nut which was a sign that Vietnamese could use to recognize each other. The Chinese didn’t have such an identity. But now there will certainly be some enormous issues ahead, the Chinese will find new ways to encroach into Vietnam. And here will be a center for the survival of Vietnamese culture, wherever there is a need we will help out, even Vietnam if need be. For example the other day when Mr. Truc Ho requested the American government to let the Vietnamese participate, that was an outstanding and admirable mission. And I think that just like you our leaders have a responsibility towards the next generation, my grandchild now studies and can read Vietnamese, but after reading a book I wrote about our ancestral temple, my grandchild still cannot understand it. But they tell me they can understand poems when read aloud. Thanks
to these efforts, I think the task of protecting Vietnamese culture in America is achievable, that I do believe. Yet I am a person with aptitude, education, a supportive family, my Vietnamese community, and many people all around me. I believe that if the city of Westminster continues to improve little Saigon then it will become an attractive destination, even non-Vietnamese citizens will visit. If the press reported on the people coming here to live, then I think our Vietnamese culture will certainly survive. Whereas if the Chinese overrun Vietnam it will die off there, nothing will remain. On the radio I’ve listened to the director of the sinology institute. He reads books and looks over historical documents, reviewing editorials on the Chinese. Their method is to recruit dishonest people to attack him right out from under his feet. Before he can accuse them they accuse him first. We call those type of violent people *thanh phan* since they use oppressive tactics. They still use the word proletariat dictatorship (to describe them), they are all party members, the same party which suppresses Vietnamese culture, and perhaps even more. So that’s why he disseminates documents over here. So I hope you are able to expand this program, collecting materials about us that will last. My family had many precious keepsakes, but now they are all lost, and since I escaped by sea I couldn’t take anything with me. But actually I brought one thing, that is a picture my wife gave to me back in Vietnam. It was from back when we studied at adjacent colleges and could easily see each other. The most convenient time was when school got out, and the students exited in droves, all the female students wearing identical *ao dais*, making it impossible to find my love, and sometimes I had to return home lonely. That’s a lasting memory. We finally convinced our families to let us get engaged. I was the first but then my older sister also married a catholic and later my younger sibling became a catholic as well. But our family tried to maintain some traditional elements. To
start with our families must be united, then comes a deeper understanding of and joining into Vietnamese society. It’s the same duty we all have towards those around us. I think all religions have basically the same veneration towards ancestors, that is a common aspect in our culture. Although we remind ourselves of that, it’s not easy to realize, but it’s a good thing to keep building centers (for the community). So with that I would like to say thanks for allowing us this opportunity to talk with you. I hope we can continue to work together, and continue the discussion another time.