

Ben Nguyen  
Dartmouth College Oral History Program  
Dartmouth Vietnam Project  
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Transcribed by Karen Navarro

PASSOT: Hello, my name is Jean Paul Passot ['21], and it is Tuesday, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020. I am recording this interview for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project, from Mill Valley, California. I have here with me Ben Nguyen, who is calling from Las Vegas, Nevada. Thank you for being here, Ben.

NGUYEN: My pleasure.

PASSOT: So, I thought I would start the interview with just some background on your family, seeing as there is a focus on Vietnam here. So, with that, I was going to ask where was your dad from and what did he do for a living?

NGUYEN: So, my family comes from Central Vietnam in the region known as Hue. It's also a city, as well. And so, both of them grew up in a small fishing village by the name of Tay Nguyen. And I can send you the spellings of that later. But, growing up there, he alongside many of the young children of that village, which I'm not completely sure on numbers of how big it was at the time, but when I visited when I was at Dartmouth, I remember hearing that there were around 15,000 or so people that lived there, but not 100% sure about that block, because it was a lot of different places that I visited. But, my father grew up there. And had a lot of dreams and hopes of becoming a doctor to practice and help people around him.

And I learned this story later. When he was able to pass the examinations to enter medical school in Vietnam—this was around 17 where in Vietnam many students, they do a big test at the end of high school, and that kind of filters them into different professional roles—he made it into that profession. But he later came to find that they wouldn't allow children who had affiliations with the US Army. In the case here, I've learned from some of my relatives that my grandfather on my dad's side had sided with the Americans during the Vietnam War, and because of that my dad wasn't allowed to enter the profession he wanted to, and so for that reason he was put into a re-education camp. And a lot of

things happened after that. As far as what he does now—I can go really deep into that story at a later time—as far as what he does now, he works as a manicurist, or he had worked as a manicurist and owned a couple nail salon businesses while I was growing up here in the States after we came here in '94. And now he works at an aircraft manufacturing facility currently in California.

PASSOT: And then also, did your mother also work in Vietnam, or did she just meet your dad and then live in the household?

NGUYEN: So, my mother and father are roughly seven years apart. They didn't know each other in childhood very well. And to add that story, so after my dad wasn't allowed to transfer to medical school and begin his studies, he decided to run away. And this was in, let me think here, this would have been around 1980 or so. And so, this is at the tail end of many of the boat people's stories that you might have heard about. And so, he was caught with his older brother, my uncle, and it's funny they never told me these stories until I kind of studied the language to get it out of them, but they had run away together and were caught by a small, little motorized boat trying to sail north to Hong Kong. But it was him and just his older brother. And so, they had been caught by the police, who had noticed, as it had been for many years, people fleeing the country in all different directions, some to Thailand, some to the Philippines, some to China, you know, obviously many of them if they could and they had a relationship with the US trying to get flights out of Vietnam, and had become formalized citizens of the US.

They were caught, and what my uncle had told me when I last visited was that at that moment while they were being arrested, my father shoved him away so that he could run away and run back home. They weren't that far away from the village at the time when they were caught, but during this period my dad had to go through this re-education camp for what seemed to me to be like a year-and-a-half or so. And I don't know if you've learned anything or read about the re-education camps in Vietnam, but it reminded me in hearing the description from my uncle very much of the gulags in Russia and how people were treated to convert to Communism. And so, after exiting that, he spent some time in the military in Vietnam, and then eventually—and the story goes quite wide—he later returned to my home village and

met my mother, and they decided to leave together with a group of people in a small boat.

There's a lot of stories in between this obviously that... As far as my mother, she wanted to become a nurse, and having not been able to fulfill that reality because she decided to leave with my dad, she was in her 20s at the time or so, once they came to the US she got her manicurist, or cosmetology license to become a manicurist. And if you're familiar with many Vietnamese American stories, many people do work in beauty or cosmetology related fields who are Vietnamese immigrants, and it still seems to be that way as well on the West Coast other than, of course, Vietnamese restaurants.

PASSOT: I wanted to go back to what you said about your dad and the re-education camps. Could you just elaborate a little bit on his experience there if you know anything, and sort of just expand on that story a little bit?

NGUYEN: Yeah. When I was growing up in... I think I remember the earliest memory of it when I was I think around six or so, I remember looking at my dad very sternly at the dinner table and I noticed all these bruises on his knees, all these dark black bruises. And every time I asked him that, it would be a couple of times a year, if that, as a kid, he would say that he got them from a construction accident, because when we had first come to the States, my parents didn't have any licensure, so he did a lot of the menial labor, the construction, he did a lot of landscaping and other small odd jobs with some relatives that he had. This was in California. We were moving around quite a bit from L.A. to Oakland, to Santa Rosa, to Hanford, Fresno, Eureka, etc. We moved around quite a bit.

But as far as the re-education camp was concerned, and later I confronted him on it, my uncle told me essentially that when he entered that camp, they had no contacts, that everyone from that village, including my dad's parents and his six siblings: two sisters, four brothers, had no idea what happened to him. And what was interesting, and I guess I didn't realize the brutality of it until I later did some research and reading into it while I was in Vietnam, but essentially what it was designed to do, these camps were designed to do were to break people's wills so that they would agree to support the new order. At the time, and still within conflict,

Central Vietnam had become a sort of a middle ground of those who were pro Northern Vietnam, which was in alliance with the Communist regime, and those within the South who sided with democratic rule in partnership with the US. And so, for what I gather at least, many of the people who were living in Central Vietnam that was being fought over, especially with the big battle at Hue city and the big temple at the center, which marked close to the end of the war where the allies were—not allies, the US was ambushed by a huge wave of Viet Cong, it left a stain, a mark on the population that they could not easily break unless forcefully.

And so, what I had learned from my uncle essentially was that people who were unwilling to come over to that side of the Northern Vietnamese to agree with the new regime, to agree with the new leaders who were being essentially placed by the North, and also from almost two decades of violence that was being committed by the Northerners to many cities and people across the country, it was quite brutal. Many, many lives were lost, and firing squads and assassinations and the like. This was, these camps, and almost like in reference to that which was done in Russia to convert people, it was essentially that.

And so, essentially what I had learned was my dad spending a year-and-a-half to two years there was essentially taking courses and learning about Communism, having to recite these different phrases and stories of how Communism had brought greatness to Vietnam, it was a unifying force for the country, a country that was seeking independence from many nations because before Communism is on its way to Vietnam, Vietnam was colonized by the French, and before that it was China for almost a thousand years. And so, this country which was at the time before the Communist regime had come in, three distinct different regions had an opportunity, if you will, historically to unify. And so, for that price of freedom, the price to pay was essentially to cross over to the side of the Communists because they opened their arms up to support the Vietnamese.

