

Phuoc Le  
Dartmouth College Oral History Program  
Dartmouth Vietnam Project  
October 25, 2019  
Transcribed by Karen Navarro

PASSOT: Hello, my name is Jean Paul Passot. It is October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019, and the time is 8:57. We are in Carson Hall at History Hub, and I am conducting an oral history interview of Phuoc Le.

LE: Phuoc Le. [corrects pronunciation]

PASSOT: So, before we get into your time in Vietnam, I just wanted to sort of talk about your upbringing in California and the Sacramento area.

LE: Sure, okay.

PASSOT: Okay. So, could you speak a little bit about the early years in the Sacramento area, and particularly at that time when you found out your host family and sort of integrating into society?

LE: Sure, sure. Well, our first point of entry into the US was not California, because back then the Immigration and Naturalization Service, INS—now it's called Department of Homeland Security or ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement]—but back then the INS was resettling people all around the country, and all you needed was a sponsor, like a church group or a non-profit organization that would say "hey, I'll take in a refugee from Vietnam," and the government, the INS, would supply some funding to support the organization, and they would promise to resettle refugees.

So, our first point of entry was actually at Wichita, Kansas. And so, you can imagine a Vietnamese family of refugees who didn't speak English and didn't ever live in cold weather suddenly being relocated to the middle of essentially, you know, the middle of America, like almost literally, Wichita, Kansas. So my first few years were in the US, that's back in 1981, living in essentially a project, so a large apartment building, a public project with my mom and my older sister. I think I was six at the time and my older sister was eight years old. And the experience at that time was just a complete—for me, you know, everything was novel and

everything was, there was a lot of stimulation, you know, because we went from familiarity to just utter strangeness.

So, just one example is just being exposed to fireflies in the summer. Or, there was a, not too far from our home was a huge venue where they did professional wrestling, WWF [World Wrestling Federation], now called WWE wrestling. And those were all new things to us. And at that time we were just getting integrated into school. We got some help from the church group that was sponsoring us to live, to pay our bills, and then eventually my mom found some manual labor work, and a couple years later we actually found family in California. So, no matter what the INS did to disperse families, eventually, even before the internet and cell phones and all that, we were still able to find family. And so we took a train when I was ten, took a train from Kansas. I actually spent my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday on the train, Amtrak, from Kansas to Sacramento.

PASSOT: That's interesting.

LE: Yeah, yeah.

PASSOT: And what was the name of the family, the host family?

LE: Oh, it was a church group. Yeah, yeah, yeah, it wasn't an actual family. It was a faith-based organization. And, you know, they didn't ask us to go to church or anything, because we're a Buddhist family. And it was a very short period of exposure, meaning they picked us up from the airport, they dropped us off at an apartment, they gave some money for food, and then fit us up with essentially public benefits. You know, back then the environment wasn't like now where now it's so, you know, there's such a stigma about being on public benefits, but back then it was expected, you know, if you didn't speak the language and you didn't have a job and you didn't have an education, you would need a way to transition into getting your own job, and that transition would mean food stamps, would mean some cash assistance, some, you know, of course health care insurance, so you can essentially take care of all your needs. But nowadays that's called "the public charge." [laughter]

PASSOT: And you mentioned that you are part of a Buddhist family.

LE: Yeah.

- PASSOT: Could you just speak a little bit more to that, and what exactly that entails?
- LE: Sure. Well, growing up until I graduated from high school, every Sunday was spent at the temple, and I was part of the youth group. There were a lot of parallels between Christian I guess culture and Buddhist kind of culture, at least from the standpoint of me growing up. It was a social network. I didn't really buy into the actual spiritual side, the religious side, but it was, just like with many kids going to church on Sundays, you know, I had no choice but to go to temple on Sundays, learn the Vietnamese language, so a lot of it was cultural in addition to our religious activities. And one thing that I think it did do was kept me out of trouble, you know, kind of like Boy Scouts almost, and Boy Scouts being a faith-based organization and believe, you know, just keep kids in a social network and community that would be an alternative to whatever else is out there while also focusing on service, which is what we did in the Buddhist youth group as well.
- PASSOT: And did you find that there was a pretty substantial community there?
- LE: Oh, yeah, it was large. In Vietnam, depending on where you are in the country, it could be majority Buddhist, and there are areas that are majority Catholic, or Christian. But, yeah, Buddhism is either the top or the second most prevalent religious...
- PASSOT: And were most first generation or...
- LE: In my family we're all Buddhists. I mean, we also knew people who were Catholic, but my family was completely Buddhist.
- PASSOT: And of the community that you're talking about, were most refugees or did you find that some were...
- LE: Yes, right. Yeah, and so, you know, a lot of people don't know the diversity of the different types of people who came over from Vietnam in the context of the war, right? You know, people often have this idea that in 1975 in April, which is before I was born actually, that refugees were airlifted, you know, and every Vietnamese refugee was somehow

