Lai Maccarone
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Brigid M. McCarron ‘26

MCCARRON: This is Brigid McCarron [‘26]. Today is February 13th, 2025, and I'm conducting an oral history interview for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. I'm conducting this interview with Mrs. Lai Maccarone. This interview is taking place in the Hanover Inn in Hanover, New Hampshire, on the campus of Dartmouth College. Mrs. Maccarone, thank you for speaking with me today.

MACCARONE: Thank you for being interested in speaking with me today.

MCCARRON: Alright. So just to start off, so previously, in 2019 you conducted an interview with the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. However you believe—however, you stated to our professor [Edward Miller] that you were interested in coming back and sharing some more information. Why did you want to do another interview?

MACCARONE: Well, I would say that there are a few reasons why I wanted to do another interview. First of all, I wanted to be able to support the project. I think that the project is really, really amazing—that Professor [Edward] Miller has been able to have students who are interested in learning about Vietnam, learning about the Vietnam War, learning about the people who experienced the Vietnam War and just being exposed to, you know, to people who are from Vietnam, so that, I would say, is the first reason why I want to participate and be involved in this project, because I'm just really impressed that there's is even a project such as this.

Secondly, I do feel like, in my first interview I talked a lot about my life history in terms of the chronology of the different families that I lived with and different things that had occurred in my life. And I think since 2019 for me, a lot of things have changed, maybe especially after COVID [the COVID-19 pandemic] and after a lot of Asian hate, and the fact that my children have now become adults, and I am an empty nester, officially, as well as just the general

season of life that I'm in, in terms of my own changes that are occurring within my own body and really a new journey that I've been on since 2019, and within that journey, I was diagnosed with a disease that was a bit of a health crisis for me, and from that, I realized that I really needed to just look within myself and try to understand some of the things that were happening that may have contributed to the health crisis and that allowed me to really evaluate my life from the standpoint that I'm currently at and just be on this really interesting journey, to be honest, for myself. A journey that I didn't expect to be on. So those are —I don't know if I gave two reasons or three reasons, but those are a few reasons that I wanted to do this interview. And it's really just a very fulfilling activity for me to help students, to help, to be involved in young people's lives, and if I can, you know, help a student in terms of what they need to do for for school I'm happy to do that.

MCCARRON: Well thank you for that. And so, as I mentioned, you had done a previous interview. Could you just talk a little bit about, generally, about your background, for anyone who might be unfamiliar with the topics that were covered in the last one.

MACCARONE: Yeah. So essentially, you know this, this project is about Dartmouth student—Dartmouth community connected to the Vietnam War. Is that kind of the basis of the oral interview is finding someone connected to the Dartmouth community and also connected to the Vietnam War, and that is definitely me. In 2019 the connection was that my husband [Chris Maccarone '86] had attended Dartmouth College and so that's how I'm connected to the Dartmouth community back then.

And, of course, I've—I'm also, I should say I'm also a refugee from the Vietnam War. I was born in Vietnam, and my family escaped Vietnam and immigrated to the United States. So obviously we have that connection. And as I said, the connection in 2019 was my husband, but the connection in 2025 is my daughter. My daughter Hannah [Maccarone '26] is a junior at Dartmouth College now. And so, of course, with her being here, I'm even more compelled to help other Dartmouth students with this project. So that is the connection. I am a Vietnam—a Vietnamese refugee from the Vietnam War, and I have a daughter at Dartmouth College.

MCCARRON: Yeah. Well, thank you for that, and so just to start off, could you talk a little bit about your growing up in Minnesota, so you were a refugee coming from Vietnam, and then you came to Minnesota. And could you tell us a little bit about what life was like there?

MACCARONE: Yeah. So in a nutshell, when we came to the United States, we were in a refugee camp in Arkansas, and we were there until we could find a sponsor. And it was hard to find a sponsor for all of us. And fortunately, there was a church in Minnesota [First Covenant Church of St. Paul] that, at the time, was looking for Vietnamese family to sponsor and to support. And so that's how we ended up in Minnesota. Minnesota is a cold location.

MCCARRON: [laughter]

MACCARONE: And so for my family, it was definitely a shock to end up there. I was a baby, and so I didn't experience the same culture shock that the rest of my family experienced, but that's how we ended up in Minnesota. And we never left, or at least most of us never left. I never left. So I still live in Minnesota now. That's where I raised my children, that's where I went to college for the most part, that's where I grew up.

MCCARRON: And so could you tell me a little bit about growing up? So you mentioned that you went over with your siblings, who else went over with you? And what was your situation—what did your situation look like? And as in your childhood.

MACCARONE: Yeah, so my family, my immediate family, consisted of my mother and two sisters and a brother and myself, in addition to my immediate family, my uncle and his wife and their four children were with us. And I mentioned my uncle specifically, because he is the reason that we were able to escape Vietnam. In my previous interview, I went into more detail about how he was instrumental in our escape. But you know, suffice it to say, if it weren't for him, we would not be here. My uncle is my mother's brother and so that connection is what allowed my mother and my siblings and I to escape.

MCCARRON: And so could you tell me a little bit about your siblings? Do you still maintain a relationship with them today? What are they doing today?

