Lai Maccarone
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Vietnam Project
August 22, 2019
Transcribed by Karen Navarro

PASSOT: Hello, my name is Jeanpaul Passot ('21). I will be conducting an oral history interview with Lai Maccarone for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. We are in Carson Hall at Dartmouth College. The date is Thursday, August 22nd and it is 9:49 a.m. Thank you for joining us today, Lai.

MACCARONE: Thank you for having me.

PASSOT: Yeah. And, so just before we jump into your story, I wanted to go over your family, and just your family names, because there are so many different families and so many different characters within your story. I think it's important that we just outline that at the outset before we dive into the nitty gritty of it. So just to start, what is your mother's name and date of birth?

MACCARONE: Well, my birth mother's name is spelled D-a-u and her last name was spelled H-u-y-n-h. And her date of birth I actually don't know, her specific date of birth.

PASSOT: And your father?

MACCARONE: And my birth father's name is spelled L-a-n-g and last name is N-g-u-y-e-n. And I don't know his date of birth either.

PASSOT: And let's go to your sister, Yen?

MACCARONE: My sister Ian.

PASSOT: Yeah.

MACCARONE: Okay. Ian was born on December 11th, 1963, and her full name is Ian Nguyen Allen. Allen is her married name, was her married name. She has since passed.

PASSOT: And your brother Trai?

MACCARONE: My brother Trai, his name is spelled T-r-a-i. His middle name is spelled N-g-o-c and his last name is N-g-u-y-e-n also.

PASSOT: And your eldest sister?

MACCARONE: My eldest sister, her name is Hoa, and it's spelled H-o-a. Her middle name is T-h-i. She maintained her Vietnamese middle name. And her married last name is Pham, P-h-a-m.

PASSOT: And then, as far as Vietnamese family, would you like to cover more? Or should we go over your family in Minnesota?

MACCARONE: Well, I do have two sisters and a brother in Vietnam. My father was in Vietnam and passed away in Vietnam, whereas my mother did come to the United States with us, and she passed away in the United States. But I do have a brother in Vietnam, and his name is Phuong, and it's spelled P-h-u-o-n-g. And a sister, Am, which is spelled A-m. And a sister, Xi, which is spelled X-i.

PASSOT: And then, from there I think we should go over also your family in Minnesota, or families, I should say. So, just starting wherever you want to.

MACCARONE: Sure, maybe going in chronological order, yes. So, the first family I have in the United States is the Pearson family, and my dad, Dale Pearson; my mom, Corrine Pearson. Did you want me to spell those names as well?

PASSOT: If you think it would...

MACCARONE: Okay. Well, Dale is spelled D-a-l-e. Corrine is C-o-r-r-i-n-e. And they have two sons who are my brothers: Aaron, spelled A-a-r-o-n, and Chad, spelled C-h-a-d. And their last name is spelled P-e-a-r-s-o-n, Pearson. So, that's the Pearson family.

And then there is the Heinrich family, and that last name is spelled H-e-i-n-r-i-c-h. And there's my dad, Dennis (D-e-n-n-i-s), and my mom, Grace (G-r-a-c-e). And they have Laurie (L-a-u-r-i-e), Lana (L-a-n-a), and Linda (L-i-n-d-a). Three girls, all are adults. Laurie is married to Paul (P-a-u-l), and they have three boys. And then, Lana is not married. And Linda has two kids, Travis and Ursula. And, so that's the Heinrich family.

And then there is the Carnahan family. And my dad, Larry (L-a-r-r-y), my mom, Elaine (E-l-a-i-n-e). And I have a sister

in that family named Nellie (N-e-l-l-i-e), a brother, B.J.; and then another brother, Chance (C-h-a-n-c-e). So, those are the families kind of in a nutshell.

And then my own family. I'm married to Chris (C-h-r-i-s), and we have our son, Will (W-i-l-l); our daughter, Hannah (H-a-n-n-a-h); and our son Luciano (L-u-c-i-a-n-o).

PASSOT: And just one more person before we move on to the actual story part of it. I understand that your uncle was also a major factor in you leaving Vietnam. So, if you want to also just go over…

MACCARONE: Yeah. Oh, and but before I go over my uncle's family, I should also mention that my sister, Ian, was married and her husband's name is David, and they have two children, Lindsay and Jennifer. So, I apologize for not mentioning them earlier. But I think I've covered everyone now. I probably should have my own cheat sheet.

So, my uncle's family. So my uncle was married to my aunt, and they have four children: two girls and two boys, and they all currently live in the United States, yes.

PASSOT: And I understand that he was working for an official in the South Vietnamese Army, correct?

MACCARONE: Yes. The story with my uncle isn't completely clear to me, and I don't know that I have the most accurate understanding of his situation. But from what I know, he worked for the South Vietnamese government, or the Army, and he was high ranking enough where he was able to be instrumental in helping us escape Vietnam and insuring his own family's escape, as well. So, the details, though, of what he did for the government or for the Army is really unclear to me. But, absolutely extremely instrumental in our escape from Vietnam. My family's ability to be in the United States, we owe it all to him, absolutely.

PASSOT: All right. And so obviously, being one year old at the time of your escape from Vietnam, you don't really remember much, right?

MACCARONE: No. I don't have any recollection of Vietnam, of the Vietnam War, of the escape from Vietnam, or of the refugee camp that we were in for quite a while. You know, my memory of

the Vietnam War specifically just doesn't exist. My earliest memory really is probably when I was maybe three. My earliest memory is with my birth mother and living in the apartment that we were living in at the time. So, yeah, anything prior to that is not my memory.

PASSOT: And you just mentioned that your first memory was at three in the apartment. That was in Minnesota?

MACCARONE: That was in Minnesota, yes.

PASSOT: And could you maybe speak a little bit more to that, about that experience?

MACCARONE: Well, so, I'm the youngest. My mother gave birth to 11 children, and I'm number 11. My eldest sister is one of the sisters who came to the United States with us, and in fact, she was just as instrumental as my uncle in terms of making sure that we were safe, that we were able to escape, and that she protected us from a lot of dangers. And so, as much as I owe my life to my uncle, I also absolutely owe my life to my sister.

But, so, asking about being in the apartment with my birth mother, I was very young. My eldest sister was not living in the apartment with us at the time. It was my sister Ian and my brother Trai, and I believe the two of them were at school. And so, my first memory really is of laying in bed with my mom, and at that time my mom was quite ill. She was, I think, beginning to suffer the disease and the ailments that ultimately took her away from us. But, my first memory of being with my mom isn't a great one. It's not a happy one. But, even at age three, I think I knew something was wrong.

PASSOT: And just to kind of pull back a little bit and look more at the experiences of a refugee living within the United States during that time, I imagine that one of the difficulties of moving to the US is language. So, I wanted to sort of go over the idea of like learning the English language while still being a Vietnamese refugee, and how much Vietnamese you actually know, and how much you wanted to stay connected to that, versus also learning English?