affiliated or helped the US military in some way, like as translators or as actual military officers, and that's how they came to the US. But that certainly was one group of people, for sure. And, but that group of people, their backgrounds were different in that they were typically educated, probably from the city in Vietnam, you know, from a larger city like Saigon, and often came from positions of relative privilege compared to... I mean, they got airlifted out, right?

And then, in the subsequent I would say 10 years after the war, between 1975 and 1985 or so, around there, there was another group, metaphorically a whole wave of people called "the boat people." I'm sure you heard of that, as well many people have. They saw images in those years. If you were living during that time, you would have seen images on television. And that was my demographic, which were in large part quite poor, people from rural villages, which is where my family came from, primarily from the South, meaning from below the—you know, the area of what was South Vietnam, and these were typically uneducated and unskilled, usually farmers or fishermen like my family, mostly fishermen because our hometown is very close to a beach. And so, that demographic had a very different experience of integration into the US, and I believe with that wave there was a very, very diverse experience of growing up. There were a lot of broken families. Many families relied on public assistance for a long time. This is where that stereotype of Vietnamese people opening up nail salons came from, you know, those boat people, and there are multiple nail salons in my family because it's kind of underskilled or minimally skilled work that you can find and actually earn a living from. But it's very different from that first wave of the 1975 evacuees, who were typically professionals, educated, and went on in the US to also transition into other professional careers. And so, yeah, that's...

PASSOT: I guess on that note, what made your family from the US sort of decide to move from Vietnam?

LE: Yeah, it's complex, and you know, I asked my mom a lot, you know, why didn't she bring my dad? So during the war before I was born, my mom, to make money she would—she was kind of a business person—she would go to the North, buy things, and then go to the South and sell them. She was

essentially a trader (I mean, t-r-a-d-e-r), you know, she traded goods. So she accumulated some wealth I believe at the time. But she knew there was no future for her children in Vietnam because we were part of South Vietnam, and at that time it was pretty clear that children of South Vietnamese affiliated people, especially if you had family members in the military, Southern Vietnamese military in the South, then you would have very few opportunities from an education standpoint and an economic standpoint. So, in general we were economic refugees. We were fleeing for a better life, which is a very similar story.

And then on top of that, there was another complication that my father, whom I haven't seen since I left Vietnam, had multiple wives, interestingly—not interestingly, but you know, sadly, I guess, for my mom that she didn't realize during the war he had other wives, so they got married and had two kids, and then after the war ended and they'd already—that's when she discovered that he had two other families that were unbeknownst to her, and so, as another reason for her wanting to leave. I mean, she couldn't see herself raising her own children in that setting.

So when we left, generously she offered to bring him along, and he declined that offer. So she sold or traded or bartered all of her material wealth in order to buy this small boat like, you know, a fishing boat, and she told me it probably would have fit 20 or 30 people, and so she brought some of her siblings, the siblings' kids, and some extended family, uncles, aunts and things like that, people like that, and we all left one night. And that departure was a harrowing one, because you always took the risk of being conned by the Marines that were patrolling—the Maritime Army, I mean, that were patrolling the waters because there were a lot of people were leaving by boat. So we luckily were not caught. We left in the middle of the night and spent some days drifting in the South China Sea, on the South China Sea for some time, and finally after we were pretty much depleted of resources, water and food, there was a larger shipping vessel that we had seen, and essentially begged our way onto and bribed our way onto that vessel. And that vessel was on its way to Hong Kong. And my understanding is that we were lucky to have been able to find—because there

were a lot of people who died on the journey, and we were fortunate.

PASSOT: You had quite a dramatic story about it, though.

