Dr. Trey Pham
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Alice Kim ‘27

KIM: This is Alice Kim. Today is February 12, 2025 and I am conducting this oral history interview for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. I am recording this interview by Zoom video call with Dr. Trey Pham. I am on the campus of Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, and Dr. Pham is speaking to me from Las Vegas, Nevada. Dr. Pham, thank you for speaking to me today.

PHAM: Oh, no problem, no problem. I'm happy to do this.

KIM: To begin, when and where were you born?

PHAM: I was born in Saigon, or what the old native people—the people still call it Saigon, but now it's called Ho Chi Minh City. I was born on July 4, 1972.

KIM: And can you tell me about your family a little bit?

PHAM: Yeah. So we are a family of eight kids: six boys, two girls. We immigrated from Vietnam in waves of three, starting in 1977, ‘78, ‘79, and luckily, we all made it. We're all over here. We all kind of scattered everywhere. One is in New York, one is in Denver. One is in Phoenix, actually, two in Phoenix, one in Northern Cal[ifornia], one in Southern Cal[ifornia], and my oldest passed away.

KIM: And what were your parents' names? And can you tell me a little bit about your parents?

PHAM: Sure. My dad's name is Cau, Cau Pham, C-A-U-P-H-A-M, and my mom's name is In Bui. My father was very, very business savvy. He was a businessman in Vietnam and when he came over to America, and also was a businessman. He had a construction company off and on in various cities. My mom was a farmer and just kind of like tricks of trades—of doing business—of various things. At one point we were farmers, pharmacists, owners of a fishing boat and various other activities I probably don't even remember anymore. My dad passed away about five years ago from kidney disease, and my mom is still alive, and she's currently in California right now.

KIM: And what is your family's ethnicity?

PHAM: We're all Vietnamese. We're Vietnamese.

KIM: Was there anyone else that was important in your life at this time?

PHAM: We're a pretty close knit family. We have some cousins that stay with us when they came over, and so we've been pretty close to them. And the cousins still live in Wichita, Kansas, that's where we grew up. They have their family now. Other than that, we're a pretty close knit family, and all we had was each other. And it was more than enough.

KIM: You mentioned you were born in Saigon in 1972. What were your earliest memories of Saigon? And what was Vietnam like for you at this time?

PHAM: So we were there—we left Vietnam in '79, so I was seven years old when I

left. So Saigon, although I was born there, that's not where I grew up. I grew up in a small town called Vũng Tàu, which is probably an hour, hour and a half south of Saigon. Well, the [inaudible] is Vũng Tàu, but the village itself is even smaller. It's a little bit north of Vũng Tàu, and that's where a lot of my memories were from.

At that time, we had a house across from a market, and it's just one of those small villages where everybody kind of knew each other, and it's one of those where, what we have, we share with each other. And so growing up, it was great, because we knew everybody, and we were running around getting lost everywhere, having fun. So those would become my memories. In terms of Saigon itself, I have very little recollection. I know my dad had a lot of business there, and at one point we owned one of the newspaper presses in Saigon. But a lot of my memories were not much of Saigon at all.

KIM: Was your dad involved in publishing at all, or was it just business? Was he involved in politics? Was he involved with the war at all?

PHAM: No, he had a lot of business ventures. I don't think he was a politician? He was not—definitely not in the army, but he ventured out to do various businesses, a lot of wheeling and dealing, we probably had 10 different things, in terms of business press, owners of jewelry stores. Let me see what else? There were—I don't have very much recollections of the other ones, but those two, I pretty much knew. But I know he owned a lot of business. We had a lot of houses in different cities across Vietnam that I knew.

KIM: And can you tell me a little bit about the fall of Saigon and your experience in your end?

PHAM: Yeah, yeah, so it was, at that time, we were probably an hour south of

Saigon, but it was still pretty much chaotic. There was a lot of confusion, a lot of people running around—of the unknown, basically, of what happened and what will happen in the future? There was a lot of chaos because some people were still trying to leave through the planes. Some people were even trying to leave by boat, or even walking—even at that time. And so it was just mere, just pure chaos. A lot of families were kind of lost to each other just from the chaos. And we didn't know—at one point we didn't know where our brothers and sisters were. We actually lost contact with our dad during the chaos, and luckily, found each other later down the road.

KIM: Was that because your dad—did he frequently visit Saigon for his businesses with—did he not live with you guys?

PHAM: Yeah, so he didn't live with us for any extended period of time. He would come and visit, and then had to go leave for another business venture. And so I just remember him going in—in and out of the house, throughout the year. He barely stayed more than a week or two, each and every time, just because he had so many things he had to deal with, not only in Saigon, but other cities around Vietnam.

KIM: You mentioned that you left in 1979 and the fall of Saigon was in 1975. Could you explain more about the four years in between?

PHAM: Yeah, it was—it was pretty scary. At that time, I think my mom was—was scared in terms of—what you think was yours going to be easily taken away in terms of land, stores, anything. I remember, there was a lot of bribery involved in terms of bribing the local government to kind of leave us alone. A lot of fear—a lot of—we sometimes—we will see people and all of a sudden they disappear. And we're like, we don't know where he went. A lot of that stuff.

I remember, if we invited visiting our village, we had to report to the government: hey, we have this person coming, and he's going to stay for this amount of time—type of deal. But for little kids like myself, I didn't know much, and so to me at that time, I was just being a kid, running around and just doing the kids thing. But for the grown up, the adults, I just remember my mom was talking about—I had to get this guy money. We have to give this guy money to kind of bribe a lot of people to kind of leave, our business and our land and our house and all.

KIM: You mentioned your mom quite often, and I bet she played a really huge role in orchestrating all—taking care of your family.

PHAM: Yes.

KIM: Was there anyone that she also relied on, or was she the only adult in the family at the time?

PHAM: We had several uncles, but they live kind of further away from where we reside on. Again, my mom's family is from the north, and so all the immediate family were kind of scattered everywhere, and so because they all had their family to take care of. And so we had some uncles who are probably one or two hours away that I would see infrequently. I know I would see family, going to their summer house, or going to a summer break to go see—staying with the family for the summer, for a couple summers—I remember that. But other than everyday things, she was pretty savvy. I mean she pretty much ran the house, and ran the business and made sure all the kids were in line. So, yeah, so she's—she's definitely the patriarch of the house, for sure.

KIM: Were you guys allowed to keep your business going even after the fall of Saigon, or did the government confiscate your property as well?

PHAM: We bribed. My mom, I remember, just had to bribe a lot at that time in terms of our business. We had a farm, and so we were still able to keep that. We had a pharmacy in front of the house that we lived in that we still kept. But that didn't last very long after the fall of Saigon. I think it only lasted for a year. And then we had—and then we had a boat. Those are the three businesses that I know of now. A lot of the other business around—other of my dad's—we lost a lot of that during the war. A lot of businesses outside of Saigon or outside of the area that we lived in. They pretty much just took everything.

KIM: And you briefly mentioned that you guys left in three waves. Could you explain more—what was the motive behind leaving Saigon?

PHAM: Yeah.

KIM: Were you aware of this?

PHAM: Yeah. So back then, they—they were trying to replenish the army. And so after the fall [of South Vietnam], anybody, any male of the family of age, when they turn I think at that time, 13, you automatically enlisted into the army. And so we had kids all of a sudden disappear, and we never see them again. And so when my brother was starting to be of that age, we started leaving in waves of three. And so [pause] That's how the first group started in ‘78. It took a while, because back then, people didn't have access to boats and everything—I mean, a lot of it was taken by the government and stuff. So for about two or three years, people were planning to leave somehow, some ways. And so, when my brother, who's two, three years ahead of me, when he was about to turn that age, we left

with him in the last of the family. And so that's how that came about, that we had to move in waves of three. It's all because we were trying to dodge automatic enlistment of the male of the family. So.

KIM: Could you explain more about the first group of people that left? Do you remember who was in the boat?

PHAM: Yeah, so the first group was my second oldest brother and my oldest sister. So they left. And, it was scary because at that time, we had zero contact with them. It's not like these days where you can get on the internet and mobile phone and call each other. Back then they had nothing. And so when they left, that was it. We had no contact whatsoever. So we don't know this. They made it. They don't know—we don't know if they survived. And not until probably a year and a half later, or a year later, is when we found out, from—back then, there was hardly any mail going in, like regular mail going into the thing. A lot of it was just posting ads on the Catholic newspapers. That's how a lot of people communicated back then. It's—there were a lot of ads of—my name is so and so, I'm looking out, trying to find this person, so and so. So, that's how we, we kind of, try to communicate then, because again, no internet, no phone and mail was very, very limited at that point, and so a lot of ads in the Catholic newspaper that comes out every month.