And it made me think back to when I believe it was Ho Chi Minh reaching out to [President Harry S.] Truman, I believe, at the time about supporting Vietnam in their time of need against the French for their independence, and this is how the US was also balancing a relationship with Ngo Dinh Diem, Ngo Dinh Diem, however you pronounce his name,

the Southern Vietnamese leader who was in favor of a more democratic Vietnamese regime; whereas Ho Chi Minh had spent many years studying the Communists and participating in different parties, that he didn't want to support a Communist nation because of what that would mean to the allies and what it would mean to the world for the US to support a Communist Vietnam.

And so, long story short, to put some of these pieces together, my dad had essentially decided to go along with the plan, even though he knew deep in his heart that he had fierce hatred for the Northern Vietnamese and Communism, because he knew that his freedom was being taken away, no different than his freedom being taken away of not being able to serve his country from his skill set. And so, after going through those many years, and bruises and beatings of basically sitting in a cage, if you can imagine like a dog cage, but many of them stacked on top of each other, there were people basically stuck in the sitting position with these large bars surrounding around them, being kicked in the shins and abused by the guards, to not having very much to eat, being very sick and gaunt from the lack of nutrition. And you know, what's funny is that my dad still hasn't told me the full story yet. I've always had to go to relatives to get more information. But, in so many different ways, I feel as though that story will, you know, some day in my life will be a more natural conversation.

And it's interesting because as I think about it, I never would have been able to come across these details had I not taken the liberty to try to learn Vietnamese. I grew up speaking Vietnamese, and my parents and I, my younger brother, we spoke to our parents in Vietnamese almost exclusively. But, we never took the time to really learn it. We didn't go to school to learn Vietnamese, and so it took me basically until my freshman summer at Dartmouth to take it upon myself to learn the language, and that was from getting a grant from the Tucker Foundation on campus to revisit my hometown. And I was going to work in an orphanage in the Central Vietnamese province where my ancestry is based. And so, and I can go into that a different time. But yeah, that's part of what I know so far of my dad's history in the camp.

I wish I had more time with some of my relatives in Vietnam, but obviously the only one that knows the full truth of it is him. I don't know if, yeah, I'll be bringing him bad memories

from that period, because he's very lucky to have made it out and survived it. But, I can tell from the bruises all across his body—no, mostly on his feet, that I'm sure those nightmares stay with him and will be for the rest of his life. Those dark bruises had never healed, and so, in some way I think it's for him it's a reminder of what he had to sacrifice on his way to eventually risking his life to run away with my mother and my uncle on my mom's side actually, and many other folks, and then being lucky enough as a family to cross over to the States.

PASSOT: Do you think that experience fostered any sort of resentment towards the Vietnamese government that lasts today, or was it just something along his journey to finally escaping?

NGUYEN: It's interesting. It brings together the question of freedom, and it's something I thought a lot about when I revisited Vietnam. As a nation, the country has endured many, many years of suffering through violent wars, internal affairs not being so consistent, monarchies changing hands from time to time, of course, the French colonization of the Vietnamese culture. And if you go back and visit or look at the cuisine, there's a lot of influence there still. But, as a country—and it's been very poetically, and I read some poetry when I went back to Vietnam as well—it as a country, and this is a quote from Ho Chi Minh himself, in the sense that—and my dad used it with me actually last year when I came back home to visit for Thanksgiving—he said that the country of Vietnam is very much like a grain of rice, or grains of rice. Rice as a crop is harvested in a very harsh manner, and around that rice is a very tough protective coating which for us here in the West when we eat unmanufactured or processed rice, we call it brown rice. And so, underneath that skin, that hard shell, is purity, it's peace, it's what Ho Chi Minh described as diamonds. And he described the Vietnamese people essentially as that, as a hardy people, which after many, many years and millennia of suffering and violence, were able to find their inner purity, their freedom, their independence.

And you look at their current motto, I believe it's "independence, freedom and happiness" I believe is what it translates directly to English, that essentially was what the fight was about for Vietnam. And so, as relates to my dad, and I talked to him quite a bit about Vietnam, he knew in his heart he could never support Communism. From what he

read about as a kid, and he was a wide reader growing up, he read about the atrocities of the Communists in Russia, and also from similar attempts of that in Eastern Europe of how Communists' rule was conducted, as well as in neighboring countries like Cambodia, he knew that this type of social structure could never lead to the type of freedom and prosperity that he saw in other Westernized democratic nations, including the US, UK, and many other allies, Australia. And he wanted that same type of growth, that same type of freedom for his country of Vietnam, and he knew that Communism would never bring that. Ideologically, he knew as a country obviously with a lack of resources and refinement and industrial power that Vietnam is still developing, that it would be a difficult road for the country no matter what system it decided to commit to.

But, he still knew, especially the way that people were being treated in the country at the time, and the indoctrination of people in the education system and how the history books were written, like how he described that the Vietnam War to us here in America is described as the war of American aggression in Vietnam. I came across that line when I was reading one of the textbooks that was part of the history curriculum for I believe 10<sup>th</sup> graders. I would study my books to try to study what it was like to, you know, grow up and educate oneself in Vietnam.

And so, from what I've seen now, he has a sort of ambivalence about Vietnam as a country. He still scorns the leadership structure and the social order that has currently and will likely be the current reality of Vietnam. But, he understands that in the grand scheme of things that he ultimately is content with his country, his blood, finding its freedom, its independence, and to think of what it cost to have a nation of people come together and create their own nation, it's a price that he says is paid in blood and tears, and that struggle and strife and that in many ways is a symbol of what it means to be Vietnamese. And so, I think he's made peace with some element of that, but he also, him and I sometimes jokingly argue about what would have been different about the country had, let's say in the case of the war, the allies and the US won the war, and made Vietnam a democratic state. Because he likens it a lot to what had happened in Korea, and you see how much of a big economic engine that Korea has become, he almost thinks

in many ways that Vietnam would have been very similar. And so, it's... Yeah, that's how I kind of see it from him.

PASSOT: All right. I wanted to return to the moment that your parents decided to leave Vietnam. And we've sort of talked about how your dad came upon that decision. And now I kind of want us to shift more to how they actually got to the US and how they eventually made the decisions to settle in California?

NGUYEN: So, growing up what was kind of interesting is I knew that, you know, of course we weren't native to the US, and I had a lot of questions about how we got there and all the details. And I remember asking my parents a few questions in elementary school around that, but they always kind of ducked the question and kind of kept it from me and my younger brother. I think part of it was they didn't know how to communicate to us, because our grasp on Vietnamese was very slim, and also that they felt probably that the emotional impact of it wouldn't have been as strong as it is, or it had been when I got older.

So, we—and this was around the time of, let me think here, this was in junior summer, so this was 2009 where I learned that—and this was after... it's almost like these scenes in a movie where you're kind of digging around your house looking for random things, and I came across the whole photo album that was at the bottom of a stack of old documents from my dad in Vietnamese and what-not. And I looked through it and I found a lot of old photos. And come to my surprise, I saw a bunch of these pictures of this little kid in the arms of my parents, and they were in, of course, a very, very different setting than I had imagined because growing up I only ever saw pictures of us prancing around in nice locations of the US like zoos, parks, and small family photos and this and that, and nothing of our origins. And these photos was of my parents holding me at the refugee camp when my mom had me there when I was a kid.