LE: Yeah, yeah, we had. Yeah, so on one of those days that we were drifting along in the South China Sea there was a storm, and my mom and I both fell into the sea, and I was five years old and I was wrapped in around—my arm was wrapped around her neck because I didn't know how to swim. Even though we were living close to the sea, I never learned how to swim. But I was pretty much just a slip away from drowning myself, and my mom was holding onto the side of the vessel, which saved our lives. And then, one of our uncles dove in to get us out of the water. But yeah, that was a... and it wasn't an uncommon story. My mom told me lots of stories of cannibalism, not in our boat, but people that she knew, people that would eventually come to the US but had an even more difficult journey than we did, stories of cannibalism out of desperation, pirate stories, all sorts of tragedies happening, which really, you know, at the end of the day people were desperate enough to, people like my family, desperate enough to risk many lives in order to leave a place where they didn't see a tenable future for themselves or for their children. And so, even though outwardly we were probably considered economic refugees, it truly was we were fleeing for our lives essentially, yeah.

PASSOT: So, when you arrived in Hong Kong, you were put into a refugee camp.

LE: Yeah.

PASSOT: Do you have any stories of that time you were...

LE: Sure. And this is one of the reasons why I do global health work now. I think it's... you know, maybe I don't have such clear memories, because I was only five, but looking back, my mom's stories of between when I was born and when I was five I really never had access to health care in Vietnam. It was post-war, we were living in a rural place, you know, access to health care just wasn't available. And so, growing up before I left Vietnam my mom always said that I was a sickly kid, that I had intestinal worms, I was always crying, I

had a pot belly, which is the typical kind of image of poverty and disease in children. You know, you're skinny, but you have a pot belly. That means you probably, you know, there's some sort of malnutrition plus minus parasites or something.

So then when we arrived in Hong Kong, they actually had doctors and they had health care professionals there to evaluate and treat us. So, I sometimes tell my medical students and other students that, you know, it's the power of two pills literally that cured me of a burden that was years long. And of course, doing global health work and focusing on health equity is not as easy as just having two pills, but to make an impact on a child's life, it's developing a system, and part of that health system is having those two pills, for sure. And that made a huge impact on my quality of life, for sure.

And then the rest of the time in Hong Kong which spanned about a year, I went to school. I have one picture of our time in Vietnam [Hong Kong], and that was waiting for the bus to go to school. The Hong Kong government was very generous and didn't just make us stay home, my sister and I. So I had the first language instruction that we had was Cantonese, which I don't remember because it's been so long, but that was the first language. My mom got employment in a jeans, like a denim factory. She made what they called Jordache jeans, the brand. I'm not even sure if it's defunct or not, but it was Jordache where they had this horse's head was their symbol. And she made jeans for a year, and just waiting for our turn, just waiting for our turn to get sponsorship. And at that time, you know, which is different from now, at that time the US Government was resettling hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees every year. And so, the Vietnamese population now in the US is a couple million. So back then it was a rapid clip that they were bringing Vietnamese refugees over, and like I said, really resettling all over the country, and that's why you see now huge densities of Vietnamese people all around the US.

PASSOT:

When you and your family resettled, did your entire family come as a group, like including your mother's siblings and...

LE: No, well, not as a group to the same place. Yeah, so when people resettled, it was the nuclear family. And so, one of my aunts, one of my mom's younger sisters, got resettled in Denver [CO]. Another one got resettled in Stockton, California, another one in Sacramento [CA], and we went to Kansas. And I know that's deliberate, but in retrospect if I were a policymaker, that seems kind of like a cruel thing to do, you know. So, for example, I grew up not knowing two of my cousins, like literally meeting the cousins who were living in Denver one time my entire life. Yeah. And so, yeah, I think that's a cruel thing to do. I would say that in so many cultures the extended family is so important, so that notion of the nuclear family being the most important unit is the US notion, or American notion. It's just different compared to Vietnamese societal structure. So, I think that was, yeah, I think that was hard for me. I didn't realize that growing up, of course. So now that I have children of my own and they have cousins who they love and see all the time, that I would say yeah, that actually was a really painful thing to endure because we didn't actually have enough money to visit Denver. It wasn't as easy as now where we have the means to go and see people even if they're far away.