MACCARONE: Sure. Okay. Well, learning English for me wasn't a problem whatsoever. I was raised with English as probably my primary language. I would venture to say that I probably

spoke Vietnamese first, but in terms of interacting with my community, I obviously spoke English. And my mother was taken away from me at a young enough age where I didn't have the opportunity to really speak Vietnamese on a regular basis, so whatever I had learned while living with my mother and being a toddler and so on, faded away pretty quickly. I do remember, though, speaking of English, I do remember being in school and being in English as a Second Language class. I remember a teacher taking me out of one classroom and putting me into another classroom, and I couldn't figure out why. But, all of a sudden I heard them say, "Well, she can speak English. She doesn't belong in this class." Apparently, they didn't think that I could speak English, and maybe it was a situation where I had switched schools. But, apparently they didn't think that I could speak English, and then when I started speaking English quite fluently, they realized that I didn't belong in ESL. So…

PASSOT: And just to cover the ESL, did you meet many refugees within that class, or was it…

MACCARONE: No. I really think it was just a one day situation where they accidentally put me into that class and realized quite quickly that I didn't belong there. In terms of continuing Vietnamese, you know, as a kid I can't say that I wanted to speak Vietnamese even if I had the ability to speak it or the opportunity to speak it. Growing up for me identifying as Vietnamese was not something that I was very interested in doing, and so learning Vietnamese, speaking Vietnamese definitely was not on my hit list of things to do. Now as an adult, and especially as a parent, I really wish that I had maintained Vietnamese, at the very least, you know, being able to speak with my own relatives. But, certainly I wish I were fluent enough where I could even be able to read and write Vietnamese. So I do wish that I had maintained Vietnamese, but I can't say it was entirely my choice.

PASSOT: Now, did you have opportunities growing up in Minnesota, in St. Paul, to pursue Vietnamese classes, or even just pursue speaking with other people within the community?

MACCARONE: Well, I grew up in, for a large part of my childhood, in my sister's house, my eldest sister's house. And she and her husband are full Vietnamese and spoke Vietnamese, and their children spoke Vietnamese. They spoke Vietnamese to one another, but, you know, they mainly spoke English to us.

We did speak a little bit of Vietnamese, and certainly their social group, they were all Vietnamese, and so I was exposed in that manner. But outside of that, I can't say that I had any formal opportunity to learn Vietnamese or speak Vietnamese. I think my niece and nephew attended a Buddhist temple to learn how to read and write Vietnamese. My brother and I did not do that with them, and I think that was probably because we were perhaps just striving to be all American, or as American as we could be, and therefore, learning to speak or read or write Vietnamese just wasn't something that we either expressed interest in or that people thought that we should do. So, in a formal setting, we definitely did not pursue Vietnamese language.

As far as my own social group, you know, I can't say that I had a lot of Vietnamese friends, if any at all, outside of my eldest sister's group of friends and their kids, and the interaction at different parties or situations like that. But even then we spoke English. So, Vietnamese as a language definitely was not something that we focused on. And like I said, now as an adult and as a parent, I really wish I had retained so much more of the Vietnamese language. I think I can comprehend a lot more than I can say. But I'm certainly not fluent by any means.

PASSOT: And just to go back to this idea of assimilating as an American and trying to really embody that, like the all American identity, did you feel pressure from society or even from school, or was that more of a conscious decision growing up so young as a refugee?

MACCARONE: Well, there were certainly, like with every child, you want to fit in, you want to feel like you're part of the group, and I don't think I was any different than that in the sense of wanting to have friends at school and wanting to be able to be like everyone else. I also think that I knew that I was very different from everyone else, you know, partly because I didn't have parents. And by the time I was old enough to really have an understanding of identity and what that was as a refugee in America, my mom had been taken away from me, and so I knew that I didn't have the nuclear family that other kids had.

So, also my experience with church and my experience with my families that I ended up living with throughout my childhood, I was mainly exposed to all American kind of

lifestyle. There wasn't Vietnamese influence on that at all. So, I knew I was a refugee, but at the same time I didn't completely understand what that meant. Is that kind of getting to your question? I kind of lost sight of what you were asking me specifically.

PASSOT: You mentioned your experience with church. Could you just speak more to that, maybe expound that idea?

MACCARONE: Yeah. So, maybe I should step back a little bit to talk about, you know, just the chronology of my understanding of how things happened. And keep in mind that I was so young at the time all of this was happening, and so a lot of what I am calling my story has been told to me. So, when we escaped the Vietnam War, and when half of my family was left in Vietnam, my understanding is that it really wasn't a choice that we made to stay or to go. My understanding is that half of my family was left behind. My father, two sisters, and a brother were left behind because of the circumstances of the moment when we had to flee. So, it was my mother, my eldest sister Hoa, my sister Ian, and my brother Trai, and I think I said my mother, and myself. And I was an infant. I was just born. And to be honest, birthdates are something that are a little bit nebulous, because when we arrived in the United States we were given birthdates, so those are the birthdates that I'm going to go by. I was given the birthdate of August 10th, 1974. So, you know, my exact age at the time we were leaving Vietnam is a bit unclear. But I was a baby, for sure. I was an infant in my mother's arms.

So, when the decision was made to start our escape, it, like I said, wasn't a question of who was going to go and who was going to stay. It just was who was in the right place at the right time. So, within that escape from Vietnam with my uncle and his family and all of the events that occurred to get us to the United States, those are all stories that have been told to me, and there have been different stories, so I can't even be clear on exactly what happened. But when we arrived in the United States, I know that we were held in a refugee camp in Arkansas for a number of months, and we were there waiting for a sponsor. And at the time, my understanding is that the US government was allowing refugees from Vietnam to come to the United States, but in order to stay, you had to have a sponsor, and a sponsor meant a family member or, in our case, a church.

My understanding of how we were sponsored is that my parents, Corrine and Dale Pearson, so before they were my parents, they were a young family in St. Paul, Minnesota, and my mom says that she had been watching the news, and like all other Americans, they were seeing the images on the television, and she just felt compelled to do something. So, my understanding is that she spearheaded the effort at her church, which was First Covenant Church of St. Paul, to sponsor a family. And they looked and looked for a family to sponsor. Well, little did they know that the family that they would end up sponsoring was our family, not only my family of my mother, two sisters, brother and myself, but also my uncle's family, so an additional six people. So, all 11 of us were sponsored by First Covenant Church of St. Paul, which is how we ended up in the great Midwest in the middle—well, at the beginning of winter, in October. So, my understanding is October of 1975 is when we arrived in Minnesota. We had been staying in Arkansas, and we arrived in Minnesota, and that's where we settled. That's how we ended up in Minnesota. So, remind me what the question was that I was answering?

PASSOT: Just asking you about your experience within the church community.

MACCARONE: Oh, the church community, that's right. So, church was extremely instrumental obviously, because they sponsored us and brought us to Minnesota. They were also extremely, extremely instrumental because shortly after arriving in Minnesota, my uncle and his family moved out of the house that we all had been living in, and they started their life as their own family, which left my mother, my eldest sister Hoa and my sister Ian and Trai and myself to living together. My sister Hoa did get married shortly after meeting her husband at English language class. The two of them fell in love and she moved out of the house, and so it was just my mother and then my sister Ian and my brother and I. We moved into an apartment, and that's where my first memory occurred with my mother. But, in that apartment, my sister was in middle school at this time and my brother, I think, just started kindergarten or preschool, I can't remember. But I do know that he did go to school because I've heard stories of him running after the bus and running all the way to school because he loved school so much.