And so, it forced a conversation that almost it was like an awakening from within that I needed to get over my chest. At the time I was 16, and the most I had known of our history, our past, was that we weren't from the US, we were from Vietnam, but I had never understood the circumstances, as if, you know, wait, they would just fly a plane from Vietnam to America and they accepted us, or did we have to go



through—and what I later found out—this perilous journey and this occupation within a refugee camp for two years, and many other twists and turns to make it.

And so, once my mom got home from work that day, I pulled out the album and I showed it to her, and she was kind of a little bit taken aback, almost in shock that I found it. And I told her to sit down and that we needed to talk about it. And so, it's kind of that weird moment of silence where I think going through her head was like, you know, "Do I tell him about it or do I not?" And I could sense the reluctance on her because still at the time my grasp of Vietnamese was not very strong. But she kind of told the story blending in Vietnamese and English so I could get the gist of the story.

And so, here's what I learned at that point in time, which I built upon when I came back to Vietnam when I was at Dartmouth. So, essentially they had taken a seven day, seven nights journey from Central Vietnam on a small boat with roughly 25 people. From our home village it was many families, and of our close family it was my father, my mother and my uncle. My mom was pregnant with me at the time. And lucky enough she said, you know, had I been born prior to that, I probably wouldn't have made the journey just because to be out there in the ocean in the cold with a lack of food and water and shelter, and this was during typhoon season, so the water levels would go up and down as they tried to perilously navigate through this small area on the coast of Northern Vietnam to make their way up north and eventually to Hong Kong, that we got lucky in that regard.

And so, they sailed north, and when they ran out of fuel, and food as well, and this was in a small motorized boat, they went to the southern border of China and pulled in and met some villagers that lived on the coast. And even through this language barrier, and it seemed like these folks here were well aware of the travelers, the refugees, that had gone on—this had gone on for a couple of decades—of what their needs were. And so, they would point to the engine, basically signaling oil, and then sought after food and snacks and water. And so, the form of exchange was jewelry, and so many families who had left their homes, other than having a pair of clothes on their backs, would bring any valuable jewelry with them, just because it had innate value that they could use to trade. And so, they would trade their jewelry in the form of silverware and gold for these goods. And so they

exchanged fuel and food and water, and they made their journey east to hopefully find Hong Kong, which at the time was under British occupation. This was around '91. I believe they made their journey somewhere in the later part of '91, because they told me that they arrived in Hong Kong around November '91.

So anyway, they sailed east from the southern tip of China, and they end up basically around or near the coast of Hong Kong, but they have a situation with which they find a leak in the boat, a hole. They might have hit something because of shallow waters. My mom didn't really describe it. But, at that time they were worried that obviously that they were all going to perish out at sea. But, one of the local fishing boats came by and basically dragged them, their little boat, to the Hong Kong refugee camp, because many other refugees had made that same journey. And so, they went through all the processing and they were accepted in, and then from that point in time, they stayed there for about two years. Actually, let me think here. More like two-and-a-half years.

I was born July 15<sup>th</sup> in '92, so it wasn't until quite a time later on that my mom was lucky enough to receive medical services paid for by the UN as a part of refugee support to be able to have me. What I learned was I was born in one of the hospitals in Hong Kong, the actual mainland Hong Kong, whereas the refugee camp was off on the coast on a small little island called High Island Man Yee. And so, and that is how we got there.

There was a gentleman there who was a Catholic priest who took pictures and created a documentary of that occupation of Vietnamese in High Island Man Yee, that refugee camp. And within the last I'd say five years, I got a copy of it, and I kind of burned it into a CD as well as onto a flash drive. If you'd like to see it, I can share it at some point. It's quite a long movie, but it has a lot of narration in Vietnamese about the camp, the experience, all these photos of all the refugees, thousands and thousands of lives, and it talks about what it means to be free, the meaning of freedom, which at that point in time I was 16 when my mom told me this story, it was like that first revelation of my life where I had to really think deeply about, not just what I wanted to do with my life, which I feel like a lot of youth, especially Asian Americans/[slash]Vietnamese youth are kind of caught up in of achievement, of school, of life and professional desires, to

a more internal dialogue of *who am I? who would I want to be? and why do I belong here in this new country called America?* And so, with that very question from that moment in that summer of 2009, I knew in my heart I had to find an answer to that question, and it wasn't until, of course, I came to Dartmouth and I got that grant to revisit my hometown and learn of more stories that I could get a lot more questions answered. And so, that was how we got there. Obviously what it was like during our stay there, I can go into a little bit later, but that's how we got there.

PASSOT: I want to go back to this sort of question about your own identity, and ask if you considered yourself to be a refugee growing up, despite, I mean, not really knowing the whole story? And then, do you consider yourself now, do you consider being a refugee to be an essential part of your own identity?

NGUYEN: To be honest, I didn't even know we were refugees. That's why it shocked me when I was 16. It was hard to describe what that feeling was like when you see pictures of yourself in a place that is very different than what you've experienced. And if you think back as a child of your earliest memory of like, you know, when you visually think back to your childhood of what you remember, my earliest memory in my head was when I was three years old running around the neighborhoods of Oakland chasing the ice cream truck. My earliest memory of my life that I can visualize, my mom chasing after me while I'm running around trying to chase an ice cream truck, and hearing the jingles that come out of the ice cream truck. I must have been being entertained or something at the time. But, that was my earliest memory of what it felt like to be a kid.

And to learn later of the suffering that my parents and all the Vietnamese people had to go through for freedom, later as an adult, I want to kind of revisit those sentiments, you know, what it felt like not only to find freedom, which I felt like, and I have a greater appreciation as I have gotten older, but what it meant to risk your life for that, that very concept. And what I mean not just to be an American, but to be a person in the world. I had a lot of questions around that. And so, my identity as far as being a refugee, I find it as a part of my origin story as something that gives me almost a sense of unreasonable drive, I think, to make the most of my life and its experiences, and having learned later in my life, though

some, I realize some of my other friends and relatives who are Vietnamese, but especially of the Vietnamese children, the young folks that don't know Vietnamese or haven't learned it, I feel as though I have a part of wholeness within myself that I know this story.

Whereas, when I look at a lot of other folks in the arena of you call it the diaspora, I guess, of Vietnamese, Vietnamese Americans or that of the many different types of Vietnamese people across the world, I have a part of me that's completed that I understand that I can vocalize of what it means to be Vietnamese. I'm not being defined by a war or by suffering, but as a pursuit of a very quintessential human desire. Some call it "rice" or a need, the search for freedom. And so, that plays into how I see myself in many ways of why I do what I do, why I did what I did growing up, and then why I continue to do what I do now as an adult. And so, in some ways it gives me a responsibility that I feel to tell the story, and I'm still working on those elements, as well, I was working on a book after leaving Vietnam actually because of all my experiences at the orphanage and learning a lot more about my roots. But this is of course along a different level, more I'd say contemporary to that specific time I was in Vietnam in 2011 for the summer. But yes, that's how I see it.