PASSOT: And you didn't have any means of contact either?

LE: Yeah, we'd have phone calls. But, you know, once you start living separate lives, back then before social media, before smart phones, it was not—the contact was minimal. But luckily for me, we were able to move out of Kansas and move to a place where I had other family members, extended family, so I did... My junior high, my high school years we were around family. But that wasn't because the government supported that, you know. It was just people trying to look for their loved ones.

PASSOT: Now that you've kind of touched on it, can you speak a little bit about your experience in junior high or high school, just a little bit about the Vietnamese society around you and also just sort of like integrating into American culture?

LE: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, it was hard. It was hard. I was living literally in two worlds. I wrote something about this in college, where at home I was living in a very traditional Vietnamese household where raised by a single mom, and



she didn't speak English and she never had schooling. She worked extremely hard and she had expectations for us, which were that because she sacrificed essentially her entire life to bring us to the US, that we would be successful, and success meaning go to college, become a professional. That would bring her some honor and some prestige, and that's why she worked so hard.

And so, then leaving that environment every day, especially growing up in a poor place in Sacramento, we went from large apartments, projects, in Wichita to public housing in that it was subsidized housing in Sacramento in an area that had a lot of gang strife, you know, we had killings around where we lived. One of my cousins was shot dead in his car in gang violence. And going to a school that there was this grading system for schools in the US called [greatschools.com](http://greatschools.com) [[greatschools.org](http://greatschools.org)], and you can be 1 to 10, and 10 being the best school. And so, the schools that I grew up in were all 1's, public schools. So yeah, I went to #1 schools, for sure. [laughter] Yeah, 1 out of 10. And so, the public school near me, yeah, you know, we were almost all free lunch, everybody was free lunch because it was a very poor school.

But, that environment contrasted like black and white, like day and night, with the culture that I had at home. And that environment in school was in large part—I did have Vietnamese friends and people who looked like me, but there were also a lot of people who did not look like me, and there were oftentimes clashes and, you know, racist remarks, and I got into a couple fights, fistfights with people. And, but eventually because of all the pressure that I had at home, I could not bring home anything but A's, and if I brought home anything less than A, there would be some physical repercussions, let's just say, because my mom didn't—the refrain was that she did not leave Vietnam and risk her life and gave all of her money, traded all of her wealth at that time to then have children who would not excel in school. And so, that constant pressure was real. There was no alternative except to do well.

And what we saw was that because we were, my older sister and I, we excelled at school, I mean, it wasn't extremely challenging because the schools we went to were, like I said,

number 1 schools. But we did see that pressure with our cousins turning into essentially those children going in the wrong direction, that extreme pressure turning them to gangs or running away from home or early pregnancy or whatever it may be. Those are the things that are not known typically in American society because Asian-Americans were considered a quote-unquote “model minority,” and the narrative of the Asian immigrant was singular. That narrative was smart brainiacs who worked hard, just put their faces in their books and did really well, and had no personalities. The reality just within the Vietnamese community was so much more complex and diverse, and just within my own family we had so many different stories of growing up in the US, even though we’re all from the same village in Vietnam. Yeah. But I consider myself really fortunate. When I was in that environment of intense pressure to do well in school, and beatings if I didn’t do well in school, that was no fun, but, you know, looking back and seeing the lives of my cousins, I would say I kind of left Sacramento relatively unscathed, even though it wasn’t the easiest upbringing, for sure.

PASSOT: And just beyond academics, did you ever have a chance to do any extracurricular activities?

LE: Yeah. Well, it was one of the ways to get out of the house. Like I said, I was living in two different households. My mom had some mental instability. I think looking back, now that I’m a physician, looking back I think she did have diagnosable mental health disorders. That wasn’t uncommon. I’m absolutely positive she suffered from PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and maybe even worse, which is so common for people who lived through decades of war. I mean, she was born in 1949, so most of her life all she knew was war until she left, until actually I was born essentially, because I was born just after the war ended. And so, the atrocities that she saw, I can’t imagine that she would have a healthy state of mental being, but she never sought care, she never sought professional care.