Anyway, my mother was starting to fall ill, and she was ultimately—it was ultimately deemed that she was unable to care for us. And I think I was about three years old or four years old at the time, but when she was put into a hospital, my brother—so, Ian, Trai and I needed a place to live. Because Ian was in, I believe, middle school at the time, people felt like she shouldn't be taken out of her environment, so our church worked really hard to find a family who would be able to take care of Ian without having her leave her school. And that's where she found the Heinrich family. So the Heinrich family took Ian in, but they couldn't take Trai and me in. Again, this is all my understanding. There might have been other reasons why we didn't go with Ian, but ultimately Trai and I ended up living with the Pearsons.

So, both families from First Covenant Church of St. Paul stepped up and took parts of our family to care for us while my mother was sick. I don't think anybody understood how sick she was at the time, but each of these families took us in, and that never would have been able to be possible had it not been for the fact that it was our church community that sponsored us and loved us. So our church certainly played a very, very crucial role in our lives. You know, I would guess that if our church hadn't had families that were willing to take care of us, we might have been put into the foster care system, into strangers' homes. And I was about three or four at the time, so you can imagine that my life could have turned out to be a lot different than it is today, had that been the case of going into strangers' homes in the foster care system, and just all of the things that could happen there. So, so absolutely our church played a very critical role in our lives.

PASSOT: And you mentioned that you and your brother and your sister were separated for a period of time. Now, was that period of time more difficult for you or was it in any way different than before?

MACCARONE: Yeah. Certainly it was different. You know, as a young child being four or five, and even six and seven, you know, you don't really realize how difficult it is, because I didn't have really the maturity to understand what that meant and how challenging it could be. But, as I got older I certainly reflected upon that time in my life of moving from house to house as being very challenging. You know, I think as a kid, moving

from family to family, you don't understand why, and there are questions that come up in your own head that you can't answer, and some of the fundamental things, for instance, that I feel are important to a child's well-being aren't established in the kind of childhood that my brother and I had. So, certainly challenging. There are definite challenges, yes.

PASSOT: Do you think being Vietnamese made it more difficult, especially during that time period in America?

MACCARONE: Yes. Yes. The moving from house to house was a different challenge, just in the sense of a child's identity and a child's ability to feel love and unconditional love and support. So, the challenges of moving from house to house is very different than the challenges I faced as an older child, realizing that I am a result of the Vietnam War, and that the Vietnam War had a major impact on people's lives in my community, you know, in terms of the friends I had at school, in terms of their parents, absolutely. There were times in my childhood where it was very, very clear to me that I was someone different and someone who perhaps in some people's eyes didn't belong here in the United States. You know, as a kid growing up in the inner city, you hear a lot of things, and at times you grow a little bit faster. And in my case, a lot of things were maybe targeted to me because I am Vietnamese and because I am a refugee, and probably also because I was an orphan. I didn't have parents. There's a lot of things about me that made it very easy to be a target.

PASSOT: No, I imagine that might have come up more within like a school setting or a school environment, or possibly just within a recreational environment? So, maybe if you could just speak a little bit about your experience in the school system?

MACCARONE: Yeah, in school, so actually, so the school I have the most memories from are, well, elementary school, middle school and high school. I moved around a lot in elementary school, but then I was pretty consistent in middle school and high school. And it was really probably in middle school where I recognized that *there are a lot of Southeast Asians in my school*. So, I may have been one of maybe 10 actually Vietnamese refugees in the school, but there were a lot of Hmong refugees. And if you're not familiar with Hmong refugees, they are an ethnic group from the mountains of

Vietnam, and so many of them were involved in helping the US government in South Vietnam, and so many Hmong people also came to the United States, found sponsors. Our church in particular sponsored our family first. We were the first family. But then, after our family the church sponsored a number of Hmong families. So, within my community there were quite a few Hmong people, a few Vietnamese people.

But, in school, having grown up the way that I grew up, I think I really wanted to identify as American. And so, by trying to identify so much as American, all American, I very much resisted interaction and involvement in anything Asian related, and that umbrella was covering anything Hmong related and covering anything Vietnamese related in school. So, in school all of my friends were Americans, you know, typical standard Americans. And so, where I faced a lot of challenging situations is that when I wasn't part of my friend group and I was perhaps alone being a kid in St. Paul, and somebody didn't know I could speak English well or somebody didn't know what my lifestyle was, you know, there were definitely situations where people saw me as just simply a refugee and somebody who maybe wasn't acceptable in whatever way they felt that I should have been acceptable.

So, as far as, I think your question was interacting with other Asians in school, so I have to say I didn't have a whole lot of interaction with a whole lot of Asians in my community in my school, and I think that all derived from this really, really strong desire to fit in, to be accepted, to be all American, to distinguish myself from other people who were in a similar situation as mine, even though I do think that I realized nobody was in a similar situation as what my family was in, because most refugee families, most of the other Asian families, did have both parents, they had all of their siblings. They didn't live with other American families and get shuffled from house to house and have to—and they didn't deal with the kinds of things that I was dealing with.

PASSOT: Did you have any particular hobbies or playing sports or anything in middle school?

MACCARONE: Well, not middle school. I did do… So, by the time I was in middle school, and actually I started at late elementary school, I was living with my sister Hoa, and so in my sister's family it was very Vietnamese. They worked. My sister was a

waitress, and then she also worked stocking shelves at Target. She worked and tried to earn as much money to support us. My brother-in-law worked at Honeywell, and so the two of them had two children. My niece is their older child, and then their second child is a boy, my nephew Juan, and he was actually born three months premature, and he was born premature because my sister, when she was pregnant, was taking care of my brother and me and her own daughter and her husband, and trying to support us, and I think it was just too much. She ended up getting very, very sick, and my nephew had to be born, and he was only three pounds when he was born. She was gravely ill. He was fighting for his life.

And so, growing up in that family, I had a lot of responsibility. I had a lot of responsibility for the house. I was the oldest female aside from my sister. So, I at the time felt like I had a tremendous obligation to the Vietnamese family. So I didn't get the opportunity to do sports in elementary school. My brother, on the other hand, being a boy, he was able to do whatever he kind of wanted to do, and he was extremely athletic and extremely involved in academics and in extracurricular activities. And I had different responsibilities. I had a young niece and a young nephew, and my brother-in-law worked a lot of hours and my sister worked a lot of hours, and so it was really a big responsibility for me to manage a lot of things that maybe a typical 10-year-old, 11-year-old didn't have to manage. So I didn't do things.

However, apparently I was bullied in school and I didn't quite know that I was bullied, but my sister somehow found out through the teacher or my brother-in-law found out, I'm not sure exactly how it happened. But basically my brother-in-law recognized that I had to gain some confidence in my life, do something that was going to be able to protect myself. So, he signed me up for karate lessons. And you have to understand that karate is a very expensive sport, in the sense of paying for tuition, paying for uniforms, paying for tournaments, paying for a lot of things that come along with the sport of karate. It's not just learning karate moves; it's competing. So he signed me up for this school, this karate school, because he did not want me to get pushed around and he wanted me to have the tools to be able to defend myself. It, like I said, cost a lot of money, a huge sacrifice on his part, but he did that for my well-being.