KIM: What were the names of your second oldest brother and your oldest sister? And how old were they when they first left?

PHAM: Let's see. My brother's name is Thao, Thao Pham, T-H-A-O, and my sister's name was Kim Pham at that time, but now she's married—named Kim Tran. When they were—so '78—so my brother would have been like 15, and my sister would have been like 17 when they left. So that was the first wave.

KIM: And can you tell me about your group? You were in the second boat, correct?

PHAM: I was in—the third boat.

KIM: Oh, okay.

PHAM: And so my other brother, my oldest brother, and my third older brother, left to basically dodge his enlistment. My older brother, somehow—they couldn't find him or there was a lot of changing names and changing birth dates just to get out of the government stuff. Because everybody lost paperwork once the war started. And so there's a lot of making names up, making birth dates up, that sort of stuff. But, luckily my brother—we're all

kind of young and had fake IDs and fake names and stuff. But so they left in the second wave, and then we left in the third wave.

KIM: So were these fake IDs sold? Were they made by your family members? How did—

PHAM: That, I don't know. That, I don't know, but we—luckily, we dodged enlistment, somehow, some way. So the younger ones, like all three of us, were in school. And so there's no faking that. Once you enlist to school and go into grades and stuff, there was no faking that. The older ones, of course, didn't go into school and somehow got away with it. But the younger ones, my mom put us all in school so, there was no dodging that. So the timeline kind of starts with myself, my two older brothers who are just above me.

KIM: How was school at that time? Did you see any changes? Do you remember any moments—particular moments that stand out at school?

PHAM: It was strict. It was strict. We were taught by a lot of nuns, and it was pretty much old-fashioned school dictatorship type-of-thing. I mean, I remember reciting the multiplication table, seven hours a day. And that's all we did. And because of that, I was pretty advanced in math, in terms of age, for when we went to America afterward. Everything was a lot of memorization. It's one of those things where you get out of line, you're not getting a paddle. I remember, we got electrocuted—kind of a shock thing. Not like total electrocution, but it's like a shock. So they didn't punish you with a paddle in the butt. It was like—put your hand on it and it shocks you. But the kids fall in line—they do what they were supposed to be told to do.

And school in itself was a lot of just sitting there and just pure memorization of everything. In terms of math, a lot of propagandas for the communist government—that sort of stuff. I remember math—History was all about the propaganda stuff. Science was very minimal. I don't remember much about science, but I just remember math. Man, every day was just reciting the multiplication table, seven hours a day—on the day of math. And we had recess, and the kids had fun. It's something that we did every day, I think from Monday through Thursday, we did? But it starts early. I remember our routine was at five o'clock—we would go to church at five in the morning, and after we get home at six [a.m.], I think school starts at seven. I mean this is routine every day. We didn't miss mass at five in the morning. I mean the rooster would always make the sound at five in the morning, that's how you know you're in mass. So, yeah.

KIM: And your family was Catholic, correct?

PHAM: Yeah, we were—prayed. We're very devout Catholic.

KIM: And was it a government-sponsored school? Was it a private school? Do you know? Do you remember?

PHAM: I think it was a government sponsor. Again, this is a pretty small village.

KIM: Right.

PHAM: And, it's a government sponsored school. And I think the class was from kindergarten to sixth grade. I think—so there were not a lot, but a fair number of kids in there—in each grades and stuff. And so back then, it's not like you're in one grade, here and there. I mean, a lot of it was just—I remember taking class with older kids, I was taking class with younger kids. So I was pretty young. So I was like six, seven years old and so. But I remember doing the multiplication at that time—just pure memorization. Can you imagine these days having a seven-year-old just recite the multiplication table over and over again?

KIM: [laughter]. And you mentioned you were the third group to leave. Can you talk a little more about that experience?

PHAM: Yeah, so it's—luckily we had a boat. My old—my two—the first two waves—it wasn't on our boat. The first two, we pretty much bought their way onto the boat that they were gone to. And my mom had the foresight to say, "Hey, we probably need to have a fishing boat." And so that's how we had a fishing—went to a fishing. And we knew at some point, the three young boys had to leave. And so we had a fishing boat. And I remember going fishing out in the fishing boat. It's—it's a small boat. It's a small fishing boat.

And on the day that we left, my mom had just told us, "Remember, go to the boat at this time, but don't tell anybody." And we're like—we didn't know. We didn't think about much—very much of it. And we're like okay. So I remember it was my brother and myself who went to the boat, and we thought—and we do this practically every day. We were around the boat and having fun with all the fishermen that we knew. And so we thought this is just another day, the fishing trip. And you know, lo and behold, when we went, there was more people than we expected.

And so there was people, and then we had food and water on the boat. We're like, "Oh boy, this is something a little bit different here." And so, when you had that many people on the boat, and that stuff on the boat, all the villagers know you're leaving. You're going to try to leave that country. And so what happened was, all the villagers would try to get on the boat themselves—try to get that free pass. And my mom or somebody

thought—had the fortitude to put an electric bar where the boat was, and so anybody who would come on the boat would kind of get shocked and not get on the boat, or would fall off into the water and stuff.

Even then, it was a small world. I remember we had about 70 people on this tiny, little fishing boat. And we left this village in 1979 and I remember leaving the water. And there were cops or police—boat police that would chase us. And then all of a sudden, they would turn around. And so what my mom told us later down the road was, well, we had to bribe a lot of the local police, just to make it out onto [open] water. And then we had—once we got out of that, we had to bribe the regional police to get out into the open shore. And then they—my mom says, “Once you're out to open shore, you're on your own. If you get caught by the national police, we can't help you.” And so, yeah. So we just left and just went on open water.

I remember we had several flags on the boat. Again, we were trying to pretend like we were fishermen. And so, we had different flags of different countries to say, “Hey, we are either Vietnamese or Indonesians or Malaysians, fishing in areas—around that area. And so the 70 people that are on the boat—you don't want to—you can't be on top of the boat, and that would attract a lot of attention. And so all of us had to be—unless you're a fisherman or driving the boat—all of us had to be in the bottom of the boat where they kept the fish. I remember, just to get out to open water. Once we're on open water, then you're okay to go up. We were down there probably a good day, two days, even—down there. And I just remember, you go to the bathroom, they had—they passed the buckets around for you to use the bathroom. They pass food around. Of course, they pass water around. But, yeah, it was pretty dark, pretty damp down there. And once we got open water, then people were—could be more ready to go up to get some fresh air and get some more water and stuff. So.

KIM: Just going back a little, your mother mentioned for you and your brother to go to the boat at a particular time, but not to tell anybody. Was there anyone you wanted to tell? Was there anyone in your life that—?

PHAM: Yeah. So I had a godfather that—in the Catholic term, your godfather is like your second father. And if something happened to your father, then your godfather would take care of you. So we were pretty tight. And I remember he had one of those sugarcane stands. And every day, he would give me a free sugarcane juice. And in return, he would always tell me, “Whenever you’re going to leave the country, you let Godfather know, so I can go with you.” And every day I'm like, “Yep, I got it. I will tell you. I will tell you.”

And to this day—I never had a chance to tell. And to this day, it still sticks to my mind. I should have told. But at that time, my mom didn't want anybody to know because if she knew, word is going to spread fast and all of a sudden, you're going to have like 200 people on the boat, and there's no way we're going to make it.

KIM: You mentioned there were 70 people on the fishing boat. Were they all people you already knew? Were they people that your mother already had connections with?

PHAM: There was—people that that we knew, and there were people that I didn't know. So I don't know if people tried to buy in onto the boat, or people actually got on jumping onto the boat. And so, once they got on the boat, of course, my mom was like, well, we can't throw them off—in open water. But yeah, I would say there were probably more people I didn't know than people I knew.

KIM: And did your mom have a relationship with your godfather? Did they know each other at all?

PHAM: Well, it's a small village, and so they knew each other. But my mom also knows that if one person know, the whole village will know.

KIM: Right.

PHAM: So like I said, there were a lot of people that I didn't know on the boat. And so I'm assuming they jumped on the boat somehow.

KIM And you lost contact with your godfather. Was that the last time you ever saw him?

PHAM: Yeah, last time I ever—I remember even that day, I had that sugarcane juice—that day before I left. And that's the last time I ever saw him.