And so, yeah, it was, looking back it was, I think sometimes I marvel at, and I’m not sure, I always asked myself, like how do kids, children, growing up in settings like that, how do they build resilience? Is it that we had some teachers who really believed in us? Is it that we had encouragement from

another family member? Or was it just truly the fear of not achieving because disappointing your mom, that intense fear of and guilt of not being able to achieve, given what she sacrificed is so intense that it essentially forced us to excel.

So, I don't know what the answer is, but long story short, I wanted to not be in the house. [laughter] I wanted to have every excuse not to be in the house, so I did every sport that I could, I did every club that I could. Weekends I had Vietnamese school, and then Sundays I had that temple youth group. And when I started driving when I was 16, I would go to community college after my classes were over and take extra classes, all in an effort to get home as late as possible and interact with that very different culture at home as little as possible. Yeah.

PASSOT: And what was that culture at home like, as far as just like a normal...

LE: Yeah, normal day, you know, you don't speak English, you speak only Vietnamese, you know, I was small... By the time that I was in high school my mom had, well, we had two other siblings, two younger siblings, because she had remarried and subsequently divorced. So she was still raising children by herself, but now it was four children, me and my older sister and then two younger siblings. And all five of us in a two-bedroom, one bath, small place, and me being at home, it was typical that she would not be home, because she was working at a restaurant for 10 hours a day.

So, we knew responsibility pretty early, taking care of our younger siblings pretty early, and so most of the time it would be evening, late evening dinners with mom, and they were, well, you would typically not talk back. The conversations are always surrounding what's going on in her life, because whatever was going on in our lives was not material because we were children. And so, we would be extremely polite, that's the culture, and there was a lot of culture of verbal abuse, especially if you do anything wrong, and then physical abuse if you make a significant mistake.

So, for example, I one time in sixth grade, I believe, I had a A-. I had one A-, I believe, on the report card, and I took a pen out, I was so worried and afraid that I took a pen and I

just marked on it so it looked like an A+. [laughter] It was so obvious. You know, looking back, I was like ah, that was so obvious that I had essentially just docked my own report card, and yeah, when Mom saw that, I was beat into oblivion for doing that. In retrospect, you know, you would think that's cruel, and maybe like I should have called Child Protective Services. Of course, I didn't have any idea that there was any other alternative, or that there was any other normal expectation or relationship between mother and child. But sometimes I also feel like oh, wow, man, from her standpoint, her life was so hard, she gave up everything. I think if I can just hop into her mind, she gave up every single thing she could specifically for her kids. And so, I think it's reasonable in her mind to say that "oh, all you're doing is going to school. All you're doing is going to school, right?" And so, "How could you even think about not getting straight A's?" And I think that A- was in penmanship. I remember, like penmanship, actually just how my letters looked. And then I think that entire summer she just made me like write on a notepad, even though she couldn't read. She couldn't read, but she just made me write random things over and over and over and over again to improve my penmanship. And then, of course I became a doctor [laughter] with terrible penmanship. Yeah, yeah.

PASSOT: And did that relationship ever change?

LE: Oh, it got worse. Yeah, it got a lot worse. So, my older sister ran away from home in her senior year. Literally in her senior year she just left, and we didn't know where she was. She still went to school, and she still would go to school and I believe she was living with a friend or a teacher or somebody, and then she just went to college. My sister's story, my older sister, and another incredible story. Growing up in the same environment that I did, and having the further disadvantage of being a girl, because in Vietnamese culture there was just this glorification of boys, and obviously in my culture, and so she had that further disadvantage in addition to what we were exposed to collectively.

But again, this is why I always question, like how do kids become resilient? So she went off to college and then became a physician and is now a physician, as well, and of course still dealing with a lot of things from her childhood,

yeah, just like me. Yeah, but after she, my sister left, then I left for college. Fast forward a few years, I was in medical school and the only child left at home with my mom was my younger sister, and there was, just like always, a lot of physical and verbal abuse. And so ultimately there was a point where I was a newlywed during medical school, I had married somebody who's also a Dartmouth grad, and we actually went to court and essentially adopted my younger sister and took her away from the home, legally. Yeah, and we went to court and the court granted us custody, and there I was, final year of medical school, just married for like a year or two, and now we have a teenager in our custody. Yeah.