It turned out that I was pretty good at karate. I made a lot of friends. I won tournaments. It developed in me a sense of confidence that I had never had before, a sense of success that I had never had before, a level of self-esteem that I think has been the foundation for so much of my life. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. And I say that not only because of all the great things that occurred from it, but that's also where I became involved with my Carnahan family. My mom Elaine had her son who was also involved in karate, and coincidentally her daughter Nellie and I were in sixth grade together, so there's this little community already, and it almost seems like God had a role in placing all these people and events in my life all in perfect order. But, through karate I got to know Elaine quite well, and we instantly had this kind of bond that was mother and daughter bond, and it grew and grew and grew. And so, that's how the Carnahan family became part of my life and became part of my family forest, and it was all because my brother-in-law recognized that I needed something that was going to be positive in my life, that was going to basically prevent me from being a victim my entire life. And so, his decision to put me into karate, I think, really was a very monumental decision. So that was the activity that I did. To answer your question, that was the activity that I did as a kid.

And then, as a senior in high school, I played golf, which I had never ever picked up a golf club prior to my senior year in high school, but by the time I was a senior in high school, I had a lot of freedom to do whatever I wanted to do, because my niece and nephew were significantly older, but specifically it was because my brother-in-law by this time had brought his entire family from Vietnam to Minnesota, and they were now living in our house. So, the role that I had been fulfilling before of taking care of the household was now given to his sisters, and they all took care of everything that was needed for the house, which meant that I had a lot of freedom. So, he brought eight of his family members over after many years of them being in Vietnam. But when he left Vietnam, he promised them that he would one day bring them over, and he fulfilled that promise. And that in and of itself is actually an amazing story, too. But so, as far as activities, karate and golf, that's what I did growing up.

PASSOT: I think one of the things that you mentioned is something we should probably revisit is just your relation to the Carnahan family, just your experience with them?

MACCARONE: Yeah, well, so the Carnahan family I really started to get to know, I really started being involved in their lives and them in my life right during adolescence, and I think that for me it was a pivotal time because I was struggling with a lot of identity. A lot of decisions I was making, I was making on my own. Like with many teenagers, you know, adolescence, it's a time of transition, a time of discovering yourself. So my mom Elaine was just always very, very upfront and just kind of, you know, realistic and in your face kind of with advice and with life lessons. And so, her guidance through those years were really important to me. And, of course, I had that foundation of being involved in karate, which was my life at that time. It encompassed everything I did. I competed in tournaments and gained just a lot of fulfillment from the sport. So, those two factors combined, I think, just established this relationship that is amazing, you know. And to this day they were very much my parents, even though I never actually lived with them. They are very much my parents as the Heinrichs are my parents, as the Pearsons are my parents. Yeah.

PASSOT: Did you end up continuing karate later in high school or in college?

MACCARONE: Well, I quit competing probably my senior year of high school, and into college I didn't compete at all. I did continue being a judge at a national tournament, and so I was still involved. And I'm still involved to some degree just because my dad Larry actually founded the karate school where I started karate, and so he is considered a Grand Master in the sport of karate in North America, and so I am involved in that regard. But competing, no, I'm not competing at all. I may someday compete again, but I don't have any dreams of being successful at it.

PASSOT: Did you have any extracurricular activities during college, or was it…

MACCARONE: During college I was so focused on getting through college and working. I had to pay for school because we had no money. I mean, I had no money at all. I had no parents to support me. I filled out my FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] form very easily, with all zeroes, and I was fortunate enough to go to a state university for my first year, and I kind of quickly decided that that wasn't the right

place for me in terms of the exposure and experiences I wanted in college. I ended up going to a school in Japan for a year, which was very pivotal in my life, the experience I had there. I also did a six month study abroad in France, in southern France, and I ultimately was able to get into a business school at the University of Minnesota, which at the time was a big stretch for me to get into and I was able to graduate from there with my degree. And so, through college I didn't do a lot of extracurricular activities in the sense of having fun. I had to work a lot. I worked multiple jobs throughout college to pay for college.

PASSOT: And just to go back to your experiences in, you said Japan, that is very fascinating to me as it seems like it must have been a first time going back to East Asia since you left in '75. Could you maybe talk more about that experience and how that influenced you?

MACCARONE: Yeah, sure. So, my decision to go to Japan was… Well, as I mentioned before, I wasn't identifying with my Asian roots at all through my childhood and through my adolescence. I think it was really in college that I realized *I need to be more than what I am today. I don't want to be a product of my circumstances. I want to take charge of my life, to determine my destiny, to really choose my path*. And I think that I became aware of that when I was in college. So, part of what I wanted to do in college was I wanted to take advantage of all sorts of opportunities that were presented to me. And going to Japan, doing a study abroad, was a great opportunity. It was something that was economically feasible. The tuition that I was paying for the state university, I could transfer to the school in Japan, and so it wouldn't necessarily cost me more. So, that was a good thing for me. But, I have to admit I wouldn't have chosen Japan if I had other options, but Japan was the only option in that situation.

But I started realizing that I needed to go to Japan. I needed to go to Japan because I decided that this was a way for me to really, to really be challenged by being Asian. As silly as it sounds, I don't think I really considered myself Asian for most of my life up until then. It just really was something at the back of my mind, and perhaps that's because I worked so hard to assimilate into what I saw was my community, and because I lived with American families, and that was the American dream, and I just wanted to be that. So, I didn't give being Vietnamese a whole lot of thought. So, going to

Japan was going to be challenging for me. But I decided to do it, and I was amazed at how much I connected with so much of Japanese culture in the sense of seeing aspects of your culture that I said, *Oh, I believe in that, too*, or, *that's how I feel*, but I never knew that anyone else felt that way. And I can't explain it other than it felt like home to me, on some level.

But, Japan's a really interesting place. Japan is extremely Japanese. And when I say that, I mean they take a lot of pride in being Japanese, fully Japanese, wholly Japanese, completely Japanese, so much to the extent that they have the different written languages to identify a foreign word, you know, using katakana to identify those foreign words that they use in the Japanese language, versus the true Japanese words, which they write in hitakana. So, for me, to be Vietnamese, a Vietnamese American living in Japan, was a very, very different experience than the American students doing the exact same thing that I was doing, living in Japan. And that was kind of a rude awakening for me, I have to admit.

I learned very quickly not to divulge where I was born. It was a situation, a feeling that I had experienced before in terms of being viewed differently because I am Vietnamese. But in Japan it was a lot more blatant, I would say. I remember saying to someone, I remember a Japanese person asking me where I was from, and I would say, "I'm from America," and they would say, "No, where were you born? Where's your mother and father from?" And I would say, "Vietnam." And immediately they turned and walked away from me. And then, you know, through my experience of studying their—I realized how they viewed the Vietnamese people. And so, my experience in Japan was very different than my American counterparts, because of where I was born, because of being Vietnamese. But, what it also, what that experience also did for me was it—I certainly had experience that changed the way that I looked at life and the way that I looked at myself, and it compelled me to do more with my life in my decisions. And so, after Japan, I would say I started making different decisions to be a more thoughtful person, to be a more driven person, to be a more purposeful person.

PASSOT: Can I ask you what were you studying specifically?

MACCARONE: In Japan? Well, I studied language, because prior to going to Japan, I didn't speak Japanese, so we had Japanese language, Japanese history, international business. I had incorporated some of the business course work into my major at Carlson School [of Management] at the University of Minnesota. So, it was Japanese culture, history… It was a long time ago, so I can't remember exactly what the course work was. But, to me it was the experience of living in a foreign country where at times I felt like this is exactly home for me, and then at times I felt like I am such a foreigner, and at some times a despised foreigner in this country, but persevering through all of that and having experiences that were life changing.