KIM: Could you elaborate more on the experience in the bottom of the boat? The one to two days you were in the bottom of the boat. You mentioned it was like dark, you guys passed around the bucket to go to the bathroom—

PHAM: Yeah. It was dark, it was cold, It smells like fish. But everybody was there and we all had a common goal: we were just trying to leave. And so everybody was nice, at least I remember they were very nice about it, making sure I was okay, making sure all the kids were okay—giving us food, water and stuff. We would take turns, one person at a time would go up to get some fresh air. And throughout the day—one or two person throughout the day. You just can't have that many people up there. That's all.

But, yeah, it was really dark. For a long time we were like—man. Again, when you're seven years old, you didn't know what the heck was going on. It's like what are we doing? Why are we in this damn thing? But after we got into open water, like I said, it took us about two days. Once we got to the open sea, then you had more free rein to get out and get more fresh air and stuff.

KIM: Thank you. In our previous conversation before the interview, you mentioned that your boat had three pirate attacks. Could you potentially—

PHAM: Yeah, so that's the thing. When we watch movies now, with my kids, they always see pirates and even on the newspaper you talk—you see about the pirates in the Middle East. And I told them there are really pirates in this world. And yeah, you're absolutely right. So we were on open water probably for about two weeks total, and at that time, I think I was telling you, we didn't have GPS back then. There's no GPS to tell you, "Hey, this is where you're going." And so they did the old school navigation, which is looking at the stars at nighttime. We knew we wanted to go somewhere east and southeast to get to Indonesia. And so they would look at the stars and so that's the direction we're going. And look at the sun, and so that's the direction we're going to.

And so what you're trying to do is—we would try to find tankers or oil tank—either oil tankers or oil rigs. And by doing that, they would drop down water and food for us. And so we had—we'd replace water and food somehow. I remember going to these oil rigs that you see on TV in the middle of the ocean. And luckily, those guys would drop down water and food, and then we would go after it. And so this is what we do for two weeks until you see the land that you're going to.

So during the time of the two weeks, like you said, we encountered three pirates. And so these pirates—again, it's not like—they have to chase you down, right? To get to where you're at. So the first guy—I always told my kids—the first guy pretty much took everything on the boat. And we didn't have very many possessions, right? I mean, they took—of course, my mom knew to have enough gold to give it to him and say, "Hey, this is all we have." And he—the first guy took pretty much everything—in terms of anything that's valuable on the boat. And the second guy that chased us down kind of took the rest, and the third guy was kind of pissed off that he had wasted all that fuel.

And this didn't happen all in one day. This happened over a span of—happened once, then two, three days then we saw another pirate, and then probably another four or five days we saw another pirate. And so the third guy pretty much—we had nothing on the boat, and they were pissed

off. They threatened to kill everybody. And I told my kids—at one point, I had a gun to my head, and threatened my mom to say, “Yeah, give us. You have to give me this,” or I’d end up killed. But we didn't have anything, and so they let us go, thank God. But to this day, I tell my kids all the time, there are really pirates in this world.

KIM: Do you remember the moment that you were held at gunpoint really clearly, still?

PHAM: Yeah, oh yeah. I remember his face. I remember he was being very forceful. There was a gun. And he knew that I was my mom's son, who's the owner of the boat, that sort of stuff. And he pressed for a good four or five minutes to say, “Hey, do you have—give me everything you have now.” And my mom just cried and plead with them, “We don't have anything. Look, you can see, this is all we have on the boat here, we have nothing.” They, of course, they searched the boat and everything. It's just, it's a small boat. And thank God, he let us go. But, yeah, I still remember to this day.

KIM: Do you happen to remember which country the pirates might have been from? Were they speaking Vietnamese?

PHAM: Oh that, I have no idea. That, I don't remember. I don't think it was Vietnamese. Because we had one guy who had to translate for us. I'm pretty sure he wasn’t Vietnamese. But in terms of which country, I have no idea which country he is from. If you ask me, it's either Malaysian or Indonesian, because we were down heading towards those areas.

KIM: Other than the pirate attacks, were there other challenges you faced while—

PHAM: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's a lot of being on the sea for that long, you kind of hallucinate things. It's like, “Oh man, is that land? Is that a boat?” Because again, you just—driving this boat wondrously, we didn't know that—at least I didn't know where we're going. They knew where we're going, but I didn't know where we're going. We just—you just drive this thing day after day, wondrously. The other thing that stuck to my mind was—man, we were so lucky to survive because going out to open sea on a tiny little boat, it's not a very wise decision. Because we see waves at night time that I thought—man, for sure, we're gonna capsize. We're gonna die. We're gonna die. We're gonna die. And luckily, our driver of the boat was very skilled and able to navigate the storm.

Again, what we see on the cruise ship—even a little waves here you could feel on the cruise ship. Now take that to the extreme, which you have on a little boat, and any little waves, your boat is going up and down, up and

down like crazy. And so there were several nights I thought, “Man, we're gonna die. We're gonna die. We're gonna die.” And some of those two memories kind of stuck with me. It's like during the day, it was just going to this empty, vast water. We had no idea what the end point was each and every day. And so a lot of time was wasted. Your mind just wanders. And you're like, “Man, is that sea? Is that land? Is that a boat?” You start to see things, and then at night time, that's when you see the storms. It's just—for two weeks, it was like, I don't know how we made it.

KIM: Do you remember how you spent most of your time at sea? Was it just—did you converse with people on the boat?

PHAM: Yeah, we talked. And a lot of prayers, a lot of singing, just to keep your mind—doing some sort of activities. But the main goal was just to get fresh water and food somehow. And so, we would—anytime we would see a oil drill—one of those that had the oil thing in the middle of the ocean, we would go there. And I remember we went to like, I think four of them. And each time, they would drop water and food for us.

At one point we came close to getting picked up by one of those cruise line, because we saw this massive boat with a lot of lights and everything. And they did the same thing. They just dropped water and food. I remember, we shot a flare to the cruise ship to tell them, “Hey, we're here.” And I don't know if they got spooked and if they thought we were pirates or whatever. And they just—they just took off, but they left this water and food, luckily. So, yeah, to this day, I'm like—man, I don't know how we survived. I always tell my kids that we were so lucky to survive.

KIM: And after two weeks, did you find land? Did you—

PHAM: Yeah. So we found land in a small town in Indonesia called Bacu, B-A-C-U. And at that time, my mom was smart enough to know that when you go to these islands, they have a lot of reefs and stuff. And so for you to get into the island, you have to know your way around to get some of these islands. Again, you're on a small boat. You hit these reefs or whatever, it's gonna put a hole in the boat and you're gonna drown. And so my mom was smart enough to put—leave some gold on the bottom of the boat. And so we had some gold left. And I remember having to pay these people, and in turn, they took a boat and navigated us in and onto land.

And I remember we were there on land for I think, two days? And then they took us to another kind of a refugee—but not a big refugee, it was just another area. I'm assuming that we're not the first persons that did this, and they kind of knew the system by now. And they took us there. So the first land, we were there for only like one or two nights, and then they

took us to another island, and we were there for two weeks. And then from there, we went to the big refugee camp, and we were there in Galang [Indonesia], and we were there for six months before we went to America.

KIM: And do you still remember how you felt when the moment you found the land? And how other people—

PHAM: Euphoria, euphoria. It's a lot of prayers and a lot of hugging, a lot of crying. We thought we made it. Lo and behold, we didn't know that was just the beginning of refugee, and there was more to come. But it was a lot of euphoria. I mean, everybody was just so happy to get off the boat. So we were really ecstatic, for sure.

KIM: And were the people after—you mentioned that you bribed them—were they friendly mostly after—

PHAM: Yeah, they were friendly. They were very friendly. I remember they gave us

food and water. And they gave us a place to sleep. I mean, it wasn't at a house or anything, but it was just like an area where we had a mat to sleep on. And we were there for two days, and then they took us to another island after that. So they were very friendly.

KIM: And did all 70 people make it to this island?

PHAM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Luckily we all—made it. Made intact. Again, amazing that we made it.

KIM: Can you explain more about your experience in the refugee camp in Galang?

PHAM: So yeah. So we were there, and it was big. It was massive. There were a lot of people. And a lot of—majority were Vietnamese. I remember it was big enough, and they even had a church that was built out for all the refugees. And we would go to church practically every day. The kids would go to schooling—that's how we went to school in the refugee camp. Most of us were Catholic, and so that's how I got baptized—not baptized, but confirmed, or—I'm sorry, First Communion at the refugee camp. That's how I received my First Communion. For Catholics, for you to get First Communion, you have to do certain orders of learning about Catholicism.