And so, when I graduated from medical school, we all moved, me, my younger sister who was only 14, I think, at the time, and my wife, we all moved to Boston for me to do residency in Boston. And so, we essentially raised my younger sister in Boston during my residency and she went to high school. Luckily she went to a 10 out of 10 high school in Boston, and then she's doing quite well now. But, so yeah, so there was a point of, there was probably seven or eight years where we had zero contact with Mom and she was living by herself. She never attempted to reach out to us to check in on her youngest daughter. And, you know, it's hard to explain why because in Vietnamese culture there was a lot, there's so much focus on pride, honor, and expectations of different generations, meaning like "you're a younger generation. It's your job to honor the older generation, your elder, not the other way around," definitely not the other way around. And there was so much pride. And then I think laid on top, like I said, a lot of mental health pathology made it almost impossible for her to—even though she was so lonely because she'd had no contact with her four children for years, even though she was so lonely, she still wouldn't reach out just to touch base. Every once in a while I would send her some pictures. So the last time I saw her was probably six months ago. We now on average see her every number of months, just so that she could see her grandchildren. Now I have two children of my own.

And so, you know, at the end of the day, it's our story. From an objective reading, from an outsider it would be like wow, success, living out the American dream. You know, you go

from rags to riches, you go from public charge to the 1%, but yeah actually just scratching that surface, going just a little level deeper, you would—it's a tale of a truly broken family, and I think broken because of the trauma of war, for sure. And, you know, trauma of war plus this growing up in two worlds, you know. And that tragedy, I would say, and it was not unique to us, not unique to us whatsoever, I know Vietnamese families in my extended—that weren't far from us, who were literally—the parents could not communicate with their children because their children spoke no Vietnamese and the parents spoke no English. So, literally they could not communicate in a deep way. I mean, yeah. And it's like, imagine how you would do that? I guess you can, you know, if you came to the US and then had children, but you never had an education yourself, so you didn't want to go to school, but you're in a Vietnamese community where everybody speaks Vietnamese if they're an adult, and then you work in a Vietnamese restaurant. So then you're really, yeah, there is an enclave, but then your child, you know, would resist speaking Vietnamese. That's common. And so yeah, there's a lot of tragedy, I think, and that's why I opened up this conversation with the misconception about this model minority, that there's a monolithic Vietnamese immigrant, and yet there is just so much diversity.

PASSOT: Of course, we're at Dartmouth. I want to touch on your experience here. Did you ever find yourself moving away from Vietnamese culture while so far away from home?

LE: Yeah. Well, I mean, I think in my senior year of high school, there was this—I could not wait to leave, and I could not wait to get as far away as I could. And I think Dartmouth was the farthest. I think that only, the one that's even remotely this distance was, I think, BU [Boston University] or something like that. But the only reason I applied—I told somebody this this morning—the only reason I applied to Dartmouth was that one of the admissions officers—we can probably go back in history just to find which one from Dartmouth—came to my high school probably thinking *oh, yeah, let's bring some diversity to Dartmouth, right? Yeah, let's go to this urban high school where probably there aren't gonna be that many applicants, but if we can get one or two people to apply, that might improve diversity.* And they presented to my class, and they said, "Hey, there's fee waivers. You don't

actually have to pay for the application. Oh, here's a brochure..." that had beautiful pictures of fall foliage, and you know. And so, but for me the key was that I didn't have to pay any money to apply.

And in the fall of my senior year, you won't believe this, but my mom one day just said, "I'm going to Vietnam for a month, and you're gonna stay home with your two younger siblings." So, there I was senior year in high school, I think it was December, and I had a eight-year-old brother and a one-year-old sister, and my mom just took off. And I was taking care of these two kids while applying to college. And my sister had already run away from home and gone on to college. And there was a freezer full of like spaghetti that I could defrost, and she left \$5 a day so that I could pay a babysitter for my younger siblings. So in the morning I would, when my brother was walking to school, I would take my little sister to a babysitter, and then go to school, pick her up, give the babysitter \$5, a bill, \$5, right? This was 1993. It's hard to imagine. And my mom just took off to go visit her family in Vietnam. And it was one of those looking back type of stories, like "What?" But yet, it ultimately helped me in one way, which was it gave me plenty to write about in my college applications. [laughter]

So yeah, that was the context, the environment in which I was applying to Dartmouth. And so, again it was like *oh, I can't wait to get out of here. I just need to go as far away as possible*, you know? And so yeah, I didn't know anything about Dartmouth except that it was a good school, it was far away, and I'd gotten a fee waiver. And later on in my senior year, I'd gotten a great scholarship from a private foundation to essentially pay tuition at any school that I would want to go to. And so, ultimately I landed on Dartmouth, and that was the story.