PASSOT: Was there ever a time when you were in Japan that you thought of maybe visiting Vietnam, or even trying to reinstate communication with…

MACCARONE: Absolutely. Oh, yes. Oh, I absolutely wanted to go to Vietnam. Ironically, while I was in Japan, my sister Hoa and the rest of my family with my uncle and my aunt and cousins, unbeknownst to me they had planned a family reunion in Vietnam. And I was in Japan, and they were in Vietnam, and I had no idea that they were even there. So, they had been reunited with my family in Vietnam without me and without my sister Ian. So, actually when I came back from Japan, realized that my entire family had gone back to Vietnam except for Ian and myself, Ian and I then decided to go to Vietnam together. And Ian and I have always been very, very close. You know, she was my idol, she was my role model, she was the example to which I should aspire. She and I were very, very close. So, for us to go to Vietnam together was really appropriate.

So, in 1998 we attempted to do that. So, fast forward to 1998, and I was working for Northwest Airlines at the time. It was my first job out of college. And Northwest Airlines is headquartered in St. Paul in Minnesota, and they had flights to Narita, to Japan, and then from Japan I could get to Vietnam. And so, I was new to the whole travel privileges of working for an airline, and in 1998 I said, "Oh, well, I can fly to Vietnam on my pass privileges, and Ian can meet me in Vietnam." She and her husband, David, were planning on going, and so I thought *oh, this is perfect, I'll just tag along on my big sister's trip*. So, I was going to fly into Hong Kong instead of Japan, because for some reason I thought the

flights were going to work out well, and flying on airline privileges means you don't pay any money, so it was really attractive for someone fresh out of school in their first job.

So, Ian went ahead, and she and her husband went to Vietnam, and we were going to meet in Saigon, and I was going to go through Hong Kong. Well, I arrived in Hong Kong and stayed at the hotel at the airport because my flight to Saigon was the next morning early. And, of course, I couldn't afford the airport hotel, so it was a real splurge for me to decide to stay there. But I wanted to be totally refreshed in the morning when I was going to meet my family for the first time in Saigon. So I wake up and I go to the gate in Hong Kong, expecting that I'm going to use my pass privileges to get to Saigon.

Unbeknownst to me—well, I should say because I was ignorant of the whole pass privileges, I didn't realize that I wouldn't have privileges to fly on Café Pacific from Hong Kong to Saigon. So, at the gate in Hong Kong, I was denied boarding to see my family in Vietnam, to meet my sister in Vietnam. It was devastating. Not only devastating, but now I was in the situation of *I'm in Hong Kong, one of the most expensive places in the world. I have no money and I have no way of getting anywhere*. I was fortunate enough to be able to get onto a flight that headed back to the United States. I basically just turned around, got there and turned around. But it was a huge letdown to not be in Vietnam with my sister.

My sister and brother-in-law David, they ended up continuing their trip in Vietnam, and by all accounts it was a life changing trip for both Ian and David. David is this big Midwest guy, and so for my family to see him, you know, they were just in awe of him, and he was the local celebrity amongst the children and amongst the people, and I think it was just a great trip for him and for my sister. So now at this point I'm the only one who hasn't been to Vietnam, because everyone else was able to make it on either that initial trip, family reunion trip, or it was my sister who went when I was denied in Hong Kong.

So, I ultimately did go to Vietnam later that year—I believe it was, yeah, I think it was later that year, and for that trip I was able to go with my sister Hoa and my brother Trai. And that was an amazing experience also, you know, for me to go

back, for my family to see me as a however old I was at the time, you know, as a young woman, was really amazing for them, because when I left, I was a baby, I was a baby in my mother's arms. But to come back as an adult who had her own job, her own ability to take care of herself, to see how I had thrived was, I think, a good experience for them, as well. In preparing to go, it was very emotional for me, you know, to say the least. I wasn't sure how I would feel about going to Vietnam. I wasn't sure how I would feel towards my siblings in Vietnam. There were a lot of things that I was dealing with emotionally. I think at some level it was the pressures of *am I living up to what they expected of me?* The guilt of feeling like, *well, how did I become the lucky one to have the life that I have, and for my siblings who were left behind to have the life that they have?* What I realized, though, was they were happy, they loved each other, they had each other, and they in no way, shape or form imposed any guilt upon me for the luck that I had in the life that I had. And that was so comforting to me to know that they loved the opportunities that were allowed for me.

PASSOT: I definitely want you to hold onto that, because I do want to revisit your time in Vietnam, because it's really interesting and really heartfelt. But, just before we do that, I want to revisit Japan. So, in your speech that you gave me, it mentions that you had the privilege of being on a panel while you were in Japan, and I thought it might be interesting just to go over what exactly that panel was going over, and who that was with.

MACCARONE: Oh, sure. Okay, I've got to really reach into the depths of my memory. So, basically when I was in Japan, Walter Mondale was the ambassador to Japan, and the school where I was studying was actually a Minnesota State University with a campus in Japan. So, it was called MSU-Akita, which was Minnesota State University-Akita. And so, so he was very involved. And I'm trying to recall if it was something that—I don't recall exactly what the intention of the panel was, but we basically discussed Japan-US relations and the importance of being able to have Japanese students be exposed to Minnesota and the United States, and then Minnesota students exposed to Japan. And it was just building relationships, you know, talking about a global economy, all of what you would expect.

Our campus was unique in that we were a campus with dorm rooms and a cafeteria and a library and all the typical things of a college campus, and we were matched up with Japanese students as roommates. So, you know, it wasn't a home study experience. It wasn't living with other Americans and then going to a Japanese university. We were cohabitating, you know. We were living together and experiencing college together. And so, the Japanese students were learning English, and I would assume taking other typical college course work, and we as Americans were interacting with them, socializing with them, going to classes with them. So, the panel, I can't remember, like I said, the details or the objective of the panel, having the panel, but it was quite the honor to have Ambassador Mondale on campus and to be associated with him on a panel to talk about basically the relationship between—you know, the need for building a stronger relationship between Japan and the United States.

PASSOT: And did the question of Vietnam ever come up within those relationship discussion? Obviously, the relationship between the US and Japan has a long-seated history, especially modern history. But, of course, your own ties to Vietnam, I was wondering if anyone ever kind of questioned regarding Japan [inaudible]

MACCARONE: No, no, I can't say that Vietnam has ever really come up in conversation related to Japan, outside of local Japanese people asking me, trying to understand where I was from, because saying America just wasn't good enough. And so, no, between Ambassador Mondale and myself or any panel discussion, no, Vietnam wasn't… And if it did, it isn't something that I remember. So, no.

PASSOT: And, so you also mentioned that you were in France for quite some time, and I was just curious why? Why France?

MACCARONE: Why? Well, so I think it was because I loved my study abroad experience so much in Japan, and really I think it was that I was done with all of my credits to graduate early, and I wanted to extend my college years until—I'm trying to recall exactly, but I wanted to walk down and get my diploma in June. And so I think I was ready to graduate in January, or something like that, because to be honest, before I went to France, I already had my job, I already had an employee number, I already had all these things that were already in

place. And because I was able to graduate earlier in the school year, I thought, *Well, why don't I just continue my education until June, until the end of a typical school year? What can I do with that time?* And this opportunity to go to France on a study abroad came up, and I said, *Well, yeah, why not? Let's do it.*

It was a different experience than Japan, because this was with a home study, home stay, so I lived with a family, and it was in a totally different part of the world. And it's also because I had taken French in high school. So, it was, I hate to say it, but more of a fun trip than an academic trip. It was more of a *okay, this is how I'm gonna end my collegiate career and this is just a great way to do it*. So, and it was the south of France. It was right on the Mediterranean. We spent a lot of days on the beach.