And so we went to school there, and I received my First Communion—on the island, actually. And so, as—I think we talked earlier—as kids, it was great. Besides going to church and going to school, maybe an hour for after church for the schooling, we had nothing. The kids had nothing, but just running around, just running around and trying to get into trouble,

pretty much. But it was—a very big island, I remember—with lots of people.

KIM: What kind of activities as children did you guys partake in? Was it sports?

PHAM: So a lot of it was just running around, just climbing trees, swimming, hide and seek, a lot of games. So every day was pretty much the same thing, every day. For the adults, they stayed around and they talked. I don't know exactly what they did through the day, but we would get supplement—food and water that comes to us once a week. And so they would ration how much food you get for each family and stuff. And so, we would try to make sure we have enough until the next ration would show up the following week. We had a place to sleep, not anything fancy, but it was—a cubicle. And so, my family, and it was me, my two brothers, my sister and my mom. And so the five of us would sleep in this small cubicle together. But yeah. I mean, as kids, I remember it was pretty fun. We just running around and just did some really little kids thing.

KIM: Did you meet anyone new at the camp?

PHAM: Yeah. It was a lot of other Vietnamese were in the same boat as we were. So we met them, but to this day, I don't think I've kept in touch with anybody. We were pretty young. I mean, I was—again, I was seven, and my brothers were nine and eleven, and so we're all relatively young. My sister was even younger. She was only two when she left, and so. But yeah, we pretty much—the three boys just kind of just running around, just did all things together, when my mom just took care of my sister. And then at night time, we were—they would show Chinese movie, actually. The first time—I didn't know what a TV was, until I was there. They would have a projector and they would have movie nights for the refugee camp. And so that was pretty fun. This first time, I didn't know what a TV was or what people on the screen was talking, so I remember that. So, yeah.

KIM: And how—you kind of briefly mentioned about how food was provided once a week, and you lived in a cubicle. How were the living conditions?

PHAM: Pretty bad, all pretty bad. I mean, the food is not a thing to brag about. These are pretty much canned food. And to this day, everything I eat, it's always well done food. It's because when I was at the refugee camp, I had serious tapeworm. And so, I guess because eating uncooked food—that's how typically you get tapeworm—uncooked pork, actually. And a seven-year-old, when you have come to the bathroom and you see worms coming out from below, it sticks with you. And to this day, every steak that I order, it's always well done. Any pork I order is always well done. Anything that I eat is always well done. It was that dramatic for me, I

remember. But we did what we had to do to get nutrition and survive at that time.

KIM: How did you guys—I guess, in our previous conversation, we mentioned how you heard back from your brother and sister who had moved to the United States already.

PHAM: Yeah.

KIM: Could you talk about that?

PHAM: Yeah. So, we knew that the first wave, my brother and my sister made it to now we know it's Kansas City [KS]. So back then, how you get to anywhere around the world is—I'm sure it's the same thing now. You have to get sponsored by families. Or the first wave of people—they were pretty much sponsored by a lot of Catholic charity churches of different denominations: Catholics, Christians, Buddhists. A lot of church people sponsored the first wave.

And so my uncle went. They were the first wave, and they were sponsored by a church in Kansas City, and that's how they ended up in Kansas City. And so when my brother and my sister went, my uncle sponsored them over, and they went to Kansas City. And so we knew that my brother and sister survived and made it. And so when the second wave came, they knew if they were to make it to refugee camp, they would contact my brother and sister, and they would try to sponsor them over. And then in turn, that's how the four of them sponsored us over. So that's how that came about, and for us, it took about six months at the refugee camp for us to get all the paperwork in line and making sure everything's in order. And then we left in 1980—probably in October of 1980 I think.

KIM: Was there anything you had to do as a child, or was it mostly just your mother?

PHAM: Yeah, it was—this is all about—she took care and sheltered all of us throughout the whole trip. And I'm sure she went through a whole lot more ordeal than we know. Us kids, we were just running around having fun. She took care of everything else. And like I said, we were blessed and met good people that looked out for us. And somehow we made it over here.

KIM: Did they teach you English at school? Did they give you any like preparation for—

PHAM: Well, no, no, no. So when we went to Vietnamese school, they did not teach us English. It was a lot of math. I remember a lot of math. When we were at the refugee camp, they really—we didn't have any education

besides going to Catholic school. Other than that, the first education that I know was when I first showed up to America.

KIM: Right.

PHAM: The English, right.

KIM: And did you fly directly from Indonesia to Kansas City?

PHAM: No, we went to—from Indonesia, we went to Singapore and stayed in Singapore for one night. And then from Singapore, we flew to San Francisco [CA]. And then in San Francisco is when you do all the paperwork. We were in San Francisco for, I think, three days. You do the paperwork, you get your vaccinations, I know we got—TB was big back then, so we had the BCG vaccine then. But they give you shots and do the paperwork to get into America. That's what we did in San Francisco.

And then from there, we flew to Kansas City in November, I think—the first part of November, and I remember to this day, because, when we came we were basically in shorts and socks and sandals. And when we went to Kansas City, it was snowing by the time we got off the plane. And it's the first time I ever saw snow. It's like, what is this? What is this white stuff? And it was cold. Luckily, of course, my brother and sister brought us coats and shoes and all that stuff. But I remember we got off the plane with shorts, shirts and a sandal.

KIM: How did it feel meeting your brother and sister again for the first time?

PHAM: Just joy, just pure joy, pure joy. Again, for a while, we didn't know if they made it. We didn't know the second wave made it either for a long time, not till we got to the refugee camp, and then they sponsored us. I was like, Oh my God, we all made it. Because I don't know what the overall survival rate is for the boat people, I would think it would be low because, man, you're into the middle of the ocean, the middle of the sea, and this tiny little boat, and every day I thought it was going to capsize. And we even saw some boats on the way—in the water. The capsized boat. And we see them, and then we saw bodies—one or two bodies—here and there.

And so it's like—I don't know what the rate is. I would think it'd be pretty low. But to meet them in America at that time—it was just pure joy and a lot of crying, a lot of hugging. It's the first time I ever saw my uncle. I didn't know who they were, and that's how I saw my uncle. And again, the war just kind of displaced everybody. And a lot of it was—just a lot of miscommunication that I'm sure a lot of people went through that we did also.

KIM: And when you first arrived in Kansas City, there was family who had already moved to Kansas City, already settled. Were they living in projects or did they have their own home?

PHAM: Yeah, so the first apartment we lived in Kansas City was a two bedroom apartment. And I think we had 12 people in there—in a two bedroom apartment. I remember, one room was all boys and one room was all girls. So the older ones would go to work. They were of age to go to work. The younger one, we all went to school. I remember that apartment very vividly, because it was on a hill, and I remember each year it snowed, we would slide down—use a sled to slide down the hill. It was just on a hill.

And so we came in November, we started going to school right away. And it's the first time—none of us knew English, and so we learned a lot of English from watching Bugs Bunny cartoons and stuff from TV. And luckily, because—with my memorization and multiplication with math, I was pretty advanced for a second grader or third grader—at that time, no second grader. I kind of had an interesting track because, in terms of schooling, I got held back in school, then I skipped the grade, and then went backward, and then skipped a grade again. A lot of it because my math skill was pretty good. I remember, I was never in the same class in terms of math with my classmates. I'm always going to another room to do math.

But for us, at least the boys are pretty close in age, and so we will see each other in school. And so although it was a small apartment, we had a lot of fun. It's a lot of bonding. You have no choice but to bond, mostly because we're all in the same boat, trying to survive and trying to make meets in, so.

KIM: What was the name of your—the first school you went to?

PHAM: That's a good question. I don't remember the name—that was in Kansas City. We were there for a year—a year and a half, then we moved to Wichita [KS]. I remember the school in Wichita. The Wichita school is Wells Elementary. I remember that, but I don't remember the Kansas City school. I was pretty young back then.

KIM: Was there a reason why you moved to Wichita?

PHAM: Job opportunity? I think my older brother and sister had better job opportunities in Wichita. And so we moved away from our uncle, which is kind of sad, and we all moved to Wichita. At that time, Wichita was kind of called a Cowtown, and so there's a lot of meat packing companies. And so, back then, a lot of meat packing was done by a lot of refugees.