MACCARONE: Yeah, so my siblings are my eldest sister, Hoa [Thi Pham], who is 20 years older than I am. She was actually born number one, and I was born number 11, so I'm the baby of the family, and she's the eldest and she lives in Minnesota. Her kids are adults now, and they have their own families, and they have children. So my sister and her husband visit their grandkids quite a bit, and they live in the south. My niece lives in Georgia, and my nephew lives in Florida. So I see my sister pretty regularly, not as regularly as I would like to see her these days, but she was very instrumental in my children's lives growing up, she was like a grandmother to them. She, you know, took care of them when we needed help babysitting. She guided them through a lot of things—guided me through a lot of things, especially with respect to, you know, the early years of raising a family. So she was—she and my brother in law, you know, are like grandparents to my children.

My next sister is my sister Yen [Nguyen Allen]. She was 11 years older than I am. She lived in Texas with her husband and her children. Her children are now adults, and one of them just got married in 2023 and the other one is about to get married at the end of 2025 and so her children are like my own children. Mainly because my sister passed away 16 years ago now, boy, that was a long time ago. And she passed away at a very early age, she died of cancer, and it was very unexpected. It was—by the time we discovered it, it was stage four cancer. It was non-smoking lung cancer. So we were all shocked, because, of course, she didn't smoke, and somehow she had this disease growing inside of her, and it wasn't discovered until it was really too late. So we lost her after a very courageous two year battle with cancer. And it was extremely traumatic for all of us, especially for me, because she was [pause] she was my idol, she was my role model, she was extremely influential in my life, and I miss her terribly, even to this day I miss her terribly. So that is my second sibling who came to the United States with us.

And then my third sibling is my brother Trai [Ngoc Nguyen] and since the 2019 interview that I did with DVP [Dartmouth Vietnam Project], he now has a little boy. He had just gotten married at the 2019 interview, but he now has a little boy. His name is Logan, and so he's my, my little nephew, and they are actually pregnant with a second child, so they're expecting a little girl. So I have three siblings who came to the United States, two that are still alive. And as far as my other siblings, my blood siblings that I have, I have two sisters and a brother still in Vietnam, who all have children and grandchildren and are are much older than I am, because, as I mentioned, I'm the baby of the family so everyone else is, you know, is older and have beautiful families of their own. Yeah.

MCCARRON: So it seems as though you had a—you have a very close relationship with your siblings, especially Tran. What was that relationship like growing up?

MACCARONE: Especially with my sister, Yen.

MCCARRON: Oh I am so sorry.

MACCARONE: That's okay. That's okay. Yen is is a name that isn't all that common in the English language for a girl, but it's—so my sister Yen, it's spelled Y-E-N and it means bird in Vietnamese, so it's a pretty popular Vietnamese name, but yeah, my sister Yen, she—what was it like growing up with her? Is that what you asked? So initially, you know, so Yen was like, thirteen years old when we came to the United States. Well, she was actually a little bit younger, I guess, because by the American birth date standards, she's 11 years older than I am, and I was about, you know, close to one years old when we arrived—or a little bit over one-years-old when we arrived in Minnesota. But she was essentially preteen teenager, so I don't have a lot of recollection of her and my interaction with her until, really I was, you know, maybe sixth grade, seventh grade, because there was a period of time where we didn't live with one another.

In my previous interview, we talked about—a lot about the chronology of where I lived and with whom I lived in, the multiple families that I lived with from our church and beyond. But there's a period of time where Yen and I did not live together, and it wasn't

really until, you know, I was a preteen teenager, that she really became involved in my life and really influenced me in terms of, you know, how—essentially, how to be all-American. She was, I think, in probably the toughest spot of my siblings in terms of coming to the United States and having one foot in one culture, one foot in another culture, and trying to assimilate and trying to blend in. You know, at that age, you're just struggling with your hormones and with, you know, and with the world and so for her, I think it was extra challenging because of just simply where she was in her stage of life.

So she was very, very focused on being all-American, you know, having the all-American friends, doing the all-American things. She was a cheerleader in high school and she was very popular, and I think she was really the only Asian person in her entire high school. And I say that she had the most challenging experience in terms of fitting in, because my eldest sister, you know, essentially, was an adult. She was full Vietnamese, and she was also—she took on the role of being the leader of our family, so she pretty much already had her identity and her role and understanding what she had to do to survive.

My brother was five years old, I want to say, four years old, three years old? So he was young, he was just a baby, a child. And then, of course, for me, I was a baby, I was an infant, I was a toddler. So I grew up as an American, and I would say for me, you know, my identity crisis, or my trying to figure out really who I was and where I belong, didn't occur until much later in life. But for my sister, Yen, I think it, you know, it pretty much hit her right away, and she had to figure out how to survive and to be happy and to make friends and to understand where she fit into to this new country, in this new world.

So she had very strong opinions about how we should act, the friends that we should have, the things that we should do, the way that we should present ourselves. You know, she was extremely influential on me, especially during my adolescent years of you know how I wanted to be presented as an American, not as an Asian American. And I think that for her it was it was a survival skill for her to to try to be as all-American, and to try to not be Asian, try

to not be Vietnamese, but to be American. So like I said, she did all the, all of the typical American things and she passed that along to me in terms of what I should be looking for, and what I should be doing in life. And so she was, she was extremely important to me, and close to me, and influential to me.

MCCARRON: She sounds like it.

MACCARONE: Yeah.