PASSOT: And how was your experience?

LE: Yeah, oh man, I think it's a different experience. 1994 was when I entered, and first generation into college, you know, from a poor place. I would say in retrospect, Dartmouth could have done a lot more to really make it easier for me to transition. So I went from valedictorian of my class, 1 out of 10, that school, right? Valedictorian, 4 point whatever GPA,

you know, taking the most advanced classes that I could find, and then going to community college and all those things, to a school where in my first semester I'd gotten—it was my very worst—I'd probably gotten, I don't know, less than 3.0. So that was my introduction to college life.

And I think in retrospect, I wish I would have gotten more support from the college to say, to recognize who I was, that it was not an even playing field. I was going to school with kids who were in prep schools, you know. The Dartmouth Outing Club, the freshman trips were about, you know, the people were drinking and telling stories of their convertibles and how many cars they'd wrecked by the time they got to college, that sort of, you know... Talk about culture shock. I had never been exposed to drinking. We just couldn't afford to buy alcohol where I grew up.

And so, you know, I think my freshman fall was really isolating, I would say, because there weren't people, there truly weren't people like me. Well, I think back then maybe the Asian student population was something like somewhere between 5% and 10%. But, among that population there were a lot of very privileged children, kids who grew up with a lot of advantages. And so, I really couldn't find a group that I could relate to. Not that I didn't have a great experience at Dartmouth. It opened so many doors for me, especially the international programs. I spent a lot of time in China for that reason. And the opportunities in research and mentorship were fantastic. But I think that transition into college... I mean, and I got to say it prepared me to go to med school and everything, so I'm not complaining at all, but I think that transition was really, really hard. And I think now there are more programs for 1<sup>st</sup> gen students, and I think the college recognizes how hard it is, that there is no level playing field for all freshmen here. But I made some fantastic relationships here, and it really, it was, Dartmouth really opened my mind to what was possible, I got to say, so...

But I don't bleed green. I'm sorry to say that. I don't bleed green and, you know, I've just got to recognize Dartmouth for what it is, you know. It's an elite school that in general brings elite people to this campus, and of course, the mission is to build leaders. But, when you look at the numbers, a lot of people leave Dartmouth and their life's goal



is to make a lot of money in the capitalistic society that we live in. And it's just the way it's been for decades, and I don't see that really changing. So, yeah, I mean, I think... But, it was a great place to learn and to meet a lot of mentors. In fact, after this interview, I'm going to go have coffee with one of the faculty that was one of my mentors.

PASSOT: So, I know that you've been back to Vietnam since you left.

LE: Yeah.

PASSOT: Could you speak a little bit about why and just your experience going back?

LE: Yeah, absolutely. Well, I know a lot of Vietnamese colleagues and friends who don't see—who don't prioritize going back to Vietnam, and you know, maybe it's that their connections are now fewer or they don't want to relive any trauma or they don't want to support a Communist government, or whatever it is. But for me, it's much, much more about connecting to culture, and then supporting the economy because there are still a lot of poverty there, for sure, to continue speaking the language and exposing my children who are of mixed heritage now, to yeah, to the country where their father is from.

But my first time back to Vietnam was when I was 19. I had just finished a study abroad program, a Dartmouth program, in Beijing, and made my way down to Vietnam after it was, I guess it was the fall of my sophomore year. And I remember this clear as day. My mom met me in Vietnam, and then took me out to my dad's ancestral home. My dad wasn't there. He was elsewhere, so I didn't see him. But, we were in his village, and I see a person approaching—we were sitting out at some sort of a highway side restaurant, and I see somebody approaching, a young man, and I stand up, and I'm about four or five inches taller than him, and he's, I'm about maybe 30 pounds heavier. And I'm not a big guy or anything, and back then I was in pretty decent shape. And I look at him and it was like looking in the mirror in a parallel twilight universe, because the guy looked just like me. Never heard about his existence. And he had a kid in one arm and a cigarette in the other hand. And he was my half-brother, from one of my dad's other wives. Yeah. So I guess my dad

had married somebody near his ancestral home, and, you know, my mom took me there not to see my half siblings, but to pay respects to my father's ancestors, which to me is still confusing why we would do that.