So, I remember going to Wichita, and because my mom were farmers, we would take over not only our backyard, but our neighbors backyard on each side, and our neighbors in the back's backyard, and we used it to grow vegetables. We were just basically hustling everywhere to make money—to make sure there's food on the table. My mom instilled in us the value of education. The people who were older were working. My oldest brother and my oldest sister—unfortunately, they didn't have a chance to go to school, and so they were working to make money for us. And so starting with number three through eight, all of us went to school, and my mom instilled us the value of education. We all luckily graduated from college and had very good degree and stuff.

But my oldest brother and my oldest sister—they didn't have the opportunity. They had to work to provide for the family. Even when we went to school, we all worked at a young age. I remember at that time I was twelve, and I used my brother's name to get—he was fourteen—to deliver newspapers. At that time, you have to be fourteen to be able to work. And every morning, I would wake up and throw newspaper before I go to school. All of us had jobs at various time or another and everything that we made always went to the family pot to make sure, this person needs this—take money on the family pot.

KIM: Just to go back and get more details on all the things you mentioned, what job did your uncle partake in?

PHAM My uncle? He knew English from Vietnam or he went to school that taught English, and so he had a fairly good job. I think he was an engineer by trade in Vietnam, and he went over and had a good engineering job. I remember we were young, we were poor, and we always looked up to our uncle. It's like, man. They had a house that I knew about. I remember that. And all the kids were—they speak very good English. And I just remember growing up, young, I'm like, man, I want to be like them. And so, yeah, so they were pretty well off by refugee standard then. So they stayed in Kansas City while we moved to Wichita, of course, because his job was pretty well paid as it is.

KIM: And did your oldest brother and sister, could they—did they learn English at all?

PHAM: Yeah, they did. They did. They had to go to some night school to learn English. And all of us went to regular school. And so they would work during the day and go to night school at nighttime. My mom, on the other hand, didn't speak a lick of English, and refused to go to night school. But she managed. She still was the patriarch of the family. She made money in the summer by growing vegetables and selling it to the store. I remember it was hard work. I mean, all of us had to do it.

It started when—we started young, and Tuesday night was the worst, right? That's when we had to get all the vegetables ready to bring it out to the market on Wednesday. And that's when the other trucks from other towns would come and buy the vegetables. So when we were young, we all did it. And each time a kid would go off to college, that means there's one less person. I remember when my older brother next to me left for college—that was me, I was the one left to do all the gardening stuff.

And, man, it was rough because, again, my mom didn't speak a lick of English. She didn't drive, so she relied on us to do all that kind of stuff, not necessarily the English part, because she communicated with the Vietnamese market people. But it was the driving around—we had to drive to this store, to that store to drop off vegetables and just taking care of the garden. It was a 24/7 job that she had to do. But yeah, so she never spoke English. We grew vegetables in the summer, and then in the winter, she made food to sell to the market—to the food market, and stuff. She always kept busy with working and trying to hustle here and there to put food on the table for us.

KIM: That's amazing. How, how was school? Do you remember school—

PHAM: The math was easy. The math was very easy. English was hard, but we picked up fast. When you're forced to speak English every day, then we pick up fast. I remember I had to take ESL, which is English as a second language, from grade school to junior high. At that time, junior high was all the way up until ninth grade, before they switched it to junior high being middle school, which is eighth grade.

So junior high back then was—grade school was one through six, or kindergarten through six, and then junior high at that time was seventh grade to ninth grade, and then high school was 10th grade to 12th grade. And so what you know now is grade school, middle school and high school, which basically is K through five, six through eight, and then nine through 12.

So at that time—so I took ESL all the way until junior high, the end of junior high. It was great because we met a lot of refugee people in Wichita, and so we met a lot of friends that way, and they were in the same boat as we were. There was a lot of, unfortunately, racist stuff that we had to deal with because we didn't know the language, right? We wasn't—what you're talking about, this is Wichita, which is in the middle of America, right? But it wasn't bad. It's because they just did—we were different. And so the kids can be rough, but, once they understand and knew that we were refugee, we made a lot of friends afterward.

KIM: Would you say your schools were mostly majority white?

PHAM: Yeah. Oh, absolutely. Majority white. I would say probably 60% white and 30% African American, and then 10% Other. But we ended up making a lot of friends. And it was fine, but it was rough at the beginning, for sure.

KIM: And you briefly mentioned that you met a lot of refugees in Wichita, so it was kind of easier, because you guys were all in the same boat, and you had a lot of people to relate to. So how was the Vietnamese community in Wichita?

PHAM: Yeah, that's a good question. So the good news is, the Catholic Church is—we kind of use that as the area where everybody gets together. Because that's how we meet. Although we live in different parts of the city, every Sunday, we get together in the Catholic Church and kind of catch up. And everybody's hustling to get better, but the Catholic Church was kind of the pillar of the whole thing for us.

Even then, we had a Vietnamese priest that presided over the church for us. And so he did a lot to make sure everybody had what they need to survive each and every year. Again, in each year, we would welcome 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 families each year. And so it would grow and grow and grow for a while.

And it became pretty robust so not only with the Vietnamese were there. We had—the Cambodian was a pretty big community. The Laotians were also a big community. The Chinese, of course, was a big community. Not very much Koreans and not very much Japanese. But those four was a pretty big community for us back then. The Vietnamese church was what got everybody together. And we all went to Catholic school, Vietnamese Catholic school, after church. Again, the priest was just tremendous. I mean, he made sure he knew everybody. He made sure if somebody—if some family is in need, that there's ways that we can—he can try to help.

KIM: And was the priest himself also a refugee?

PHAM: Yeah, he was, he was. Back then—so right now there's a big congregation of Vietnamese seminary school and church in a city called Carthage, Missouri, which is probably four hours from Wichita. Where now they have—where everybody came together in the summer. And you're talking about 60-70,000 people showing up in one little town in Missouri. And these are all people from all parts of the United States, or even different countries and stuff that come in for this Catholic celebration that lasts for like four or five days.

And so at that time, they were building the seminary school, and they were sending these young seminarian that become priests to a small part of—different parts of everywhere around the country, and they serve as pastors or priests for that city or stuff. So we had a young guy and he had the heart of gold. I mean, everything was about making sure everybody was okay, making sure this family needs this. If he didn't know, he asked somebody to make sure we get it from them. And so the Catholic Church has always been a great part of our family and our journey to where we are now.

KIM: And you briefly mentioned about the Vietnamese market people. So was the community—did the community include Vietnamese markets, Vietnamese restaurants?

PHAM: Yup. So we had a family that opened the very first market in Wichita and they sold a lot of the stuff that we wanted, like Phở, the sauce for the Phở, the Sriracha—the business for Sriracha was big. All the stuff that we eat, and all the seasoning. And so that family started a market, and they also branch out and communicate with other markets around—other cities around Wichita, mainly smaller cities in Wichita, Western South Wichita, Oklahoma City, Kansas City. And so there was a lot of trading on that part.

And that's how we got connected with selling our vegetable to other cities around Wichita. And so that's how we made our money. And so, yeah, so it got big now, where—that market is now absolutely huge in Wichita. They made so much money. And now there's probably five markets in Wichita, I mean, I was back there. My sister-in-law still lives in Wichita now, and so we'll go to Wichita maybe once a year. And things have changed. It's like—now everything, of course, the memories that you had, it's changed. But every time you see this one place here, you're like, “Oh, man, I remember that place,” that sort of stuff.

KIM: You briefly mentioned that there was racism, unfortunately. Do you remember any incidents particularly that stood out to you?

PHAM: No, I mean, it's—again, these are kids, right? And so when they see somebody new, who don't look like them, who don't speak the language—and we're smaller stature kids compared to the average American kids. And so it's very easy to get picked on. Just because they're not—they don't understand. We speak funny, we talk funny, we look different from them. And so, it's very easy. And so, we see it, but again it's—to this day, I mean, someone became my friends afterward, after they understand and they're more educated of who we are.

I mean, it's—unfortunately, we had to deal with that. Every one of my brothers and sister had to deal with that at various grades and stuff like

that. So we were a family, we just tried to stick together. More and more refugees came, and so they're more and more of us. And so it just became a little bit more the norm. So people were just more accepting of it.

KIM: Did you ever have a desire to conform—to do something to fit in? Did you do any extracurricular activities, maybe?

PHAM: Back then? Man, we were just trying to survive. And so it was a lot of family unity. I did not have your typical childhood. Like I said, we all worked when we were young. We all had jobs. And so I remember, the one thing I always wanted to do was play baseball with my friends. And we tried to play baseball, but it's more like ghetto baseball. We didn't have gloves, and we used socks to catch balls. And so, I remember when growing up, all I wanted to do was play baseball with my friends.