MCCARRON: You mentioned that you had that cultural reckoning later in your life, as opposed to her earlier, as opposed to Yen having it early in her life. Would you like to expand on what that looked like for you and when that occurred for you?

MACCARONE: Yeah, I would say it's still occurring. And I would say that it's that I guess I would say, throughout my entire life, I've always known that I'm different. My circumstances are different than the other people around me. I look different than the other people around me. As much as I tried to deny it, or as much as I tried to fit in, there were just circumstances that were obvious that didn't allow me to fit in. You know, one of the things being that I didn't have parents or consistent parents. I had different families that I lived with, but I didn't have consistent parents. And so it's always been a current that has been running, you know, throughout my life, I don't think that I ever had the maturity to fully understand it. And I would say when I really started dealing with it was when a lot of things were happening at the same time in my life.

One of the things was the health crisis that I was dealing with it. It was something that —that raised my stress level. There it was--I had a lot of stress in my life at this time, and I was experiencing a lot of hormonal changes in my life, and a lot of things were essentially confusing to me, and it was hard for me to understand. And so I started seeing a therapist for the first time. And to be honest, I didn't even know that I needed a therapist. But when I started seeing a therapist and started understanding some of the events in my life and the experiences that that I was going through and starting to peel back and evaluate, it started me on this journey of understanding who I am. So a lot of that really didn't occur until I

became an adult, and a lot of that really didn't make sense to me until I got older and looked back on my life and looked back on my children and saw it from a perspective of having raised a family. And then understanding from my childhood how my childhood really was very difficult and very challenging in ways that I had never understood or acknowledged before.

So that process of evaluating and understanding my own experiences [Phone Alarm] has kind of forced me to deal with a lot of pain and—I want to call it trauma. And again, trauma is a word that I had never known until I started therapy and understanding that, there has been a lot of trauma in my life. And so, that's where I would say, the evaluation, the cultural, as you said, the Cultural awakening, I guess, is really, really started. And I still am evaluating and still understanding and still recognizing, even though I was an infant when we left Vietnam, and even though I don't have a lot of memories of Vietnam, and even though I didn't experience the same kind of cultural shock that my mother or my siblings experienced. It does impact it did impact me, and it continues to impact me in a different way, in a different way, from how they were impacted, but I'm recognizing and understanding that impact was not minor, it was not little, it was not insignificant.

MCCARRON: What would you say that trauma looked like? What did that trauma look like that you experienced?

MACCARONE: Again growing up, I didn't recognize it as trauma. I didn't know that the family, that where I belonged in the family, was a different—a different sense of belonging. And so, you know, I have a different understanding now of what belonging to a family is like, and what it should feel like, and what it it should be like. So I think that there's trauma related to that. But then there's also simply trauma from when I was an infant, and from the fact that we did escape a war even though I don't have memory of it, that's trauma that has occurred and that I did experience even though I can't recall it.

So there's that, that kind of foundation of trauma on top of the trauma of not having my mother. In the earlier interview, I outlined how she was taken away from me at an early age because she felt ill and was deemed unable to take care of us. And for her—I can't

even imagine this, what she went through escaping her family—or escaping her country, and leaving half of her family behind, and dealing with coming to another country and not knowing anything of the language or the culture or anything. So she obviously experienced a lot of trauma, which I'm sure resulted in her falling ill and eventually passing away at a very early age. But that trauma was also something that I experienced as a three-year-old again, even though I don't have memory of it in the definition of trauma.

So there's, you know, trauma that I don't have memory of, and then there's the trauma of a child moving from one family to another family. And I do have memories of that. But I don't have, I didn't have an understanding of that trauma, because, of course, I was a child and, you know, and at that age, how do you even know what trauma is? So there's trauma related to that. There's—I would say that that's probably the overarching concept of trauma that I'm dealing with in terms of family stability, family definition, family belonging, family love, family support that I didn't fully understand until I had my own family. And again, raising my own family, it's, I have three kids who are very close in age and and, you know, so raising them was just kind of keeping my head above water, shall we say? You know, life just moved fast and we just, we lived our lives and we were active in our children's lives, and we had an active life.

And now that I am—now that all three of my kids are in college, and that my life has slowed down significantly in the sense of managing my own health because of the health crisis that I was through, and just being at a stage of my life where I recognize that my mental health is really important to my overall well being, my physical health. I'm trying to slow down, I'm trying to manage my mental and physical health, but with—that gives me the opportunity to really reflect and to really look back and to really unpackage things that you know as a young person, you don't necessarily take the time to do. And so as an old person, now I am working through all that and learning about things about myself that I had never taken the time to really evaluate.

So part of that process is really sitting from a perspective of feeling really good about where I am in life, in terms of my health is better,

my children are fabulous. They are all happy and healthy and on the right track of making their own lives fulfilling for themselves. And so that makes me feel really good, and my husband and I are really grateful for for the wonderful upbringing that we've been able to provide for them, and the love and support and the happiness then that they have. And I'm sitting in this world of just thankfulness, and I'm reflecting back on my upbringing and recognizing how different it was for me. And it's allowed me to unpackage things and evaluate things and look at things with a different set of lenses. And really just feeling sad and feeling bad for that five-year-old little girl, six-year-old little girl, seven-year-old little girl, for that little girl who didn't have the family, the family stability, the support, the love, the sense of knowing where she belonged and that's areal painful thing for me as a mother who loves and cares and supports her children and all children, to be honest.