I absolutely loved living with my French family. I loved the experience of being in France. I loved taking classes. Like I said, the idea of traveling and being in a different place, it's very appealing to me. I like adventure. I like being able to show yourself that you can survive given any circumstance. I like being challenged by my environment. I like being adaptable. And I think that being adaptable has developed in me because of my upbringing, because of moving from family to family, because of being in one social setting versus another social setting, versus one community versus another community. You know, I don't wish the unfortunate circumstances of my life upon anyone, but I do really feel that the experiences that I've had established a foundation that I truly, truly value and benefit from, and feel are blessings in my life, for sure.

PASSOT: I'm just curious. Do you remember any of the courses that you were taking in France?

MACCARONE: Oh, no, no. I remember being on the beach a lot. [laughter] And just having a lot of fun. And yeah, I don't really remember any of the course work I took at all, [laughter] to be honest, unfortunately.

PASSOT: Do you remember any of the interactions with any French people in particular or at that time…

MACCARONE: As they relate to Vietnam you mean? Like in, similar to what I was talking about in Japan?

PASSOT: Or just in general?

MACCARONE: Well, my French family I still keep in touch with them, you know, through Christmas cards and through email and things like that. I have not yet been back to visit. The students I studied with, all of that is all very important to me. There were a group of girls who traveled throughout Europe right after we were done. It was either after we were done or during a break that we had. I can't remember. But, basically five or six college girls backpacking through Europe, jumping on trains, going from station to station, trying to spend what little money we had, you know, all of those things are things that I consider experiences that growing up the way that I grew up I wouldn't have ever dreamt about, you know.

So, I think I said before that there was a point in time in my life where I decided that *I am going to take charge of my future*. And so, so that's, having this opportunity to travel throughout Europe and to study in Europe, and to study in Asia, and to make the decisions that I've made are all a conscious choice of me making the most of my life, and having that revelation that my life could have been very, very different, given the circumstances of my life. My current life even could be very different than what it is today. And so, so yeah.

PASSOT: Now, we've spent a lot of time talking about your experiences abroad. I just kind of wanted to come back to the States, and just talk about your experience in college itself in Minnesota, and just what a typical day might look like?

MACCARONE: Today or in college?

PASSOT: In college.

MACCARONE: In college. Oh, in Minnesota? Well, as I mentioned before, I first went to a state school. And I think that I went to a state school basically because I didn't know where else to go. It was a school that's in southern Minnesota that I didn't necessarily research very much. I didn't have a whole lot of guidance in selecting colleges or in school. I think that my refugee experience academically is very different than probably the typical refugee academic experience where you have parents who have high expectations of what you do

and what you study, and the focus on grades and the focus on family and the focus on being everything that you can be, I can't say that that's the experience that I had.

You know, there were a lot of people who had their fingers in the pot, were involved in my upbringing, but because I didn't have parents, nobody really took the lead on that. I think everybody was so busy dealing with their own lives, and it was hard to take charge of my life. So, I had to do a lot of things on my own, for good or for bad. I made some good decisions and I made some really bad decisions. But, I think that I've had to be accountable for all of those decisions, and understand what went into making those decisions, because I didn't have the parents to do it. So, so again a situation of I wouldn't wish that upon anybody, but the result of me really having to be accountable for my decisions I think is something that a lot of people don't have to do. And I had to learn to be accountable, and that's because I had no one to blame when something went wrong.

But, so college, so a typical day at college at the first school… Oh, well, you know, so that first school, so something that maybe is interesting is, I had spoken earlier about taking advantage of opportunities, and college to me was something, was a time to do that. So, one thing that I did was I enrolled in ROTC, and ROTC is Reserve Officers Training Corps, and at the school I was at it was Army, so it was Army ROTC. And the way I came upon that was I needed a credit, a one credit for financial aid that was Phy Ed. And I really have no rhythm at all, so dancing was not a class I wanted to take, and other sports weren't appealing to me.

But this one credit for military science was appealing to me, and I thought, *Well, where else am I going to get the experience of being in—having exposure to the military without signing up to be in the military?* And I wasn't sure that that's what I wanted to do, even I am extremely, extremely thankful for military service, for the soldiers who were involved especially in the Vietnam War, for the soldiers who—for anybody who is involved in protecting our rights as Americans. I am deeply, deeply indebted to soldiers. There's no doubt about that. And I have a great respect for anyone involved in the military.

So, as a freshman at college, this military science class came about, and I signed up for it. And I ended up falling in love with the class. I fell in love with it. I loved doing field training exercises. I loved that it was unique. It very much fit into being active and doing something that I wouldn't otherwise be able to do. So, so I joined ROTC. And, so my daily schedule with ROTC was, you know, basically waking up at 5:30 in the morning, doing PT, physical training, and then from there I would go to class, and then I had a job at the bookstore that was for three hours, and then I had more class, and then I worked at a radio station at NPR, the National Public Radio station that was local to the campus, and I worked the midnight shift, so I worked from 6:00 p.m. to midnight.

And it was a full day for me, and that's how I was able to pay for college, but it also just gave me the experiences that I wouldn't otherwise be able to have. You know, who gets to work at a radio station without actually making that their career? And who gets to be involved in all of the field training exercises and experiences without actually being in the military? So, so I ended up staying in ROTC, though, for two years, and after two years is when you have to make a commitment. And it was after my second year that I ended up going to Japan for a full year, so it wasn't even a possibility for me. But, I thoroughly enjoyed my ROTC experience. It taught me a lot of things, and so, but it definitely created a daily schedule for me that was very demanding, very demanding.

PASSOT: Now, being in ROTC as a refugee, that's kind of an interesting dynamic. Did you ever feel that you found yourself reflecting back on the Vietnam War or just the military engagement outside of the US, in general?

MACCARONE: Yes, probably. I wanted to do the best that I could in my experience in ROTC. I worked hard. I think I showed some leadership skills, you know, abilities. My commanding officer wanted me to continue, and really praised me for various things that I was doing. To be honest, I can't even recall anything spectacular that I did. I did earn some medals and awards while I was in ROTC, which was nice to have. I still have those medals. And I don't have my uniform at all, but I have the medals. And it was…

But my first exposure to ROTC was, there was a sergeant there and he asked me where I was from, because you're right, there aren't very many refugees. I think maybe I was the only one. And he asked me where I was from, and I told him that I was born in Vietnam, and he asked "how long had you been there?" or he asked when did I come over? And I told him, and then he must have calculated in his mind that I was an infant and basically came over to the United States as an infant. And so, his remark to me was that he spent more time in Vietnam than I did. And I remember hearing that, and being really impacted by that statement. It was a moment where I felt hugely indebted to him, to the country, and I also think that I felt at that time this immense responsibility to be the best that I could be to almost justify or prove that I was worth it.