And of course, we didn't have the money, right? And so not only that, we didn't have the time, because all of us were working one way or another. But it made us come together as a family, because everybody has their road and all we did was try to make sure everybody's taken care of. And at that time, my third brother went to college—I knew, even then, we made sure he's taken care of in college, in terms of rent, food. Tuition, luckily, we were first generations, and we had very decent test scores and stuff. And so tuition was pretty much taken care of, but it's more like food, rent and everything else to make sure he's taken care of.

KIM: For the sake of the interview, can you tell me the names of the middle school and high school you went to?

PHAM: Yeah. So, Wells Elementary, Jardine Junior High. It's not middle school anymore, back then it was junior high. J-A-R-D-I-N-E. And it's still around. I remember driving there, and I remember the apartment that we stayed at when we first—one of the apartments we stayed at when we were in Wichita, and it's still there. And then high school is called East High. East like, E-A-S-T. So I remember those vividly, and I remember the places where I worked. I was like, man, bring back a lot of memories when I go back to Wichita.

KIM: Except for the newspaper job, did you have other jobs as well? And—

PHAM: Oh my god, I had so many jobs. I threw newspaper. And every summer they had—starting at fourteen, they had summer school book program, right? And so all of us did it. I remember, I threw newspaper for two years. And by the time I was fourteen, my summer job program composed of librarian—where they employ kids in the summer and various different

parts of the company would hire these kids. So I was a librarian at one place. I was a scorekeeper for baseball area, so that was fun.

And then I worked at the YMCA, just to kind of clean up the air and stuff. Other jobs outside that, I was a golf caddy, that was fun. That introduced me to golf. I remember, I was a young little kid, and it was the country club that I was caddying for. And some of these old men, I'm like, "Man, what the heck you put in these bags? Why are your bags so heavy?" And I was a dishwasher, waiter, a Mexican cook. To this day, I still cook some Mexican food for my kids, and they're like, "Oh, you pretty good dad." I said, "Yeah, that's for my past life, I guess." So, yeah, so I did all those jobs when I was in high school.

KIM: And moving on, how was college?

PHAM: College was—it was good. I went to University of Kansas, just because my brother was there. And again, even then, we worked all through college. Work study program, I was a paralegal. I was working at Target. I was, what else did I do? Tutors, lots of tutors. So, yeah, we worked through college also. But college was fun. I mean, the first time you're on your own, of course, and to be able to do things on your own, it was—I always say it's the best time of my life to my kids. So nothing but good things about college.

KIM: Do you feel like college was the first time you got to actually live your life?

PHAM: No, because even then, every one of our kids—our goal was, we didn't want to be poor. And so we do whatever we can to make sure we're not poor. So in college, I still had to work a lot. The first time when I felt like I didn't need to work was when I went to med school. It was the first time I didn't have a job. Where I can be more of a student. Because I remember, there are plenty of times where Friday night, Saturday nights, everybody's like, "Hey, let's get together. Let's go to a party." I'm like, "I'm sorry, I can't, I gotta go to work."

And so not until med school, where I didn't have a job, they said, "Okay, the test is done. Let's go party." That's when I can actually went to party. But again, all my brother and sister did this. I mean, it wasn't anything different, we knew that we didn't have much, and we knew that we had to provide, either for the family or for ourselves. But it's still—I get to live with my brother and still do the college, the other college things.

KIM: And what made you want to go to med school? Was it kind of like an obligation—

PHAM: That's a good question, right? So it's your typical Asian family, right? I

remember my first freshman year, coming back home from college. At that time, my mom and dad sat me down and said, “What do you want to do?” I said, “Mom, Dad, I want to become a math teacher and I want to coach basketball.” They're like, “Nope, you’re going to med school.” I'm like, “Okay.” And that was it. That's how I went to med school. Because they told me to. And at that time, it's—math is what I like to do and basketball.

I thought I was going to be a basketball because I was a manager for the basketball team when I was in junior high, and also—no, not high school, but junior high. So I knew basketball was pretty fun, and I actually had a chance to be a manager for college. But again, I didn't have time either. Basketball manager, didn't have time either. Basically, manager just means you're just a towel boy. Just making sure the team has water and making sure their uniforms are clean, make sure their towels are clean and throw the towels away and stuff.

So, yeah, that's how that came about. They just sat me down and said, “You'll be a doctor.” And then from there on, that's all I did. Just took a lot of science classes and took the MCAT and went to med school.

KIM: Are all your siblings also doctors, potentially? Or do they have other—

PHAM: So my brother, who's older than me, he's a doctor, he's a pediatrician in Phoenix [AZ]. My other brother is an engineer, a brother before that was an IT guy and the brother before that, the first guy that went to college was an engineer.

KIM: And were those jobs also kind of brought upon by your parents? Or do you think that—

PHAM: I don't know if they forced them to be a doctor, but I know they forced me to be a doctor. Engineers was easy because we were very good at math. Again, just from our childhood. So, of course, the old stigma of Asian being good at math, well, it's because I sat there and recited the multiplication table for seven hours a day [laughter]. So yeah, so I don't know if they made them, but they're all engineers and computers. And my brother was a doctor, and I'm a doctor. So we are doing okay. We're all doing okay.

KIM: Speaking of your parents, we forgot to mention or talk about how you met your dad again at—

PHAM: Yes, yeah. So we got lost during the war and we thought for sure something happened to him. And so that was ’75. And we met him again in '81—in the summer of ‘81, I think? So, six years later, and it just happened that we were in Kansas City and he was in Kansas City, and it

was just by sheer luck that we ran into each other. And, yeah, it was—again, it's—somebody's looking out for our family, I guess. So it was interesting how that came about.

KIM : Do you remember the moment you met your dad again? Or was it—you mentioned, it's sheer luck. Was it like in the middle of nowhere? Like—

PHAM: Yeah, yeah. I think we went to one of the Vietnamese restaurants and he happened to walk in and, of course, we recognized each other. A lot of euphoria, crying, that sort of stuff. And, yeah, he just happened to get sponsored to Kansas City, and was living in Kansas City.

KIM: Was he living alone?

PHAM: No, unfortunately, he had another family at that time. And again, he—we thought we would never see each other again. By then, he had another family and he had a family of his own, with two young kids at that time, so. But we connected and he continued to live with that family and we continued to do—back then we moved to Wichita soon after that.

KIM: So were you separated from your father after that?

PHAM: So he would come and visit us once in a while. But again, from my standpoint, I didn't see much of him. Even when I was young, he was a businessman, and so he would come in and out of the family, didn't stay for a long period of time. And so for the five years that we were going through our journey to get to Kansas City, he was never around. So from my standpoint, I didn't have very much attachment to him. I mean, by the time I met him, I said, "Oh, this is your dad."

I'm like, dad? To me, I never had the concept of a dad. And so when I met him, and he had another family, and then he never stayed with us. And so to me, my mom has always been the pillar of the house of everything. And so when I visited in my freshman year, my dad came and visited also. And then when they both sat me down and told me, I'm going to med school, it's more of my mom telling me going to med school that I accepted. And I think it's probably because he told her to tell me to go to med school. So I really don't have much time with him, and never really had that concept of a dad [inaudible].

KIM: And did you have any relationships with his new family, or was it—

PHAM: No, so they live in Kansas City, and we live in Wichita, and so we know each other, but we really never really crossed paths very much. It's not like when he shows up for a graduation, he would go by himself. He doesn't take the other family with them. And of course, we never visit the other

family. Like they had graduation, we were never—we never went. And so pretty much—we see each other and had that moment of euphoria. But then again, to us, he never—to me at least. he never lived with us. And so I never had that relation of a dad.

KIM: And did you meet your wife before med school, after med school, during med school?

PHAM: Interesting. So, in the middle of third year med school, I think. She's a pharmacist, and so she's from Lincoln, Nebraska, and she actually came to Kansas City to do a rotation—actually, to Topeka, Kansas to do a rotation. It's church again. So the one time I went to Vietnamese church because my mom visited me, because I was so busy with med school and didn't have time to go drive 30 minutes to go to church. I went to church around campus where med school was. And so she came and visited and said, “Okay, well, let's go to Vietnamese church.”