It's hard for me as an adult and a mother to recognize and see the pain that this little girl had, and then it's even more painful for me to know that was that little girl was me. And so it is hard for me to to be so thankful and to be so grateful and to be in such a wonderful privileged position in my life, and yet still hold the pain and trauma of this little girl. And to be able to hold both at the same time is confusing, and it's hard and it's a challenge to deal with at times. But like I said, this is something that is necessary for me to work through, because I'm now at the point in my life, where I can take the time to work through it. The way I look at it is that pain has always been within me; I just didn't know how to deal with it, and so now that I can recognize that there is that pain, I'm cleaning that pain. I'm working through it. I'm cleaning that pain instead of leaving it dirty. Because that pain sometimes, if it isn't cleaned, you throw that pain onto other people in your life without even knowing it necessarily. And that's something that I don't want to do, and it's especially something that I don't want to do to my children, is to throw my pain, my trauma, , and make it generational trauma, and have it be something that they have to experience or that they have to overcome themselves.

So [pause] that's where I am at this point in my life, looking back at my experience and looking back at the things that I've been through.

MCCARRON: When it came to processing that pain did you have—what were the—when did you realize that you need to process it, and what was that journey like?

MACCARONE: That's a good question. So I—again, I didn't know that I had to process anything. It just wasn't part of the way I lived my life. I, you know, I just went full force with my life. I just had to get things done—You know, when you have a family, you have to just get things done, you got to move forward, you got to think ahead, you got to prepare for the next thing, and so it's always the next thing, not looking back. And what caused me—what forced me to do it really was the health crisis that I faced. And I'm not sure if the health crisis came because I had so much stress in my life? I don't know if the events, the external things in life, caused my illness, or if my illness didn't allow me to properly handle the external stresses in my life. I'm not sure which contributed more to than the other. But to me, it was a moment where I had to reevaluate. And part of that was a lot of things coming together at once, like I said. I haven't mentioned my non-blood family, so my quote, unquote, foster families, which, again, is a term that is new to me.

I think I've always referred to the families that I lived with as just simply families. I never called them foster families, because, again, it just wasn't something that I wanted to be defined as. But, but that's, that's what they were. You know, they were foster families. And so I talked about them in the last interview, and I believe I even highlighted that my one mom had just been diagnosed with cancer herself, and so I was very instrumental in being her caretaker. And it was something that was what I did. It just—in my role in life, if somebody needed help, if something needed to be done, I stepped up and I did it. And so with her, that's what I did. It—they were dealing with a health crisis. It was a shock to everyone that she had cancer, and it was really bad, and her life has been changed because of her cancer. It was really touch and go for a while, and I was involved very intimately with her care, and it took a toll on me, and it was exhausting.

Shortly thereafter, she was diagnosed, and I was heavily involved with her care. We were dealing with COVID [SARS-CoV-2 virus]

and the isolation of COVID. And unfortunately with COVID, my uncle died from COVID, and it was the, you know, the scenario, the horrific scenario, of him being intubated and isolated, and at—you know, this is when nobody could, could go into the room, and you couldn't talk to anybody. He died alone. And we did a FaceTime, you know, with the nurse being all decked out from head to toe in the protective gear, holding up an iPad with us on it so that he could see it. But of course, he was in a coma, so he really wasn't seeing it, but we could see him, and we could say our goodbyes to him. And that was really traumatic, because—my uncle, as I mentioned before, is the reason that we are here, perhaps even the reason that we are alive, and for him to die alone like that was extremely upsetting.

So with COVID, I experienced death in the family. And then with COVID, my eldest sister fell ill and she was struggling with, I would say, long term COVID issues. And I think that she struggled so much that it was hard for her to process things that were happening in our family. At the same time, my—there are some cultural things that were happening within our family that I again, can't fully understand. But my brother essentially was excommunicated from our family by my sister. And my sister requested that I no longer speak to my brother and his wife, and that was a hard thing for me to accept, mainly because [pause] I didn't fully understand why he was essentially being excommunicated, and I didn't want that to happen. He didn't have anybody else. I was confused by that and hurt by that. So that was happening. And then on top of it,my son, my oldest child, was getting ready to go to college. So a lot of things were happening at that time that really affected me and just made me a different person than who I knew myself to be.

A number of people had recommended that I start seeing a therapist because of all of the stress that I was experiencing. With respect to my health crisis, it was completely unexpected. And I should rewind to say that when my sister, who died of cancer, was diagnosed with her cancer, it was unexpected. And it was non-smoking, lung cancer, and she never smoked, and within two years, she passed away. My diagnosis was a liver disease, an autoimmune liver disease, and I don't drink. So to me, it was the same screenplay that was—that had happened to my sister. To me,

it really felt like I was going to die, that [pause] I was diagnosed with something that I had not contributed to, just like she had not contributed to non-smoking, lung cancer. And so it was a period of time that I really felt like my destiny was going to be the same as hers.