But yeah, at that moment it was a surreal moment where I literally saw—you know, you've heard of the counterfactual, you know, what life would have been like if I hadn't made XYZ choice? Well, right in front of me was that choice, the choice of staying in Vietnam versus not staying in Vietnam. And he was maybe a couple of years older than me, but had three kids, chain smoker, like I said like 30 pounds lighter, four inches shorter, lived in a shack, was a farmer. And here I was this big shot, you know, Dartmouth student, doing study abroad, you know, with all this prestige.

And I think ultimately that image continues to resonate with me even now because I think, I truly believe in this notion that if you are given a lot of privilege and a lot of opportunity, you need to make sure that you do something meaningful with those gifts that you were given, because literally the other, the counterfactual could have been like my half sibling. And we still don't—it's not like we developed a relationship or anything. You know, we were absolute strangers who were biologically 50% identical. It was... yeah, yeah. So yeah, my experience back in... and, you know, being in Vietnam with that connection to my ancestry, it felt really good, you know, and I wanted to keep on going back. So over the years I often, every couple years or so, I come back, and especially now that I have my own kids. I bring them every year or two so that they can truly appreciate their heritage, their culture, the language, and then start learning the history. Over time I'll tell them more about the history.

PASSOT: Do you see it changing at all?

LE: Oh, yeah, Vietnam has changed so much since I was there in 1995. So I had left in 1981, and then came back in 1995 as a college student, and absolutely, from then to now. I mean, probably 75% of the country has never experienced war at all, at all. Another, the majority of the country is just so young, and kind of optimistic about life, especially if you're living in the city, because there are lots and lots of economic

opportunities. There's now way more educational opportunity. Yeah, the suffering that was going on in the late '70s, early '80s, you know, financially and malnutrition and all these things by and large are non-existent, by and large. You know, there are very few people starving in Vietnam, you know, very few. There are still a lot of problems. There—a lot of poverty, rural poverty especially. But, abject poverty is certainly much, much improved. And life expectancy, if you look at all other metrics, life expectancy has gone way up, and so I think Vietnam truly is an emerging middle income, almost middle income country.

PASSOT: What about the Vietnamese society in America, have you seen that change since your introduction?

LE: Yeah. Right, right. Yeah, I think so. I think there's, what I've seen, and it may be I'm biased because of where I am in the Bay Area, but there's a lot more activism, the professional class of Vietnamese is growing, for sure, and growing in influence. And there are now politicians who are Vietnamese. One of things, though, that I have seen is that the Vietnamese, just like I guess any other immigrant group, is split ideologically. So there are a number of very, very conservative leaning Vietnamese, and oftentimes they're a professional class, oftentimes it's people who came over from Vietnam in 1975, that time frame, and so maybe didn't necessarily grow up in poverty. And so, I think there's, like I mentioned again, you know, there's a lot of diversity of Vietnamese. But, the numbers of impoverished Vietnamese people are much, much smaller from what I have seen, now that the generation, you know, now that we've had a couple of generations in the US.

PASSOT: Have you seen a sort of like adoption of American culture at all?

LE: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. Yeah, no question. There's still plenty of traditions that are kept, but if you look at, say, the Japanese-American experience over time over the certain number of generations, that quote-unquote "American culture" gets adopted, and while trying to keep components of traditional culture and potentially language, but if you talk to somebody who's a fifth generation Japanese-American, you know, almost nobody would speak the language.

Nowadays in Vietnamese culture, fewer and fewer children are speaking Vietnamese. Like my children, who are half Caucasian, half Vietnamese, you know, we're struggling, we're struggling, for sure. Yeah. Yeah. And that's one of the reasons why I want to bring them to Vietnam as much as possible. But I can totally see in another generation very few Vietnamese-Americans actually speaking their mother—their ancestral tongue, and yeah, I could see significant assimilation into so-called American culture.

PASSOT: Well, unfortunately I do have class.

LE: Great, okay.

PASSOT: So, we will end the interview there.

LE: All right.

PASSOT: That was very, very nice. And thank you for your contribution.

[End of interview.]