And the one time she was in Topeka, which is about an hour away from Kansas City, and she happened to go to church. And she's also Catholic, she happens to go to church there. And we ran into each other. And the old classic line, Alice. I saw her, and I said, “Wait a minute. Do I know you from somewhere?” Works every time, Alice. That's how the conversation starts. That's how the conversation starts. And funny enough, so we don't know each other, but her sister and my sister are pretty close friends. We didn't know that, right?

We talked. And then, she said she was doing a rotation in Topeka—pharmacy rotation at the VA, and so we talked. And then afterward, after mass, I called the VA pharmacy, and said, “Hey, do you have an intern there?” And that's how I got her to talk the second time. And then we went out a week later, or something like that. So that's how we met. Again, through Catholic church again. The one time we both happened to be at Mass, at the same time. So if I can say, maybe it was fate, I guess.

KIM: And was she also a refugee from South Vietnam?

PHAM: So it's kind of funny, because her dad works for the US embassy. And so I told her she had the VIP tour. And so remember, you see those airplanes that—or the helicopter that leaves the roof of the embassy before the fall [of Sài Gòn]. And so her family and her dad—she was two at that time. So it was her dad, her mom and her older brother and her that was on that helicopter that left—second to last one that left the US Embassy. And so I told her she got the VIP tour because she went by helicopter that took her to one of those US—big ship, and they took her to Guam—a refugee camp in Guam. And then from there, she got sponsored by a Catholic Church in Lincoln, Nebraska.

So she was–yes, she's also a refugee, but we always joke with her that she got the VIP tour from Vietnam to America. But they went through the same thing we did, right? So that's one of the common bonds that we have, which is the refugee camp, the refugee in America. And so, her mom and dad worked. She says that they started—dad at $2.75 and mom at $2.85 and they both worked as janitors for hospitals. And that's how they raised their family. But they had eight kids also, and they did the same thing as us—just hustle like every refugee kid that we know. And here we are.

KIM: And after med school, were you—where—did you move?

PHAM: Yeah. So we met in third year med school, and we married the week after I

graduated from—after I walked for med school. So we graduated, May 26th, 2001. It's kind of funny, because not only did we marry at the same time, my med school roommate married the same time, and my other roommate across the door, across the apartment from us, married at the same time, and all six of us went to honeymoon together in Jamaica. And so again, yeah, three guys who barely have enough money, and yet got married and went to honeymoon in Jamaica together. And so it was a lot of memories, a lot of good times back then. So, yeah, after that, after Kansas City—that's where med school was—I went to Minneapolis [MN] to do my residency.

KIM: Would you say your roommates in med school were your closest friends at the time?

PHAM: Oh, yeah. I mean, med school was rough, and so you spend a lot of time together, studying—lots and lots of time together. And so, my med school roommate—to these days, we still keep in touch. It's kind of funny. We wish we could meet more often because they have family and kids and practice also. And it took us 23 years before we meet again. And we actually met again two months ago in Las Vegas [NV]. So us three guys, plus another guy who was a roommate to the guy that got married to, right across the street—the door right next to our apartment. So the four of us and our wives got together for the first time in 23 years in Las Vegas two months ago. And, yeah, but we still keep in touch with texting and phone calls. But yeah for sure, they were a very close-knit group.

I remember because I'm Vietnamese. My roommate was Filipino Vietnamese. My other two guys, one was African American, the other one was a Haitian. And so every week we would—it's like Seinfeld. I mean, our doors are always open. And we would come in and say, “Hey, man, you have anything to eat? I'm hungry.” And so we had a routine where each

one of us had a special dish that we made. And so for me, it was some sort of stir fry, broccoli with beef, broccoli with chicken, with rice. My roommate was Adobo chicken. He put it in a crock pot and cooked it, and then we could eat after we're done with classes at night time. And my Haitian friend, he would cook the Haitian food: pork chops, plantains, beans, rice. And then my other guy was African American. And of course he would eat—cook fried chicken and grits and all that stuff.

And so we had a routine. Monday, it was my day. Tuesday was my roommate. Wednesday was the Haitian guy. Thursday was the African American guy. And every week we rotate and cook, and then, after we're done with class, we all get together and eat and stuff. It was a good time. Again, we all—all of us came from humble backgrounds. And so we try to save as much money as possible.

KIM: Really nice. And you moved to Minneapolis where you did your residency?

PHAM: Yes, so that's another story. I think I took the longest path of residency and

fellowship of anybody known to man. So I first started as a general surgeon. And we had this great idea that me and my roommate were going to be partners by the time we were done. So he stayed in Kansas City to do general surgery, and I went up to Minneapolis to do general surgery. And the goal was for both of us to do vascular surgery together and hopefully open the practice together.

And so I remember, in my fourth year of general surgery, my wife was pregnant and at that time, fourth year—they—it's kind of almost a semi-pyramid program that they put residents into the lab to put out papers. And then, depending how many papers you have you get out of the lab to go back to residency again. They kind of outlawed that practice, but back then it was very prevalent.

And so, I remember I was about to go into the lab, and they called me in and said, “Trey, we have no money for you.” And I’d say, “What do you mean you have no money for me?” “We lost our fundings.” I'll say, “Okay, what does that mean?” They're like, “Well, we have no money for you to do the lab year.” I'm like, “So what does that mean? My wife is pregnant. Do I have insurance?” “No, because we have no money for you.” And so I'm like, “What are you talking about?” And so it kind of—again, fate, definitely—whatever somebody's looking out for me. Because of that, I ended up doing an interventional radiology fellowship because I want to do vascular. And so I went to do that and the guy that I did it with said, “You're pretty good at this, you want to do this full time for the rest of your life as opposed to general surgery?” And I'm like, “No way. I love general surgery. I’m not going to do this.” And they said, “You know what? Just

take your time, once you think about it, and come back and we will talk about it."

So I'm like, "Yeah, okay." I remember, this is—I was pregnant, and this is my first child. And so I went back to general surgery, I talked to all my attending assists and said, "Hey, just so you know, they're asking me if I wanna do this, what do you think?" And to a man, every one of them said, "You gotta be stupid for not switching. You have an out. We don't." I'm like, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Well, you have a kid soon. And let me tell you, we have all missed so many soccer practice, piano recitals because we're on call." And, yeah, it's—for a general surgeon, it's pretty bad. It's—to this day that's still pretty bad. They work pretty hard. And so because of that, I thought about it and I talked to my wife and said—and she was very supportive, "I'll support whatever you want to do."

And at that time, I was thinking, man, it just kind of hits me that—do I want to do this? And I like interventional radiology, right? It's because—I guess I still get to do procedures. It's not general surgery, but it's still procedures. I'm still using my hand every day. And so I ended up switching. And so I did a year interventional, went backward to do four years of regular radiology residency. And it's kind of funny, at the end of my second year of radiology residency—or actually my third year—the neurosurgery program, he would ask me—because when I was a general surgeon, we had to rotate to neurosurgery a lot. So they asked me, "Hey, we have an opening, you think you want to do neurosurgery residency?" And I basically told—I said, "Look, sir, I think my wife would divorce me if I'm going to do another residency." [Laughter].

And so I ended up doing—finishing general radiology. And then I had to do another year of IR fellowship. So I ended up doing a total of 10 years. So the longest path of any residence ever in the history of mankind, to where I end up now, so. But in the long run, it helps me because I know a little bit more about general surgery. And so that helps me on an everyday practice with doing interventional radiology.

KIM: And is your first child Lauren Pham, who's a Dartmouth student? Or—

PHAM: No. So she's my second child. My first child is Tyler Pham. To this day, we told Lauren she's actually a third child, because we were pregnant after Tyler, but had a miscarriage when my wife was 14 weeks. And then we had Lauren, and then after that, my wife says "we're done."

But when we had Tyler, I told her, "Look, we're not stopping until you have a girl." And so when Lauren came out, I told my wife, "You're so lucky." [Laughter]. Because I was ready to have like eight kids. [Laughter]. But in the long run, it was hard for us because she was working full time, and I

was doing my 10 year stretch of residency fellowship, and not making a lot of money. So it was hard for my wife to be able to work full time, and still take care of two kids. And so I relented and said, “Okay, we can stop at two.” So, yeah, Lauren is the second child.

KIM: Was there a reason why you wanted a daughter specifically?

