INTERVIEWER (PQT): My name is Pham Quang Tuan and today is November 5th, 2010. I am going to interview Charlie Van Le and we are at the Nguoi Viet Daily News in Westminster, California and this interview is for the Vietnamese-American Heritage Foundation 500 Oral History Project.

PQT: I’d like to ask you if you can state your name, age, and where do you live currently.

INTERVIEWEE (CVL): My name is Charlie Van Le. I’m currently am 25; currently I reside in Houston, Texas.

PQT: Okay, and what do you do now, Charlie?

CVL: Right now, I just graduated from the University of Texas in 2009—the summer. I was a major in Asian Studies, with a minor in Asian-American Studies. I’m currently pursuing a career in Contract Management. Currently I am enrolled in the UCLA Contract Management Program, so I’ll be, will be, moving into Los Angeles soon. And for now, I’m currently waiting for employment with Northrop Grumman Aerospace Systems as a Configuration Analyst and so then I am just helping out with the organization as much as I can for my time.

PQT: Can you tell me how did you choose your major in college?

CVL: Well, I didn’t start out as a Asian-Americans or Asian Studies major. I started out as a Pre-Med. Bio major because I guess I was pressured from my parents to become a doctor. I guess,
being a doctor or engineer was like the prestige thing, or I guess position, to have for a job. But as I started to study Biology and Pre-Med, it just wasn’t my passion. I just wanted something more that I could have better, I guess, pride in, and I guess, Asian-American and Asian Studies was something that caught my interest; something I would like to learn more about.

PQT: I see. Did your parents ever share with you how did they get to the U. S., and if so, can you share with us?

CVL: They haven’t really gone into details about it, but all they did was told me that they came over from the U. S., I guess, in 1982 through ODP, Orderly Departure Program. Other than that, they really don't really have—they don't really share it. I guess they’re trying to move on from the past and make sure that their children have a good future, so they do not remember the past.

PQT: I see. Do you think that is it is because it’s a painful subject for them to want to look back, or did you ever ask them to share with you?

CVL: I already did think that it was painful subject because every time I ask, they would play it off like nothing happened and just try to, you know, I guess, laugh it off. But as I started learning—taking classes in Asian studies, and more depth, I saw the history I was involved, and after watching “Journey from the Fall,” I actually could understand why they actually wouldn't share it with me. It’s just the memories of the past.

PQT: Did they ever share with you, what was their career or what their profession was back in Vietnam?

CVL: Not really. It was until I talked to my aunt who is more—she has more better English than my parents. She’s very more educated and went to college, so I was able to talk to her and get a little bit more information. Apparently my mom’s family, they were millionaires, because her father was a businessman. He owned a construction company in Vietnam, so he was a
multimillionaire. He would always do charitable work and give back to the community, so he was well known in Vietnam. And I guess my father, his family, they’re farmers. So that's pretty much what I got from my aunt.

PQT: I see. So, what other stories you can gather about your parents, are mostly through your aunt.

CVL: Yes, because, I guess my Vietnamese—I was born here in the U. S., so its one of my regrets is that I haven’t been able to increase my, I guess, Vietnamese proficiency. It’s actually losing. I felt bad about that because I feel like, if you don’t use it, you’re going to lose it, and I’m seeing it right now. But through my aunt, I could actually talk to her and like, just one-on-one, and just get more information and it’s actually a good bonding experience between us. So I could later on ask my parents and talk to them about it whenever this is all done.

PQT: I see. So, can I ask you what inspire you to get involved with the 500 Oral History Project?

CVL: The Oral History Project was one of our classic assignments. A course we took was the Vietnamese American Culture and History. I took it alongside Jason Wang, who’s my co-associate Director of Operations. It was after doing all these interviews and watching “Journey from the Fall” it actually pushed me to move on, because I want to have something to leave behind for younger generations to see and to learn from.

PQT: And did you have any expectations when you first joined the project?

CVL: I just knew it was going to be a lot of work involved. I didn’t realize how much effort it was going to take, but Co Nancy, she had a lot of networks and contacts. Also, for students like us, we can contribute more because we have our resources that we can do to help out, like I guess, advertising, conduct interviews, promote some more, and reach out to more people.

PQT: Any expectations from the personal level?
CVL: For me, I wanted to see this project succeed, so I would recruit other people too, and try to make sure that this project will succeed. That's the expectation that I want to see, this project, for it to finish. And once we reach 500, I want to go on and record everyone. That's my expectation.

PQT: So you don’t think 500 is efficient?

CVL: I don’t think it’s efficient. It’s enough, but I want it to go further; record everybody, because everyone has their own experience.

PQT: So, what roles have you played, or did you play in the project up to this point?

CVL: Currently I am the Associate Director of Operations. Right now we are trying to recruit more volunteers and to coordinate this on a national level. So we recruit regional coordinators and we need to, I guess, come up with a packet, like a training packet to teach them how to conduct oral histories so they can, too, lead other people to conduct oral histories so this project can, I guess, increase in numbers. More hands is better than one, in my opinion.

PQT: With all the interview that you’ve conducted so far, was there any one, any particular, interviews or interviewees that still stuck in your mind and you remember the most and if so, can you share with me?

CVL: I interviewed Dr. Chat, she was a retired teacher from the Austin ISD. The reason I interviewed her was because she received an award at one of our VASCON Conference, I guess, several years ago for leadership and dedication towards the community. What I learned from her was she came over before the war. Her husband, actually, was a UT student. He came for his Ph. D., I guess, it was in Chemistry, and she came over to support him, and I guess, get her teaching to learn more, to teach, so she can come back in Vietnam and support her schools because she actually has schools in Vietnam, but once she heard about the war and she realized that she can never go back, she had to, I guess, change all her plans, and make sure that the future generations
have something to hold on to the Vietnamese culture. So whenever all this is over, maybe they could come back and see.

PQT: I see. So, what do you think you have learned so far from being involved in this project?

CVL: I learned that it takes a lot of dedication, a lot of heart, to actually go on with the project because a lot of these stories they really make you open your heart and change your life because you really see that these people have not given up, they’ve given all they had, make so many sacrifices to make sure that everything they fought for isn’t in vain.

PQT: So, from your experience and being involved in the project, do you have anything you would like to share with your peers, your friends, who are also Vietnamese-American about the project as a whole, and about what you learned so far?

CVL: I learned that you should never turn your back on your culture or heritage, because if you do, you will regret it later when you, I guess, not any time soon, but later when you’re, I guess, in your 40’s, 50’s, whenever you have a family you want to, and then you want to learn about your past, but you can’t because there’s nothing there to learn, because there’s no written documentations or anything. So I think this is a good thing to do for everybody to keep on continuing our culture and heritage. That's what I believe.

PQT: So the project has not changed your mind about the importance of its---

CVL: No, it just helps me continue, but it's a good motivation for me seeing all these stories.

PQT: Okay, so we’re at the end of our interview, so is there anything else you would like to add before we depart?

CVL: No, not at all.

PQT: Great. Well, thank you, Charlie.

CVL: Thank you.