So I would say, a lot of things happening at the same time, a lot of pretty intense things happening at the same time. Which is why I started to see a therapist and [pause] —and in talking with a therapist, that's how I started my journey of reflecting back and understanding what was happening to me and recognizing that what I was doing and how I was relating to my families was very much a result of my upbringing and how I grew up, and the fact that I didn't have a family, and that's really how I look at it. And the example I give is with my mom, who had cancer and was going through her own struggles, and me being such a significant caretaker for her. I could—I could now recognize that what I did in terms of sleeping at the hospital with her, literally in the same bed with her, to to comfort her, you know, taking care of her medical appointments, communicating with all the doctors taking care of her, her pills, you know, driving 45 minutes to her house to make sure that you know that she was okay and that you know all of that was my effort to be, quote, unquote, the good daughter, so that I could belong to that family, so that I could be worthy and valued as a member of that family. And that was really taxing, and that was really hard for me to accept that. That's why I stretched myself so thin.

That's why I sacrificed what I needed to do for my own family to be able to be there for her family. Because it was all in this effort of being a good daughter and belonging. And it was actually the first time when I called someone “mom and dad” to their face and as a reference, as a greeting to somebody, because I've always referred to my multiple families as my mom or my dad in reference so—but I've never, you know, said,"Mom, how do you feel today?" You know, I would call them by their first name, but if I referenced them, I would say "my mom" did this or did that. But when we were at the hospital and the doctors needed to know that I was legitimately their daughter and they could share information with me, I called her mom, I called him dad, as if we've been calling each other this

our entire lives. And what I realized in me was that every time I called them mom, or every time I called him dad or whatever, or every time they were they called me their daughter, it was like a drug. It made me feel so so good. And so I continued to want that. So I continued to do more.

I continued to absorb myself in taking care of her, because the reward was that I was their daughter. And ultimately, that was unhealthy for me. It was unhealthy for me to [pause] to do as much as I did at the level that I was doing. So there—there was a lot that was happening that caused me to go on this journey, to cause me to evaluate, this awakening inside me of understanding how—how my upbringing, how my experiences were impacting me.

MCCARRON: And why do you think your experiences caused you to seek, to seek the validation in that way. What about growing up brought you to—to really valuing that being called daughter?

MACCARONE: I think everybody wants to belong. I think everybody wants to feel like they are loved and supported. You know, it really is just knowing where you belong. And I think because we escaped the war, and because my father—our family wasn't together, I don't think I ever had a sense of a belonging. And all of that was something—belonging is a yearning, it's innate. And I think I always struggled with that on a basic fundamental level.

I think this emotion, or this feeling of not belonging, was also challenging for me, because of where we were as a nation, in society. I started questioning a lot of, do I belong in this country? Do I belong in this community? Do I belong even within my quote, unquote families? Because I think from where we were politically, I was feeling very targeted. Especially when it came to the rise in [anti-]Asian hate crime and seeing [pause] seeing a lot of Asian people being targeted. You know, there's—there was a lot happening that really made me question where I belong, not only in my family, but in this country.

MCCARRON: Earlier, you spoke about how your sister Yen taught you about fulfilling that American lifestyle and that belonging. What value did that have in your life at the time? And when it came to that period of

Asian hate and not feeling like belonging, did you still feel the impacts of that, of that? Yeah.

MACCARONE: Well, so here's, here's the thing. When in 2016 when so many people were emboldened to wear t-shirts and sweatshirts and hats and things that more openly expressed nationalistic views that were really offensive or threatening to minority groups—it really made me scared. It made me scared, not only for myself, but for my children. You know, when somebody wears a white supremacist shirt, and I see them at the gas station, and I'm with my husband, who's American, who's Italian American. He can look at that and be disgusted by that and not agree with that, and he can turn around, and that's his experience with that.

For me, [pause] I'm terrified for my life. That that person might do something in the open, in public, to me or to my children. So I'm terrorized by that, and I started to wonder who will, who would stick up for me? And understanding that 50% of our country supported that kind of emboldened attitude and behavior really, really made me question my own family, my own community, my own environment, of who would stand up for me. But in that process of being terrorized, I realized that I actually had a superpower. So that superpower was that I could speak English, and I could speak fluently. So I could talk, and this person might not think that I'm a refugee, might not think that I'm an immigrant. So that was my superpower, and I could be okay.

So then after that, George Floyd [The Murder of George Floyd, May 25th, 2020] happened in essentially our backyard in Minnesota. And that was very impactful on me and our community. But then again, I thought to myself, “well, my superpower in that situation is that I don't have black skin, you know, I'm not going to be targeted.” And I could be okay. But then when videos of random attacks on Asian people started, you know, populating the news every night, then what was I to do? Where was my superpower? I didn't have one to fight that. And that's when I became really frightened.

And I was walking with a girlfriend, and I had a panic attack. I had never had a panic attack in my entire life, and I had a panic attack because we were about to go under a bridge and walk along the

river. And looking ahead and seeing that bridge and knowing that we were going to be leaving the busy road above sent me into a panic, and I couldn't do it. Because I was terrorized that someone was going to attack me. So that's when I started therapy, that's when I began this journey. And so I don't know if I actually answered your question about being—I think we were talking about being all-American, and I was thinking about being able to speak English and and my my sister, yes, okay, so my sister, you know, making sure, or wanting me to, do the all-American, the all-American things in life.

And I think that one of the things that allows people to believe that I'm all-American is that, especially as a refugee of the Vietnam War, I don't have an accent. Whereas my sisters do have accents, and most people from the Vietnam War do, because there weren't too many infants who came over after the war, you know, or as a result of the war. They were older, and so they they retained an accent when they learned English.