PASSOT: Now that we've sort of covered this sort of like broad question of identity, I wanted to bring us back down and to kind of look at your early life, just ask how was growing up in early '90s, or '90s and early 2000s Bay Area?

NGUYEN: I had, how do I say it? I think, if I were to think back now as an adult back to my childhood how I feel about it, I would say I had a bit of a roller coaster of a childhood in the sense that I had a lot of struggles with fitting in, with connecting. I was a very reserved child. But I was very contemplative. My parents noticed that. I'd run off and do all these things, and I broke all these bones running around and doing things. I was a bit of a risk taker, but I kind of kept to myself. It wasn't until I got into school and started speaking English that I really started to open up, because I grew up primarily speaking Vietnamese. And so, I think the fact that we moved around so much, and we had some struggles until about third grade financially as a family, that it was harsh on both my parents, and also the many relatives that we had to seek help from of trying to figure out how we would assimilate into American life, culture, etc.

When my brother was born in Oakland, that made a almost like a shift in the family to try to figure out how to settle down and stay somewhere longer, and really trying to figure out how we were going to make it. And so, my parents knew educationally that it would be very, very difficult for them to find themselves into specific areas that they wanted to be in like, you know, my dad working in the medical field and my mother becoming a nurse and getting her licenses, all due to their language barrier, and also financially it would be—and looking at the time required to complete everything, all the studies that would be prohibited. And so, they decided to work on jobs until they saved enough money to open up their own nail salon business, as many other families have done.

And so, a lot of home life it felt to me to be a mix, especially after I got into grade school, of my parents working seven days a week, waking up early, coming home late around 9:00, and myself taking care of my little brother. We had babysitters for a few years. But, that was our dynamic, and a lot of it I felt like I was raising myself in a way, and in other ways I felt like I was closed off from my Vietnamese identity, other than the fact that I spoke it and ate food at home. I didn't feel a strong connection to being Vietnamese. Honestly, I knew I was, but my parents were a very secluded group of, or rather, they were very secluded in terms of their personalities from the different Vietnamese groups. Like we didn't attend Vietnamese temples and not too many social events. Every now and then we'd go to a wedding or here and there, but we weren't the most social of families, a lot of it I think hinging on the fact that my parents put a lot of attention to their business, which they had a good period for quite a bit of time when they saved enough money for us to get a home. Yeah, they put a mortgage on, and they were doing quite well until things kind of went south due to the economy, and we went through a rough period, like many families, leading up to the '08 crisis and quite a bit before that where it basically forced my family to move around California from L.A. to Oakland, then to Hanford, California, I think where Fresno is or Visalia, to live around there. And then we moved up north to Eureka for a little bit, moved down to Novato, and then eventually settled in Santa Rosa where I grew up for most of my life, from 6<sup>th</sup> grade all the way through high school.

And so, if I were to like think about it more deeply what I felt, I felt like I had a roughly normal childhood. I don't feel like I had any strong opinions about it. I was more aware than my younger brother that, you know, a family like ours, we had our ups and downs, and we were trying to do the best to make it the best we could as a family, and that's something that we kind of reiterated over and over again throughout our life in America was we were going to do whatever it took to have a "normal family," quote-unquote. And it wasn't until I learned of my roots that I felt like my resolve and my desire to get close to my family became real, because a lot of what I felt was my reality was the things that I did as a person, my accomplishments, not so much of what I felt about my family, my parents, my culture, my identity. I felt like I didn't care for those types of things. And so, I think finding out about my beginnings of being a refugee, my parents' story, and also learning what it meant to be Vietnamese, to me that's what opened up everything.

But I also, I say it, I feel like my understanding of what it means to be Vietnamese to me is a big part of how I see the world. But not that I see it as a Vietnamese-centric viewpoint, and the more so that I understand who I am and where I come from. And that to me is a very big part of what I would have seen as my life's journey, yeah, not so much of just doing things and accomplishing things and, I don't know, accumulating material wealth. It was more than that. And so, that in many ways gave me a sense of satisfaction, and I continue to get that. I was actually planning to go to Vietnam this summer to revisit after many years of not being there, but obviously our current situation with Covid-19 has made it a little difficult.

PASSOT: I want to ask when did that shift first begin happening? When did you first start to realize that you wanted to tap in more to your Vietnamese roots and your origins?

NGUYEN: So, growing up, like culturally if you were to say like "how are you like?" I felt like I connected a lot more with my peers in the neighborhood that I grew up. I grew up mostly in at-risk or developing communities on the cheaper sides of town just because that's all we could afford as a family. The schools I went to were all Title I public schools, and I went to public school my whole life until college, and so many of my friends were all from all these different backgrounds: Caucasian, black, mostly Hispanics, and very few Asians within my

friends group, just because I was one of the few Asian kids oftentimes in my classes and at school. And so, I felt I identified so much more with what I did in terms of activities. I was a wrestler, I did track, I did music on a drumline, played in a couple bands. I was a geek, you know, but I liked to do stuff. I was a bit of a thrill seeker, running around and, you know, was skating around in the canal for hours, breaking multiple bones, taking shopping carts up and down hills, breaking more bones, all these different things.

And so, for me the connection with roots and for how I saw being Vietnamese, it took, yeah, I think I would say it took that moment with my mom to really open myself up to understanding, I think, having a desire to understand a big part of myself. It's almost like you have this deep part of yourself that you know is missing somewhere, and you know some event, some place is going to help open that up, and for me what it took was, yeah, it was that moment. You know, I've had other epiphanies in my life as a child, but not so much around my identity other than that moment of, you know, *there is this deep part of my history* that, and I think having those photos in my hands and watching that clip of my family's story, even though I couldn't understand the lyrics at the time, but now I do. I get teary eyed as I watch it sometimes.

But understanding what it means, the price of freedom, and what it means to have your life in your own hands, it kind of sealed the deal for me of trying to understand why we had all we had, why we continued to strive. It gave me a great appreciation for my family and my life in a way that just living my life as an American kid didn't quite fulfill, but I felt like being in America was very much like being put on a—how do I say it?—like being put on rails in some ways, but you have different controls over the tracks, but you're still stuck to rails of why I continue to seek some sort of sustenance, whether it be in entertainment, in food, in what you did for work or for your leisure. It lacked a sense of wholesomeness, of wholeness, of feeling connected to a greater whole. I felt like it was us within America, but not integrated into America. It's like we had a bubble around us as a family. And I feel like a lot of folks who come from other countries, immigrate to America, or refugees feel that way, in the sense that they're trying to figure out how they fit in with the great puzzle that doesn't quite have slots that fit them.