PASSOT: I think with that, I'd like to pause for a minute. [Pause in tape.] All right. So, when we left off, you were talking a bit about ROTC, and we had been talking about your experiences studying abroad and how that maybe sort of reconnected your identity with Vietnam and sort of shifted away from not necessarily being all American, but sort of recognizing that Vietnamese side of you. So, I was just curious if your family or your extended family ever had communication with friends or family that you left behind in Vietnam?

MACCARONE: Yeah. So, growing up the communication that I was aware of was with my sister Hoa and our family in Vietnam, or friends or other relatives in Vietnam. And I would assume that my aunt and uncle also had similar communication with people in Vietnam. But, for my sister, we would receive letters in the mail that are marked "Airmail" and that were coming from Vietnam. So, I don't know specifically if that communication was direct with my father or my—actually I know it wasn't with my father, and I'm guessing it wasn't directly with any of my siblings early on, like in the late '80s, I would say. The reason I'm saying that I don't think it was directly with our family is because my mother died in the United States the same year that my father died in Vietnam, and at the time of their deaths, they did not know what had happened to one another, so they both went to their graves believing that half of our family had perished as a result of escaping or as a result of having been left behind in Vietnam. So, so I don't think that communication with my siblings happened until, I don't know, until after the embargo was lifted. I can't be

certain about that. That would have to be a question that my sister would know.

But, In terms of communication with my family now, you know, with the advent of cell phones and texting and Facetime and everything, there's a lot of communication between my family in Vietnam and our family here in the United States. And again, mainly that's through my sister, and more recently through my brother Trai, who married a Vietnamese woman a couple years ago, so he actually travels to and from Vietnam quite often. But as far as my communication, it's extremely limited. I don't speak to my family in Vietnam really very much at all. All of my information about my family in Vietnam comes from my sister.

PASSOT: And you mentioned the embargo lift in '95. So, was it around this time that your sister began planning visits back to Vietnam?

MACCARONE: Yes, I think so, because I was in Japan, I think '95, it must have been '95. And so, that's when she and the rest of my family went back to Vietnam. So I think at the first opportunity to travel back to Vietnam was available, I think that's when they all went back. And then my sister Ian and I didn't go back until '98. So…

PASSOT: And at this point was your family still living in Da Nang or had they moved to Saigon?

MACCARONE: Still living, well, so my family doesn't live in Saigon at all. They're all in Da Nang. So, yes, that's where they live. And I believe they live in—they have homes now where each sibling has their own house, but I want to say it's in the same neighborhood where we grew up, but I can't be certain about that.

PASSOT: Okay. Now, just sort of going to your visit to Vietnam in '98. I just wanted to sort of go over that experience, and just ask you what it was like going back after so many years away from really [inaudible]?

MACCARONE: Yeah, well, I appreciate you asking me about that because that obviously was a very emotional experience for me. My sister Hoa and my brother Trai and I went back in '98. And Trai and Hoa had been back before, and it was my first time.

And, as I mentioned before, I had a lot of hesitation about going, not hesitation in the sense of desire, but really hesitation in dealing with whatever emotions I might have as a result of going back. At this point in my life I was just starting off my career. I was feeling very much like a hungry tiger, just eager to jump into life and to establish who I was going to become, and really quite selfish, I should say, you know, just as any young adult coming out of college and starting their career would be, focusing on myself. I didn't have a significant other, I didn't have a family of my own kids or anything, so I think I was in a very selfish stage of my life of just focusing on me.

So, when this opportunity to go back to Vietnam arose, I was really hesitant, trying to understand what emotions I might feel, what emotions they might feel, if I would be feeling guilty about having the life that I had, whether they would be happy with who I had become, you know, what kind of responsibilities I might have, what kinds of obligations I might have to fulfill. There were a lot of emotions. And, of course, it was all exciting, too, because I was going to Vietnam, and, you know, from my experience or from my perspective, it's someplace I had never been before, even though I was born there. But, it was a new adventure for me. And it was extremely comforting to know that my sister and brother were going to be with me. I don't think I would ever have made the trip on my own.

But we flew. So, if you recall, this is my second attempt to go to Vietnam because the first one was thwarted at the Hong Kong airport. But this was successful. We flew into—I think we flew into Bangkok, and then went from Bangkok to Saigon, and then Saigon to Da Nang.

And I have to say that part of something that if you're listening to this you don't have the opportunity to understand is I have curly hair, and I'm the only one in my family who has curly hair in my family in the United States. So, growing up, my sister Hoa and my sister Ian and my brother Trai do not have curly hair. It's only me. And so, so in going back to Vietnam, and in particular going to the Da Nang airport, we got off the airplane, and if you can imagine, people are behind a chain link fence, and those are the local people. And so, we got off the airplane and I'm scanning the crowd, and pressed up against the chain link fence is this guy with curly hair, wavy hair. Curly hair, wavy hair. And I knew

immediately that that was my brother. And it was an extremely powerful moment in my life, because I could identify with him, and the way I describe it is it was love at first sight, it was this unconditional feeling of being loved. And so, so I knew he was my brother. And sure enough, that was my brother.

And throughout the entire trip in Vietnam, my siblings lifted me in adoration. They just loved me for who I was, and they kept calling me “Baby Lai.” And that’s how they remembered me. They remembered me as a baby. And now I was an adult. And I have to say, I was heavier when I was in my 20s, and so, I was heavier than most Vietnamese people. So, my family was just so impressed by how fat I was. [laughter] And so, to them that was just a sign of wealth and health, and they were just so pleased. But, of course, in the translation of them saying something to me, it was in English, “Oh, Baby Lai, you are so fat. You are so fat.” [laughter] And, of course, hearing that as an American I was taken aback by it, but then, like I said, realizing that what they were really intending to say is “you have such wealth and health that it shows in your plumpness.” And so I had to laugh at just understanding what the words really meant.

So, so our trip to Vietnam was very short, but it was extremely, extremely meaningful and emotional and necessary. I was reunited with people, with a family that I really never knew I had, you know, aunts and uncles and cousins, and history that I had just always never acknowledged and never even fathomed, quite honestly. Having lived in the United States and having grown up the way that I did, it never really occurred to me that I had a history, a family history, because in my experience growing up as an orphan refugee living in multiple families, is that I didn't really have a family connection, and especially a family connection that had roots. So, the experience in Vietnam absolutely was eye opening, many levels for me.

And at some point, I would love to take my own family to Vietnam. It’s something that we’ve been planning and something that we desire greatly. And I know that we will be able to do that at some point. But I’m very thankful that my sister Hoa and my brother Trai have been able to go back to Vietnam quite regularly to be able to maintain the relationships with my siblings and their families. But we definitely still communicate, and, you know, I’m ashamed to

say that I personally am not the one doing the communicating, but our family as a whole, we are in touch and we are sharing in each other's joys of life. So…

PASSOT: Now, I have to ask just a little bit outside of family lives, was there any sort of like cultural shock? Because I know you grew up in, of course, with your sisters, and that was a whole Vietnamese household, but also you had many American influences throughout your early life and effectively grew up American. So, were there any sort of cultural disparities when you're trying to first revisit your family, anything that you sort of, you were unaware of?

MACCARONE: Well, absolutely. I mean, life in Vietnam, especially in 1998, was very different than life in the United States in 1998. I arrived at my brother's house, and the house had three walls, that's it, three walls. The front was a gate that pulled across at night, kind of like you would see in New York City to protect storefronts. It was just a gate. There was no door behind that. So, that was something that I wasn't expecting. But, you know, understanding that the climate that they live in, being comfortable with air flow and not being restricted by doors and windows is what they need in that environment. Of course, living in Minnesota, that would be unheard of.