MCCARRON: [Pause] Well I'm so sorry that you went through all that, but I'm glad to hear that could—that you've been going through therapy, and how has that experience with therapy been?

MACCARONE: Oh, it's been eye opening, absolutely eye opening. And it like I said, it causes me to really reflect on a lot of things about my own life. It actually I feel like, ironically, has made me want to know more about Vietnam and more about my history. Or I should say, more about my lineage. I have a real desire for my children to learn about Vietnam and to be connected to Vietnam. I don't think that denying my Vietnamese heritage is a desire of mine any longer.

I actually would really like to embrace it. It's eye opening, it's therapeutic, it's comforting, it's good to understand what life's experiences have impacted who you are and what you believe in. And so, yes, I have a very strong desire for my children to experience Vietnam and to, you know, to have a desire for them themselves, to learn more about where their mother came from. And even participating in this project helps to—helps me internally to know that my story is valuable, that my story can be heard, that my story is deserving of [pause] you know, of understanding. And

so it is important for me to reconnect with Vietnam. And it feels funny to be labeled as a Vietnamese refugee, but yet I don't have a strong connection to Vietnam. And so that also has been an identity—I guess an identity miss shift, or a shifting of definitions? Because it doesn't feel like I'm a refugee, because I've grown up here.

You know, almost born here, but not born here. So I don't have those kinds of challenges the way that other typical refugees have had. But I still have had challenges as a result of the Vietnam War, and being refugee and being an immigrant. And I also have an entire lineage in Vietnam that that I don't know much about, that someday I would like to learn more about. Someday I would like to be more connected to. And the last 50 years of my life have just been so focused on, you know, on just living life and taking care of my family and taking care of myself. And I think I'm entering a stage, a season of life where where I can learn more about my past versus trying to establish my future.

MCCARRON: How have you gone about—have you been going about getting more in touch with your Vietnamese heritage, and if so, how have you tried to do that?

MACCARONE: Well, I have to admit right now, my brother is married to a Vietnamese woman, and they do go back to Vietnam on a regular basis. I would like to go back to Vietnam with my family at some point. It's always been something that is on our radar, but we just haven't been able to figure out the right time to do it. And so we would like to do that. I would love for my husband to meet my family. You know, there are complications about going to visit. And I think actually things are a little bit different now. But in terms of earlier years, you know, going back to Vietnam to visit family, there was a requirement of being able to bring a lot of money to them and to provide for them in almost a way of showing the gratitude of having the life that that we can have in America versus the life that they have in Vietnam. And so giving them money, supporting them in that manner, was expected if you went back to Vietnam. And I don't know that that's entirely the case now, because I do believe that Vietnam has come a long way in terms of development, in

terms of opportunity, in terms of just overall stepping into the first world, you know, especially after the Vietnam War.

So I don't know if that expectation still falls upon me, and I don't know if that's the same expectation that would fall upon my sister being the eldest versus me being the baby. So I don't know a lot of that. It's something that I will have to evaluate before we go back to Vietnam as a family, because obviously, I wouldn't want—I wouldn't want to do something that upsets my family, or rather, I want to make sure that I'm doing everything that I'm supposed to do to not upset my family.

MCCARRON: When you describe that expectation, is that an expectation from your family over there, from your family members here, or an internal expectation?

MACCARONE: I think it's a general expectation of Vietnamese people who have left Vietnam and go back. So I think there's that general expectation. But I do know that my sister, when she does go back to Vietnam, she does bring money to my family, quite a bit of money. And my sister is married to a Vietnamese man, so the fact that I'm married to a non-Vietnamese man, I don't know if, if that changes things. So I'm in this position of being the baby, so there's less expectation on me in general, as being the baby of the family. And then there might be different expectations of me because I'm married to a non-Vietnamese person who might not feel that obligation.

But then I'm also different because I didn't grow up in the traditional Vietnamese family, where the cultural norms, cultural traditions, cultural expectations were instilled in me. So in a sense, I am trying to have one foot in one culture and one foot in another culture. But it feels like I'm an American trying to understand Vietnamese culture versus, you know, being Vietnamese and trying to fit into American culture. So as my children discover their life path and their passions, it will be interesting to see how much involvement we have in Vietnam. All of my children know about Vietnam obviously. They all have a curiosity about Vietnam.

Each child has kind of identified with the Vietnamese side in a different way, which I think has been really, really interesting to me. But at this stage in my life, like I mentioned before, I'm really focusing on my health, both mentally and physically, and knowing and establishing boundaries that maybe I had never established before. And so I'm giving myself the grace to allow what happens to happen with respect to Vietnam. My connection to Vietnam is still very strong in that when I do pass away, I want my ashes buried in Vietnam. And I think that that just comes from an internal deep desire to want to be connected in some way, fashion or form.

MCCARRON: Do you know if your siblings have a similar connection to Vietnam, or a similar desire to become more connected after coming back to the— coming to the United States?

MACCARONE: Hard to say. Well, I mean, my brother married a Vietnamese woman, so he is absolutely connected to Vietnam, because his in-laws are there. And, you know, and, his son goes back to Vietnam quite a bit. So he, for sure, has a connection to Vietnam. My eldest sister, yes, has a connection to Vietnam, mainly because she still is the one who communicates with all of our family in Vietnam and the needs and desires that they have. She has taken on that role of matriarch of our family. For me, my desire to connect to Vietnam, I'm sure, is different than their desire to connect to Vietnam.