And so, that I think was what for me that moment, as I was looking at those pictures of that little kid which was me as a baby, and later on as a one-, two-year-old running around, and my mom would recount some of those stories of me as a child of how inquisitive I was and how energetic I was, up until the point where I got really, really sick in the camp, and on the verge of dying due to disease. I wanted to re-experience that, you know. I felt like I wanted to know what it felt like to grow up in that environment. I think I would have had a greater appreciation as a kid of my family had I known, because I'll tell you the truth, I felt like in many ways I housed a bit of resentment around my family in the sense that I felt like they kept hiding things from me, and not because I knew, but I felt, I had a feeling like I didn't know the full story, because my parents had always [inaudible] details of their early life, of our family's life, and they kept telling me that they would tell me when I was older that, you know, when they felt like I could understand. And so, yeah, that's how I see it.

PASSOT: How did that sentiment carry over in your college career? Did it influence any of the decisions that you decided to make?

NGUYEN: Oh, certainly. I knew from the moment that I realized that I could get grant money to visit Vietnam that I had to do it. Ever since that moment in junior year, I was like *I need to go back somehow some way. You know, obviously I don't work too much as a high school student with my studies and all*, but I had to figure out how to get back. And so, I looked into different grant programs, and I contacted not an American or a foreign-based NGO, but a local NGO that was Vietnamese headed up by Vietnamese, and I found a group that was headed by a group of scientists from France who were Vietnamese who are quite famous actually, but they partner with a financier to basically fund different orphanages all across the country, and other scientific endeavors to kind of bring together Vietnamese scholarship with the rest of the world, because at the time, and it still is, Vietnamese scientific research in many ways just doesn't align with that of the West. So, and it still doesn't.

But, they sought me out, I talked to them, I told them my story, and they said they "would love to have you," and so I decided then and there—this was what?—winter, I believe, of my freshman year—that it was a done deal I was going to



do it. And so, I got the confirmation of receiving the grant in springtime, and off I was. And leading up to the trip—this was a two month journey—I basically binged on learning Vietnamese. I bought all these books from Amazon, and once I got to Vietnam as well, I went to some libraries and checked out more books of learning English from Vietnamese, and then learning Vietnamese from English, yeah, kind of counterbalancing both worlds. But I made a kind of an oath to myself that I'd be able to read the paper upon exiting, and I spent a serious amount of time trying to figure that part of myself out.

And obviously, to an extent it unsettled my parents because they were a little bit apprehensive that I'd be going by myself on my own, and even though it was to my home village/[slash]hometown, I'd be without close proximity to them if something happened. And what was interesting as well is they knew my tendencies to speak my mind and be very strong about my desires of the world, was that they didn't want me to—oh, how do I say it?—they didn't want me to put myself in a potentially compromising position voicing my opinions about myself, the Vietnamese government, about Communism, about democracy, and they wanted me essentially to try to blend in. I knew I couldn't, obviously, because culturally I'm very, very different than a Vietnamese citizen, something I learned to accept, that no matter how much I would try to learn and become a part of Vietnamese culture, I'd always be different, the way I walked, the way I talked, the way I dress, my mannerisms. And so, I think trying to bridge that gap, that divide, was a big part of my journey there on top of other you'd call it foolhardy things I did, in learning about the orphanage, learning about non-profit work in Vietnam, learning about money, learning about corruption, all these little things that boiled up to some very big moments that I had in Vietnam that continue to linger with me and that continue to influence the way I do things.

PASSOT: And did that experience or any of these experiences sort of lead you in the direction of going into education over like being a doctor or...

NGUYEN: So, I'd been pre-med all through Dartmouth. I think for me, my decisions professionally had less to do so much with that story, because I felt like my focus, especially after that experience of Vietnam because of all that happened, was less of what I wanted to be professionally, because I feel like

as an American, which is how I mostly regarded myself when I was a kid—I was like *I'm an American kid. I happen to be Asian, I happen to be Vietnamese, my parents happen to be Buddhist*—that I had this shift essentially from what I wanted to be to who I wanted to be. And that very shift internally is what has helped me to move forward very quickly at some major life decisions, things that I have done now, professionally, individually, socially, and some of the initiatives and you can call it missions that I have for my life that I continue to pursue.

And so, I felt like I needed to be true to myself of the sentiment with which I wanted to live my life under than a almost like an appeasement, a settling, if you will, of my future to the will of what is culturally expected of me or that of my family, which I feel like a lot of Asian American or Asian children struggle with, as far as a cross between honoring one's own family and their dreams so that they can live vicariously off of you that child. I feel like a lot of kids at Dartmouth, a lot of students at Dartmouth, I almost feel, thinking back to the students that I teach in high school, this pressure that comes from the family from within and all around of living up to standards. And so, it gave me a release from that and allowed me to think on my own terms, and that's allowed me to move very quickly. And that's part of what led me to the decisions that I made now as a professional [audio skips] and as an individual seeking to further his life. And so, yeah, it was my freshman summer was like a hallmark experience.

And I later actually returned in my junior summer for a medical mission in Northern Vietnam, in Hanoi, which is a whole 'nother story, I mean, and that's [inaudible] after that as well. But, a lot of my life has consisted of at least in that realm of individuality to my story as a Vietnamese person, it's almost rediscovering myself, if you will, like unlocking your past.

PASSOT:

Yeah. So, I wanted to ask if, or how learning about the Vietnam War at Dartmouth might have changed your perspective, or even just the refugee crisis at the end of the war, if that changed your perspective on what you had heard from your parents or your own experiences? And if you think that the American system changed the perspective on like the Vietnamese, on like the Vietnamese story, you know?

NGUYEN:

Hum. So, upon returning to Dartmouth, I had a desire to learn more, obviously, you know, digging through the library, looking up Professor Miller's course, which is very highly rated, and I talked to many other Vietnamese international students who had taken the course, and how for them, you know, being Vietnamese nationals versus me being Vietnamese-American, being in that case of, yeah, I had a lot of sit down talks with young Vietnamese citizens, international students, of that sentiment. And I think we came down to a point of just understanding to a certain degree... And I was actually a head of the Dartmouth Vietnamese Students Association, and we did a few events around cultural awareness, sharing stories, and also some food events like pho and spring rolls and the like. But, for me, learning their sentiment of understanding the different points of view of what it means not so much to side with a nation for its own sake, which I feel like many Vietnamese-American children are almost through their parents siding with the viewpoint of coming from a mostly Westernized society of Western values blended with their own cultural identities.

So, understanding a people, of what it means to be from an ethnic background, to have a story. It gave me a more mature, if I were to see it that way, and nuanced viewpoint of what it meant to be a Vietnamese person within the world, that it was in many ways okay to have questions, and okay to not fully understand the stories and the realities of other people, but to have an acceptance of what was, the war, the atrocities that followed the war, my parents' own experience and that of many people that forced so many millions of Vietnamese to run away, to now as a small emerging developing country of Vietnam, trying to seek its place within the world. And so in many ways it gave me a sense of hope about the future of the country.