But then, also, you know, they didn't have a telephone. Their community—I don't know if "village" is the right term for it—but their community had one phone, basically, that everybody shared. So, communicating was challenging. I saw a lot of people sitting on the curbs and eating food. Of course, that's something that we wouldn't see very often in the United States, and certainly not where I was raising my family in the suburbs of St. Paul, Minnesota. You know, people don't just sit on the curb and watch the cars go by while eating their lunch. But, that was something that was very common in Vietnam, and actually completely normal and really enjoyable to sit and enjoy a bowl of pho sitting on the corner.

So, that, and then the other thing that really amazed me actually was how many individuals can fit on one scooter. I think that my sister arrived at my brother's house with, no kidding, five people on one scooter. I think one kid was on her hip, another kid was practically standing behind her holding her neck, her husband was maybe steering, and then there was another kid on the handlebars. It was just

amazing to see how people maneuvered around town, and just how people piled up. And so, so there was a lot of culture shock in that regard, you know. But, part of what I came to realize is, as shocking as all of that was in the sense of my own experience and possibly my own standards of living, you know, and feeling like how could people live like this, how could they do this? Part of what I realized is, we all have our cultural experiences, and when you go to another country, when you go to another culture, you really have to leave your cultural baggage behind. Because eating on the street, curb, isn't something that I thought was culturally acceptable, having grown up in the US, it's totally normal and totally acceptable and there's nothing wrong with doing that in Vietnam. That's just, that's what it is.

And so, in realizing that I needed to leave my cultural baggage behind, the other thing I realized is, like I alluded to before, my family was healthy, happy, loving, all of the things that I wish for my own family and my own children, and I saw it in them. Even though they didn't live the life that I was living or that my children are living, their life was just as fulfilling. And that gave me such a sense of happiness that even though I was the lucky one that ended up in the United States, those who were left behind were still living lives of happiness and love. And by acknowledging that, I think I was able to enjoy my visit to Vietnam much more than I anticipated, and so I think that that was a real life lesson for me, you know.

PASSOT: And I know by then your father had passed away, but did you ever—or did you ask about your father at all or about…

MACCARONE: Yes. So, my father by then had passed away, so unfortunately I never had the opportunity to be reacquainted with him. My sister Hoa speaks so highly of him. He apparently was a wonderful father, a committed husband, a loyal soldier. My sister speaks so highly of him, and as a result of that, I respect him so much and wish that I had known him, wish that he had been a father to me. He had—like you said, he had passed away, and so our family did have a burial site for him. And so, a story that I have that I've told about visiting his gravesite, I don't know if it's completely accurate because I've heard different situations since then. But, what I remember from my visit to Vietnam in 1998 was, we went to visit his gravesite, and it was my understanding that on a person's gravesite, the names of those who

preceded you in death are written on your tombstone. And so, at the time that my father died, the belief was that we all had perished, those who had escaped to the US, that we had all died. So, on my father's tombstone was my name, and that is a very, very eerie feeling of seeing your name, understanding that your name is there because you're supposed to be dead, is very, very impactful. So, that is how I remember that.

Now, since then I've heard that that's not true in terms of the names written on there. I don't fully, I guess, understand or know truly why the names are written on the tombstone, if it's because they were merely a member of the family or if they really did believe you were dead, or if it was the actual opposite of they believed you were still living. So I haven't quite figured that answer yet. But at the time that I was there, the impact that it made on me was *oh, my gosh, they all believed that we were dead, and based on this tombstone, we're supposed to be dead*. So that was the experience of visiting his tombstone.

The other thing about my father is, after half of our family escaped, or left Vietnam, and my father did not know what happened to us, and so, the way my brother has told it is that my father went mad. He searched the streets of Da Nang, he searched the streets of Saigon, and he carried postcards or posters with our names on it looking and searching for us, you know, not knowing where we were, and eventually he went mad. We have since found out that he had another child in Vietnam with another woman, and so, in addition to the family members that I've mentioned, my sisters and brothers, I actually have a half brother. I don't know his name, but he lives near my brother, and my brother Trai and my sister Hoa have met him. And the pictures that I have seen of him resemble my father so much, and my sister Hoa says that he reminds her of our father. So, as a result of the Vietnam War, I have a half sibling. So I guess I am not the youngest of our family.

PASSOT: Yeah, so looking beyond that visit and just more into your life now, are you at all involved in the Vietnamese community within Minnesota or do you still speak with your family back in Vietnam?

MACCARONE: So, I should mention another thing about that visit, though, so, talking about culture shock. So, everyone at that time still

dressed in what I would say pajamas, you know, the tops and the bottoms matching. Everything to me looked very Third World, you know, very little running water, no telephone, three walls to a house, all of these things. And so, to me there was a lot of culture shock just in what it looked like. The countryside was beautiful. The city area was dark and dirty, and people were in cars—not very many cars, but mainly scooters back and forth, and it was just chaotic and just didn't resemble what I knew in the United States.

Now, fast forward many years, and now that my brother is married to a Vietnamese woman and they go back quite often and we see pictures, I would not recognize Vietnam whatsoever, because now Vietnam, and of course the Instagram pictures and the various selfies that I see that are taken in Vietnam, they look like what I saw in Japan, just a lot of neon lights, a lot of activity, all of these things that in my opinion brought Vietnam into the 21st Century. It just doesn't resemble the Vietnam that I saw.

So, I would like to go back, because I would like to see the change, but I feel a little longing for the rawness of what I saw in Vietnam back in '98, because I think it is very, very different in today's day and age. So, so I think part of your question was do I want to go back to Vietnam? The answer is yes, and definitely with my family. I think it's very important for my children to see that, to know that they have an entire family that resembles their mother, to put it bluntly. The family that they know is, you know, my families here in the United States, they don't look like me, for the most part. So, for my kids to recognize and acknowledge that they have this whole history inside of the family that hopefully they will embrace as they get older. And as their lives take the turns that they take, you never know, they might end up being very involved in my family in Vietnam, their family in Vietnam.

So, as far as being involved in community in Minnesota with the Vietnamese community, again I would say no. As a very, very busy family of three active kids, we're just busy trying to make it day by day managing all the things that we have to manage as a family. So, for me to expose them to more Vietnamese culture hasn't been top priority. My sister Hoa is extremely active in their lives, and she is very active in the Vietnamese community. But, as far as my kids, their exposure to Vietnamese culture is all through my sister. We, of course, still celebrate the Lunar New Year, and the kids

do receive Vietnamese New Year money, which is very important to them, and so we do try to maintain some of the traditions that I am familiar with. But, you know, a lot of it is I wasn't really exposed to a lot of the Vietnamese community growing up in the sense of being involved, so I don't have that as a parent to use as a resource. So, unfortunately, my kids don't speak Vietnamese and they aren't active in the Minnesota Vietnamese community.

PASSOT: All right. Well, I know you have to get back to your hotel and catch a flight. But, thank you for coming here and doing this interview.

MACCARONE: Thank you for inviting me. Thank you for being interested. Thank you for letting me share parts of my story. And thank you for the true thoughtfulness in having me part of this program.

[End of Interview.]