Part of why I also want to establish more of a connection to Vietnam is because for my own children. But then also for my sister's children and my sister who passed away. So my sister who passed away also married a non-Vietnamese man, and so her children are half and half, just as my children are. So for them, they won't have a connection to Vietnam at all, unless I encourage that, unless I foster that and develop that. So since my sister's passing, I do feel a stronger obligation to make sure that her children, as well as my children, you know, have an understanding and appreciation of Vietnam and their mother's story and our family's story, and moving forward with their lives in a way that give them a sense of belonging, also to the Vietnamese culture, even though they weren't raised in it, you know, giving them an opportunity to explore it and to be interested in it. And who knows where that could lead. You know, it's—it will be interesting for future generations to

understand how Vietnam and Vietnamese culture plays a role in their lives.

MCCARRON: And you mentioned earlier the role that care gave—giving and setting these boundaries is going to look like in your life. And you spoke about your relationship with your siblings and how that may have led to earlier emotional turmoil. How has your self reckoning affected how you perceive your relationship with your siblings, or how has it reflected that relationship? If you feel comfortable answering it.

MACCARONE: Yeah, it's—there's a lot that I don't understand about Vietnamese culture. And what has transpired in our family related to the excommunication of my brother is definitely something that I believe is rooted in my sister's Vietnamese culture and upbringing and role that she has currently as the matriarch of our family. I think it also has a lot to do with where she is in her life in terms of how much she can manage in her life, her children's lives, her grandchildren's lives, her sibling's lives. In Vietnam, her sibling's lives in the United States. You know, she carries a tremendous burden that I will never be able to fully understand or appreciate. And so I think that she is working through a lot of things on her own that I don't understand. So my relationship is at this point, not able to [pause] it's not able to be as fulfilled as it needs to be. So it's, it's, it's a challenging one right now. Yeah.

MCCARRON: And going back to the caregiving and the value that you felt earlier. Could you speak a little bit about what it was like growing up with the— was it the Pearsons, correct? Or—

MACCARONE: I had the Pearsons, the Heinrichs and the Carnahans and then the Phams, who are my blood relatives, my sister and her family.

MCCARRON: So could you speak a little bit about what that transition to living with the Pearsons was like, and how you now look back on that experience and how it differs from what you—how you may have perceived it when first going through it.

MACCARONE: Yeah, well, I would say all of the families I actually—I was young, really young, living with all of these different families, And with the

Carnahans, I never actually lived with them, but they became like parents to me because of, essentially, because of where I was in life as a teenager, and the connection I had with with my mom, Elaine [Carnahan, mother in the Carnahan family] and just how I really gravitated towards her for all of life's questions that I had as an adolescent. But living with each family, you know, I just remember really a strong desire to be a daughter. And and it turns out that I actually didn't live with any of those families for very long, but in my mind, it was forever.

It was, that was—it connected us in my mind, it connected us in a way that was permanent. And I didn't really fully understand it until much later in life, that I wasn't there very long, and I didn't really participate as a family member. It was almost more when it was convenient for me to be with them I was with them. And in my little girl mind, it was, that's what a family was. I didn't know any differently, so I just assumed that's what a family was, even though I desired more, but I didn't know if I deserved more or if I was entitled to more, or if I just thought there should be more.

And it really wasn't until I raised my own family that I evaluated how my family and how I am a mother to my children, did I kind of reflect back and wonder if that same relationship existed the way I thought it did. And that's when I recall situations that, you know, I realize now we're kind of unfair or traumatic, and where I realized I deserved more as— that a child deserved more, not me specifically, but you know that a child deserved more in that situation, in terms of inclusion and love and support. And so I started really changing the way I viewed my family and how I defined family. And that's—that's painful, you know that's painful to have to reassess the people in your life and how you love them, and how they loved you, and—yeah.

MCCARRON: How is your relationships with those families evolved over time? So what do those relationships, if they're still existing, look like today?

MACCARONE: We're still working through it today. You know, as I said, I'm on this journey, and it's, it takes a lot of time, and it takes a lot of effort, and it takes a lot of pain and hurt. And so, you know, I'm working through that and I'm involving them as much as is comfortable for

me, but I think that I have to—I have to work through things first before I can fully involve others in a way that is going to be helpful.

So, I love my family—the different families that I have. Part of what I've recognized is each family is kind of their own silo that they don't interact together as a family. So they only interact through me or through my family as one big family. So to me, it's been almost like living four different lives of trying to be the best daughter that I can be in each of these families without the families knowing or sharing what's happening with each other or with me.

So what I've come to realize is—that's really exhausting. You know, it's really exhausting to [pause] to belong or to strive to belong, as much as I do to each of these families, independent of one another. So I've had to draw boundaries that are going to be helpful and healthy for me. And those are just things that we're—that we're working through, that we're—yeah, we're working through it.

MCCARRON: And I think you mentioned it a little bit earlier, but how was your situation growing up? How has that impacted how you have chosen to raise your child—your children, and how your involvement in their lives?