And I think part of me also, I know deep down, and when someday I finish that book that I've been writing, is to share more of that story of bridging the nation of Vietnam as we call it, and also that of the Vietnamese people, those that have run away from the country. In some ways I feel like, you know, being a refugee running away from—and not deliberately because I was a kid, right? I couldn't know those sentiments of what it meant to try to run away from your country or what it felt like to be my parents at that time giving up all their possessions, all their dreams and hopes in

Vietnam and running away to another country, knowing that the success rate of getting into another country was so low—it gave me a sense of pride to continue the things that I did, and it still does to this day, of working toward the greater mission of bringing together people the way that I do. And not so much that I hang this story over people’s heads where I introduce myself as a refugee immigrant American.

You know, I feel like many of us Americans whether we’re of any ethnic background, we have an ancestry that calls to all of us, whether we’re Asian, white, black, Hispanic, it doesn’t matter. We all cherish stories of our ancestry that brought us to this land called North America or the US, and it all lends to our identity, it all connects with who we are as people, and I think [audio skips] what differs is when we decide to open up these stories, these backgrounds. I think some of my friends more recently now that they’re older and have, quote-unquote, “a little bit more time” of taking time to travel and revisit their ancestral hometowns, whether it be in Europe, parts of Asia, South Africa, etc. And so, I think for me, Vietnam represents that part of the journey.

PASSOT: Just to sort of broaden this, I wanted to ask more about the Vietnamese society at Dartmouth itself, and did you notice a lot more interest in the Vietnamese people at Dartmouth to sort of explore their own backgrounds as they went through their college experience? Or was a lot of it just to build the sort of sense of community of these Vietnamese-American people?

NGUYEN: So, our club was I would say 66% Vietnamese Americans and 33% internationals, just because there were so few Vietnamese international students.

PASSOT: Right.

NGUYEN: But the Vietnamese internationals, they all knew each other, because there were a lot of programs specifically in Vietnam for Vietnamese international students that made their way into elite universities. There were all these summer camps that they all knew each other from. And so, they were very close. Amongst the Vietnamese-American students, we were, I think it was more dependent on major and activities other than our club that brought us together. But within that group, there was an innate desire to try to reconcile the Vietnamese identity as a people to recount stories and to

understand one another from our point of view what it means to be Vietnamese, because we had students who were on one side who had very little connection with culture, didn't grow up around many Vietnamese like myself, but had a desire to. And then, on the flip side you had other students who grew up in predominantly Vietnamese societies and groups in their youth and were very closely connected with the culture, those who could read and write Vietnamese very well, could understand movies and written texts in Vietnamese.

So, a lot of what I felt to be the sentiment, other than the fact that, you know, we enjoyed each other's company as friends, we traveled quite a bit through Vermont and into Canada for a few trips, just, you know, just talking about things and learning about each other, the sentiment was around celebrating what it means to be Vietnamese, to have Vietnamese in our life in some form, the culture in our blood, to understand what that felt like, that the association with Vietnam didn't have to be what I think the world seems to view the country as, which is the war with America, but more than that, you know, as a struggling people seeking their independence and their freedom.

And it wasn't until I talked to a graduate student, and that's kind of nailed it into my head about his [inaudible]. And essentially initially before I learned more about the culture, I was very much in this viewpoint of disagreement with the way that Vietnam as a country was being developed through the Communist regime due to corruption, lack of efficiency, and lack of I saw what I felt to be a lack of an education and economic progress. And while more and more people were becoming literate and educated, the opportunities in Vietnam were still very small. It was dismal in comparison to that which I saw in other parts of East Asia and South Asia. And so, I think those things will continue to develop as we all continue to—as we all get older, the world moves forward and things change, and so...

PASSOT: I wanted to go back to your junior year when you said you went to Vietnam on the medical, on like a medical...

NGUYEN: Trip, yeah.

PASSOT: Yeah. Could you just go over that in a little bit more detail on what had happened and what you were there to do?

NGUYEN: Are you familiar with Dr. Joseph [M.] Rosen [MD] from the Dartmouth Medical School, or the Geisel [School of Medicine at Dartmouth] medical school?

PASSOT: Yeah, but if you want to give more information for the record, that would also...

NGUYEN: Yeah. So, my first encounter with Dr. Rosen was through his engineering course on engineering breakthroughs in health care, on seeing how we cross different academic disciplines to better treat different cases in the medical world. And so, him and the reconstruction and plastic surgeon worked very closely with engineers, biomedical engineers, to develop some of the techniques and tools that he has utilized and shared with the surgical community across the US and across the world. And so, I remember going to one of his office hours to discuss a project that was coming up for a midterm, and I told him a little bit about my story—this was in the engineering building at Thayer [Thayer School of Engineering]—as a Vietnamese-American and a little bit of my story as a refugee, and a little bit about my story as well of when I went back to Vietnam during my freshman summer.

And I remember him saying that there was a meeting later on that week with a group of medical students and a few other undergrads to come back to Vietnam for a trip. It was called the RICE Project, which stood for the Reconstruction Inter... Let me think here. It was Reconstructive International Cooperative [Cooperation] Exchange. And what this essentially stood for was a exchange of medical techniques and practices from Western medicine to that of other parts of the world, including in this case Vietnam, which Dr. Rosen had been doing many trips of throughout the years of sharing Western medical surgical techniques with that of Vietnam. I didn't realize it at the time until I got there and visited some of the hospitals, but many of the people there, the doctors and the medical professionals, they utilize techniques from Russia and from the French, not so much of what I saw used in America of certain techniques of how to deal with certain issues concerning surgery.

And so, he basically asked if I wanted to become a translator of sorts, but also serve as a cultural guide for the other attending group members, which included I think five

medical students, four other surgeons from different universities or medical centers including the [inaudible] Women's, the Harvard Medical School training hospital, John Hopkins. I believe we had a UPenn [University of Pennsylvania] surgeon, and then another one from Dartmouth, and a few nurses as well, and other surgical aides. And so, I went as the only undergraduate—actually no, I was of two undergraduates, but I was the only Vietnamese person within this group.

And so, it just felt to me like a surreal experience. I'm like, "Wait a minute. How does this..."—you know, in my head after I left that meeting with him, "How does the talk about office hours, a project lead to this opportunity, all expenses paid for four weeks in Hanoi?" which is in Northern Vietnam. "How did it even come to be?" And so anyways, I went to the meeting, I accepted, I filled out all the paperwork, and you know, that one thing led to the next. And I still write to Dr. Rosen to this day.

Oh my goodness. The trip was something out of a book almost, you know. I felt really out of place. I was very unfamiliar with medical terms in Vietnamese. I had a dictionary all over the place with me. I ended up having in that trip creating a small, it's like one of those easy dictionaries, if you will, of reading Vietnamese medical terms over to English with pictures on them to help out in the surgery rooms, if you will. So, it was an experience for sure. I think I felt like, part of me at the end of that trip was like "You know what? Screw doing general surgery. I think I want to do plastics," just because I saw some really cool techniques being utilized, like how to reconstruct someone's ear using rib cartilage, and then being on my feet for 16 hours in a surgery room trying to translate and gawk at a surgeon and work in his zone. It was just, it was something out of this world.