PHAM: It's just for my wife, and I told her to this day—we're blessed because my son does the boy things with me, the sports—to this day, we still do a lot of sports together with my son. And my daughter, although she plays golf and do a lot of sports thing with me, she's still the daughter that does the spa thing, the massage thing with my wife, the shopping with my wife. I always tease my wife, “Aren't you glad you have my daughter now?” Because she does the girly thing with my wife. Because when we go on vacation, my son and I are probably doing some sort of sports thing together. And so my daughter is always around my wife to do the girly things—the massage and stuff that my son and I have no interest in doing.

KIM: Do you think the absence of a father figure in your childhood affects the way you are a father now?

PHAM: Oh yeah. It affects every one of my brothers and sisters. We definitely understand the value of a father—a fatherhood for the family and it definitely affects how I want my family to be. And I always try to be there for them. Try to—just to be emotionally and physically there for them, somebody that I didn't have. And I can see that with every one of my brothers also, because we were all in the same boat. We really—none of us had a really father figure. Although the older ones—my oldest brother and sister had more time with him. When his business got big, he just was more absent with us. But my brother and sister—when he started the business, he was more around. But yeah, definitely 100%, I would say because of him, I am the man I am today. Because he wasn't there.

KIM: And do you think your mother's emphasis on academics and the importance of education is rubbing off on the way you raised your children? I mean, Lauren's at Dartmouth, and it's a prestigious institution, so—[laughter]

PHAM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, when we went through school, it was a lot of mainly us who are doing everything. We'd never had PTA, parent teacher conference, because my mom didn't speak the language. There are plenty of times where my brother acted like my dad, walking in. And so, yeah, the importance of education is always stressed with—again, a lot of Asian family as you know, what differs between us and the refugee kids is we pretty much did it on our own, and by the time we had our kids, we kind of knew the system. And so, I always say more or less, because we had the

road map on how to do it, we impart the knowledge on them. “Hey, this is how we do it.” This is how you do it to get where you are today. But yeah, so stressing the importance of education is, as you know, it's very basic with any Asian family.

But we—the refugee kids, would never have an opportunity to go to Dartmouth, no way. Number one, we didn't know what Dartmouth was. We didn't know what Ivy was. Number two, we didn't have the money to get there. Although they have free education these days for first generations and people who are poor. We would have qualified, but there was no way we going this far to go to—you still have to pay for the room and board—I mean, the room and board and food and all that stuff. There was no way we had the opportunities at refugee camps.

So, but yeah, I mean, again, we're blessed. I mean, both of my kids—they take education very seriously. And again, part of it's because we're—the parents stress that education comes first. But even that—that's all upon them to make sure they're doing the right things. So, I mean, we're blessed with both. They're both very good kids.

KIM : I guess do you—in terms of raising your children, do you have other things that you want to kind of stress, I guess, family traditions, culture? Is there anything else you kind of stressed when you were raising your children?

PHAM: Yeah, I mean, we tried to raise them to make sure they still understand the culture. And I'm thankful that my wife know more about the culture than I do. Her dad was very strict. Her dad made sure that she knows how to read and write. Although I had two years of Vietnamese school, so I had some basic of reading and writing, but not to the—but I don't understand to the level that she does. I can read words, but I don't understand the meaning of it. And so my wife can still read and write and she still knows more the traditional traditions, the Vietnamese traditions, especially the new year stuff.

And so we try and impart them to know the tradition, to pass it upon to them, the traditions. And so when we raised them, we spoke English to them predominantly when they were young. They were very good speaking the native language. The problem is, once they start going to school, they lost it all, right? It's because all the kids speaks English, and for a while we still try to stress them Vietnamese, and speak to them even when they're in kindergarten, first grade. But soon after that, it was just them coming to school just kind of overpowers because they have to learn the language, read and write and stuff like that. Now, they still can understand—speak very broken Vietnamese. But they try their best.

But you know, tradition-wise, we do still try to impart them to all the traditions of all the different holidays, especially the New Years and stuff. So they know it. And so we're just hoping to keep our fingers crossed that they can pass it upon, whatever they can remember, to the next generation. But it's hard. It's hard. I'm sure you're going through the same thing too—of trying to know the traditions. Of newer generations. It's hard when you're here in America.

KIM: And do you tell them your stories from the past as well?

PHAM: Yeah, yeah. They've heard it multiple times, and each time, it always starts, “When I was your age,” that sort of stuff that they always say, “Oh, dad, your typical stuff.” So to this day they could probably recite some of the stuff. I try to—just to make sure they remember it, because it is a part of their tradition. It is a part of their life. And we took them back to Vietnam a couple times now. Even for me, it's different. For them, it's going to be—going to be a whole lot more different for them too.

KIM: How was going back to Vietnam for the first time after living in the US?

PHAM: Yeah, that was interesting Because—you see the people in—you miss the people you miss, the culture and everything. But to me, it didn't feel like home. Because I was raised in America and everything was just a little bit different. I didn't feel like home. To my kids, I'm assuming for them, it's just another tourist country that they’re going to. But we try to show them, “Hey, this is where we came from,” and try to show them a little bit of the culture and stuff. But, yeah, it was interesting. To tell you the truth, to me, I can relate more to the American stuff than all the Vietnamese stuff, for sure.

KIM: Did you go to Saigon? And when was this?

PHAM: Yeah, we went in 2010? No, they were a little older, maybe 2011, I think. So we want to make sure they were a little bit older to understand a little bit. And so we took a tour, and we went to seven cities in 14 days. That was kind of rushed I think. But back then, we didn't have very much money, but we wanted to make sure we wanted to see everything.

And interesting because at that time—when we went the first year, we didn't know that we needed to have a visa to visit Vietnam. That's how out of touch we were with the country. And so we show up to the airport, and the guy at the airport counter says, “Let me see your visa.” So I pull out my credit card visa. He's like, “No, where's your passport visa?” I'm like, I pull out my passport. He's like, “No, you need a visa.” I'm like, “What are you talking about?” And we didn't know that we needed to have a visa and

so stupid me didn't know that you can get a visa when you land. And so we didn't get it onto the plane altogether. So that was the first year.

Then, we tried to go the following year. We actually had everything and got on the plane this time. And it brought a lot of back up memories, but this is a memory of a 7 year old kid. I don't remember much of—we went to Saigon, and supposedly that's where—we stopped by where my dad's newspaper press was, but I don't remember that. We stopped by the church that we always go to, I remember that. But trying to show the kids and of course, they had no attachment to anything that we showed them. But it was good to see. And then we just went back again two years ago—no this past year, actually—on a cruise boat. There, we stopped in Saigon, Đà Nẵng and Hạ Long Bay. And so this time, they understand the country a little bit more and try to enjoy it a little bit more. But yeah, so we've been back twice now.

KIM: Were your parents accompanying you as well?

PHAM: No, so my dad passed away, and my mom, unfortunately, she's of older age and dementia is setting in, and she can't walk at all. She's reliant on a walker, but very little short steps that she can take. And so, it's just my family and my kids and we usually go with my wife's sister's family, and so—because, their kids and our kids get along very well, so we usually vacation together. And so the two trips—we take a lot of trips together. So the two trips to Vietnam, we were together. But my parents did not make it with us.

KIM: On a kind of final note of the interview, I wanted to ask: you've had the time to go back to Vietnam. I mean, you've probably definitely had a lot of opportunities to learn about the Vietnam War and the refugee experience. I guess overall, with that in mind, do you have any thoughts on the war and the aftermaths of the war?

PHAM: Yeah. I was telling Professor [Edward] Miller, I always said there is no real winner in any war, right? The people that suffers the most is always the regular, everyday people. I mean, most of us didn't understand why there was a war. I mean, we understand the basic concept, the communists, and all that stuff.

But on an everyday level, most of us were just trying to go on with our life, trying to provide for our family. And because the war impacted millions of people—displaced millions of people, I'm not supposed to be in America. And unfortunately, history always repeats itself. Every decade or so, we have a war—I mean now, you talk about Ukraine, where you displace 10 million Ukrainians to other parts of the country. And it just brings back memory to what we went through. And so, to the everyday people, we still

see the effect of the war and stuff, but we all are saddened that the cause and the effect of the war.

KIM: Any final thoughts before we end the interview?

PHAM: Thank you very much for the interview. You definitely brought back memories that have been hidden in the back of my brain for a long time, and you just pushed it out to the forefront today. And so I appreciate that. Hopefully this gives you the perspective of what my aspect of what a refugee went through. I'm sure the other refugee stories are pretty much similar and looking forward to what the end result with this is going to be.

KIM: Yeah, thank you so much for being willing to be vulnerable and sharing your story today. Thank you.

PHAM: Thanks Alice. Appreciate it.

[End of interview.]