MACCARONE: Oh, well, my kids had a very different upbringing than what I had. And you know, when they were little, I wanted all of my families around. You know, we had birthday parties for the kids, you know, with everyone and so we would have 50 people practically every birthday party celebrating my children and, it was, it was really wonderful. They didn't know any better. They knew all of these grandparents and, they called them grandparents. And my youngest son, I think he, was three years old at the time he made the comment—he said, “Mom,” —we were—this is at the time when he was, like, learning where babies come from, you know, like babies are in mommy's tummies, you know, that kind of, kind of conversation and, so he made the comment. He said, "Mom, you're so lucky. You have all these parents, and you weren't in any of their tummies, but I just have you and dad."

MCCARRON: [laughter]

MACCARONE: So he was, he was, you know, kind of lamenting the fact that he only had one set of parents, and he thought having all of these parents was so much better. So to me, that made me feel good as a parent, feeling like I had presented to my children a nurturing, you know, fabulous family environment. So that was really important to me as the kids were little, for them to just know that that lots of people supported them.

And then also, my husband is from Connecticut. His entire family is on the east coast. So in Minnesota, it was just my family—my families. And so I wanted them to— to know that that family was around. And then growing up, we were in the very fortunate position of being able to have them in a lot of activities.

You know, we were able to involve them in things and explore things that they might be interested in. So I was a very active parent. I stayed home shortly after our first child was born, and was able to dedicate, you know, a lot of time to really intentionally raising our kids. And we've been able to do that, and we've been able to give them, you know, just a lot of opportunities that that certainly I didn't have, and I would say that most kids don't have, as far as traveling goes. And so to me, I never wanted them to doubt if they were loved, and I don't even really know if that's something that parents go into with with the intention of letting—of teaching their children that they are loved.

Because I think for the most part, in a healthy, normal family, you're just known that you're loved like you don't have to question, "Do my parents love me? Do they support me?" I think it's just a given in most healthy families. And so for me, because it was something that I always questioned, even if I didn't articulate it, or even if I wasn't mature enough to understand it, it definitely was something that I wanted my children to never question. And I think that that was—that was a result of my own desire, my own needs. You know I want to say, and I hope that, hope that my children are reflective on their childhoods as being wonderful and supportive and carefree. You know I—yeah, I think that they would, and that makes me immensely happy and proud. And it makes me feel also like I'm making my sister [Yen] proud.

My sister, like I said, always wanted to have the all-American family, and she certainly did. She married the all-American guy, and she had two beautiful girls who are just wonderful human beings. And they, you know, live in suburbia, and, I mean, just, you know, she really was living the dream, and I wanted to emulate her and I'd like to think that [pause]—I'd like to think that she'd be proud of the way my kids have turned out. And I know she would be very proud of the way her girls have turned out, overcoming the tragedy of losing their mother at a young age, and yet still believing in people and loving people and trusting people and believing in themselves and having love for others. I know she would be so proud of her girls and the women they are and the choices they're making, and so that makes me very happy too.

Yeah, so raising my kids—I feel like it's not just for my husband and me, but I do feel like it's, it's for our entire family. For me, because I don't know much about my family in Vietnam, and because I don't have that connection—for me, my lineage begins with me. And so, I hope to, I want to believe that I've done good things in my life, that I've treated people well, that I have left a good mark, or am leaving—I'm not dead!—that I'm leaving a good mark, and that my children will also leave a good mark on this world. So that's kind of the guiding light of raising my children is wanting good humans who are happy and healthy and that know that they're loved.

MCCARRON: I think before we wrap up, I just want to ask another question about your sister, Yen. You both seem to have a close relationship, and we talked a little bit about it when she was a little bit older than you and you were still young. How did that relationship evolve as you guys, as you both got older?

MACCARONE: Yeah, well, certainly, you know, through high school, she was instrumental in, again, you know, just guiding me about good choices. Not that I always followed her advice! But, she was in—or I was in her wedding, she was in my wedding. And, you know, when she had children, I really watched and took— took advice from how she was raising her girls, and I did a lot of the same thing.

My kids were very young when she passed away. But, she set the foundation, and she set the bar for what it means to be a good

mother. And I've always wanted to make sure that that my kids know her. We still honor her in many ways. My nieces and I take an annual trip on the anniversary of her passing, so that we can spend time to remember their mother. We always celebrate her birthday, we—she's just always in my intentions for what I do in life and what I want my children to know, and what I want her children to know.

MCCARRON: That's beautiful. Well, before we end this interview is there anything else that you want to talk about today that you want to elaborate on now?

MACCARONE: You know, I think between last interview and this interview, we've covered a lot about my life story, but also about where I am today in my life and I just want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk and to, at times, be really vulnerable about where I am.

I recognize that that even though the events of my life are not different than they were in 2019 I appreciate that you're giving me the opportunity to speak about some things that are just from a different perspective now that we—now that I'm where I am in my life, and I feel very, very grateful for the opportunity to express that and to share with you. And I feel honored by your interest in it, as well asProfessor Miller and the DVP in general, just being curious and interested in stories like mine. So I appreciate that. So thank you.

MCCARRON: Thank you, and thank you so much for taking the time and coming up here. Your story means a lot to me, and it means a lot to so many other people, and I really appreciate your willingness to be vulnerable and talk to us today.

MACCARONE: Thank you, Brigid.

[End of interview.]