That and also connecting with some very high ranking Vietnamese folks, including some of the military generals whose family members were being treated by this team of highly experienced reconstructive surgeons from the US, and also trying to learn from them as well. So, yeah, this basically involved us visiting different hospitals across Northern Vietnam, traveling to different provinces, and exchanging techniques, communication connections, and we also piloted a project with SAP, the software company, in

telemedicine using mobile phones, essentially a way to gather data to share information and resources to rural Vietnamese communities, many of whom if they're not located near a medical center or a hospital, struggle to get support to those who are ailing. So, yeah.

PASSOT: How does that experience for you just as far as like long-term influence, how did that differ from your first experience going into Vietnam?

NGUYEN: I felt like the stakes were higher in a different way, you know. I wasn't a doctor, but I felt like for me to be in the room with these medical professionals, and then to be able to listen to conversations from Northern Vietnamese people in need of aid, to hear it from that level, and also having learned the language well to be able to pick up on some more of the nuances—I had familiarized myself I'll say of the Northern dialect just because I was raised primarily in the Central dialect of Vietnamese—it changed the way I saw what it meant to be Vietnamese. I think a lot of Vietnamese-Americans, especially if their parents are from the South or Central, they have a resentment of those from the North, of Vietnamese natives calling them "you're basically Communist slaves" or something of that sort, where I saw this as a young country in some ways looking to catch up with the rest of the world after having so many years of strife and war. And so, it gave me a greater appreciation for what I saw to be a slow building of the country towards a brighter future.

And it was like, how do I say it, a proud moment to be a part of that in some very small scale way, and it gave me more drive to continue to carry on that mission in what it seemed like to be the rest of my life in some way however I can. And so, yeah, I still plan to revisit somehow, some way. It looks like my plans this summer we have to move to next summer, but yeah, there's a lot of ideas that I have in mind, between radio stations, working with education in Vietnam, the education ministry, of which I got to meet with during my first trip. I met the Minister of Education there, who later I found out—we were on TV—they were recording him visiting different orphanage sites and seeing different people in the community. I remember him saying to me specifically that I shook his hand. I didn't even know that this was the Minister of Education at the time. But he told me essentially that, you know, "Ben, I want you to find a way to bring our people



together.” And it wasn’t until we finished our handshake, I kind of looked him in the eye to kind of figure out what he was getting at. I was kind of putting him in my life of, you know, “this is something I want you to try to resolve.” And I think having that in my heart gave me this almost satisfaction, and also this desire to want to figure something out about that. But, whatever medium I chose to use to pursue that problem, I felt like I still was and am developing the process and the content for. And so, I’m hoping in the next 5 to 10 years I’ll figure out something that’s meaningful to contribute in that light, and then make it more public as well. But, those are my sentiments on it at least.

PASSOT: What eventually pushed you to join the Teach For America program?

NGUYEN: So, when I was in the orphanage, I was a tutor and I taught some courses, some different basic subjects, on chemistry, on algebra, on English, and I remember connecting very well with the orphans there because I wanted to learn what it’s like to grow up in Vietnam. Because I feel like in some ways growing up Vietnamese was kind of not a part of my childhood. I felt like I had a very regular American childhood for the most part, and I mean that in the sense of, you know, playing football in the park with friends, riding my skateboard or bike around during the summers, enjoying going to the movies and renting videos from Blockbuster when it was still alive, and playing video games, and all these little things that now seem to be just a part of the regular American fabric. And what it meant to be Vietnamese for me didn’t really resonate outside of food, and maybe a little bit of language that I learned when I was at home.

And so, my connection with the children there at the orphanage and which I still talk to to this day, and you know, here we are in 2020, and nine years after the fact I still talk to those kids, now all of whom are much older and into their lives professionally or educationally, it gives me the sense of pride and a sense of almost gratitude in a way for the experiences that I had been given as a successful refugee to America, and gave me a way to in some ways, I feel, give back what I’d been given, and that from my family, in learning that we were a part of the, I think my dad told me is 0.3% of the refugees in the camp that we were in in Hong Kong that actually made it out. So the 3,000 or so folks in that specific camp, we were part of the 90 people that made

it out. And so, in thinking about those statistics and these numbers, and my dad told me this number like four years ago when I went back home after college, it gave me an appreciation for what it meant to live my life with gratitude.

And that as well as I—and it became the focus of my thesis in my anthropology major of teaching in the Marshall Islands during the winter, my sophomore winter term, with the Dartmouth Volunteer Teaching Program which was headed by Professor Andrew Garrett, who's a professor emeritus in the Education Department, that led me to a lot of ideas on, I guess—how do you say it?—on some sentiments that I wanted to explore around what it meant to find freedom and to have purpose in life. And I felt like this story of the Marshall Islands, which is this remote country—if you know where Fiji and Guam is, a small country of like 30,000 people on these small islands, atolls—of how they in many ways mirrored that of the Vietnamese of feeling isolated, of having little resource, but seeking connection with the rest of the world. I felt many of those similar sentiments.

And after my trip to Vietnam that summer of my junior year, I actually went on to do thesis research in the Marshall Islands for two months. And so, it was like one trip on top of the other. And my return to the Marshall Islands that junior summer, and this was after my sophomore winter term that I was teaching there, it just felt so natural. You know, I had the opportunity to go do medical research in a lab for a year, to go work in the Pacific Islands with the WHO [World Health Organization], which essentially looking at current events would have been a cool experience, so look at epidemiology, to the opportunity with Teach For America to teach somewhere. I thought about it financially, I thought about it in terms of the extra time I would have, because I wanted to work on my applications, do interviews and the like. It just felt more convenient to do teaching, to get a full salary, to have benefits, while also pursuing other things that I wanted to do to enhance my life. And so, that led me ultimately to the decision of Teach For America, and this was during my junior year actually, my junior spring that I committed. I did the junior deadline, just to get myself a little bit of assurance.

But, you know, life's been very quick in the last five years, because I also joined a start-up when I came here as well, here in Vegas, and so that's going to take my life on this different spin of, you know, and then that's why I backed off

from becoming a doctor is because I got caught up in learning programming and coding and learning how to push technology projects and work in this industry. And again, it gave me a different set of appreciation, I think, and a sense of freedom as well, to pursue my life in the way I wanted to, because I felt like in many ways I was living out my dad's dream of becoming a doctor, or my mom's dream as well working in the medical field. In many ways they still want me to, you know. That talk I had with them when I told them I was no longer committed to in the near term becoming a doctor, it in some ways shattered some of their early childhood hopes, you know, of Vietnamese children working within a field that is built on saving people. I think part of my heart knew the way I would save people in the world, my life story would be very different. And when I finally came to those words to them and explained my sentiments, I think more recent as well with some of the success I've had professionally, that's convinced my parents of my decision, and in many ways they've given me a lot more freedom to go about my life, to release their hold on where and what I wanted to involve myself in.

PASSOT: I wanted to sort of finish up here with how you keep Vietnam and your Vietnamese identity present within your life today? And any sort of projects or even just family trips to—I mean, you mentioned trying to visit Vietnam again. But, anything like that to sort of keep in touch with that Vietnamese aspect of your life?

NGUYEN: Hum. What's interesting is, as a family, all four of us, my mom, my dad, my brother, myself, we've never all four of us returned to Vietnam together, and we were actually planning this summer to go. And obviously, you can see it's a bit different now. But we do plan to, say, next year or the year after to visit. In the meantime, I had, and I still talk to many of the folks that I worked with when I was visiting Vietnam in both those summers, from the medical professionals to the orphans, and the older children now who are now into their professional life, about having a bit of a reunion, if you will, when I return to Vietnam. And obviously they've kind of moved all apart from Central Vietnam, but we all plan to meet at the orphanage where we all met, almost as a life thing.

And so, coinciding with that, I wanted to give them all a draft of the book I've been writing about my experiences there in

that summer. It's creative non-fiction, if you will, of what it felt like to almost rediscover myself. It's like a runaway coming home, if you will, a refugee returned to the land that they ran away from. But it almost became this epic, this story of discovery, because this was a home that you ran away from that you didn't understand, that you had no experience in. And so, those were the plans. Obviously it's changed a little now and the timeline moves forward, but my continual conversations with my relatives and my close contacts in Vietnam keep me grounded to that, as well as the desire to continue to learn about Vietnam. I buy books on history, I read other stories from other refugees, other Vietnamese-American sentiments, and I recently visited some of the Saigon, Little Saigons in California, especially in Santa Ana, Westminster, California, where there's an enormous Vietnamese community. And so I got to appear in the news in a news broadcast there after winning a big education award, and share some of my thoughts in English and in Vietnamese, as well as being in the paper all across the country for winning that education award, called the Milken Educator Award, and sharing my thoughts of what it means to be Vietnamese in the world. So I feel like Vietnamese support each other almost—it brings pride in me as well almost unconditionally when someone who's Vietnamese wins a big prize. And it was a little surreal getting ads on my social media linked in from random people in Vietnam after winning a big award in education. And so, in some ways I feel like I still have much to live up to and I'm just getting started, but those things still permeate part of who I am.

I feel like I see myself still, though, not primarily from my Vietnamese identity. I think it's a very strong part of my personality and how I ground myself, but I think more what I see myself is still along the lines of I think part of how I saw it as I grew into my college years of being myself, Ben, personally, and having these different elements, these different facets that pertain to me. So, other than being Vietnamese, of course, being American, enjoying specific things, loving music, loving sports, all these different things, it becomes a big, at least in terms of being Vietnamese, a big puzzle piece of my identity and something I'll know true to my heart for the rest of my life that I'll continue to almost, how do you say?—it's like polishing a gem stone. It feels like that at least, that it's a part of my life that I'll continue to uncover and make more rich and more—how do I say it?—a more clear view within myself, the world, and I think the

missions that I've committed myself to for, in some ways thinking back to the words of that Minister of Education, the education minister, of bringing back, or rather bridging our people together, "our people" meaning Vietnamese people across the world, to accept that the culture is moving forward. And then, from my own personal life, advancing my professional and life goals as well. So...

PASSOT: Just one more question that sort of popped up before we wrap up is, how do you see American relations with Vietnam as they stand today, both like culturally, and I mean politically is a different sort of question, but...

NGUYEN: Certainly. So, let me go ahead and just... yeah. My dad and I talked about this, especially the last couple of years more specifically, especially with the rise of Covid-19, and also as China continues to build its manufacturing and its educational/[slash] societal initiatives all across Southeast Asia and across the world. He, my dad, is fearful that within the next 50 years to 100 years that China will try to go after Vietnam and reabsorb the country, because in many ways China still views Vietnam as a rogue nation that still belongs to China. And so, and my dad has seen several attempts from the Chinese to install political leaders, and also different work sites and people within the country of Vietnam to slowly—how do you say?—bring the country under its influence in direct and indirect ways.

As far as political relations between the US and Vietnam, I do think they will improve. I think the challenge is obviously is Vietnam has a huge human rights issues, a series of issues to deal with, that and transparency and ongoing corruption, and an overall friendliness, if you will, with the rest of the world, and you compare it to, say, Thailand that has a very friendly relationship with tourists, especially those from the States, whereas Vietnam still continues to harbor this bitterness towards the US. In many ways that's justified given the amount of bombings and chemical warfare that occurred from the US to Vietnam, but I think the sentiment is changing. The youth are becoming more accepting. Facebook's opened up a lot of doors, even though they've banned it and everyone uses CPN in Vietnam to view Facebook. People are trying to connect in many different ways.

In Vietnam the youth, they want things to be different, and they're changing, they're becoming more Westernized. When I went back to Vietnam I saw in the mall, I saw children who, you know, I didn't think Vietnamese people could be chubby, but I saw chubby Vietnamese children. I joked with my mom, and the reason why is because the country is becoming slowly industrialized and people are having more access to resources and more opportunities, but obviously some of the same flaws still apply. Some people feel trapped because property isn't essentially theirs; it still belongs to the government, and they're just renting it, like homes and businesses. And so, there is a lot that needs to happen in the next couple of years if we want to see a more closer alignment.

But I do feel like relations will improve little by little, especially as our continual adversity with China continues to build, depending on our political leaders and other initiatives in the world. And I see Vietnam as a part of what will—and I'm thinking back to the Cold War and the Vietnam War as well, but we'll ultimately see the state of Vietnam as almost like a buffer region and culture to that of different ideologies of governance of people. And so, in many ways I see Vietnam kind of like that puzzle piece of the world. And I think the West will be more open to embrace it, given that Vietnamese leaders are continuing to seek more avenues to find support. But obviously their support from the Chinese is still very strong due to their similar government issues, but in many ways from what I read in the paper is what my dad tells me is that Vietnam does not trust China, but has to reluctantly accept its support until it earns that of other nations. And so, that's how I see it for now, but things will change, I think, year after year, and I kind of try to keep a close eye on those things. And who knows, maybe I'll do something foolhardy and try to do something about it. But, we'll see.

PASSOT: Right. Well, unless you have anything more for me, I am just about finished with my questions. Thank you again for your time and for all your information. I found this to be very valuable.

NGUYEN: Yeah, it was a great experience. I appreciate getting a chance to share my story, and if you have any other questions for me, just feel free to email me, and I can send any clarity, if you need pictures or anything of that nature or

videos. I have half a hard drive full of stuff that I keep. But in any case, yeah, this was great. That's basically all I think I need to say for now, but if you have any other questions, do let me know.

PASSOT: All right, with that I'm going to end the recording.

[End of interview.]