

Name of Interviewer: Kelvin Wang

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Name of person Interviewed: Kenneth Tran

Relationship to interviewer, if any: Friend's dad

Name Transcript

File 1

06:00 AM

Ken Yeah, when I grew up I'm in Quang Ai, Vietnam.

0:25

Kelvin So what was your life like as a child?

Ken When I'm a child, I'm be in school, you know then play, then help parents.

Kelvin So you say you played less when you were a kid right? Does that mean you had to help more?

Ken Help more, yeah. I had to help more than American kid, a lot of help for help family.

Kelvin Okay, so how long each day do you help your parents and how long each day do you play?

Ken How many hours a day? Something like that? We help parents at least after school have six hours? We help at least two three hours a day.

Kelvin We talked about the discipline when you were younger? What would happen when you did something wrong?

Ken When I did something wrong I get very scared of parents, I mean we get fined, we get problem, I mean he can whip me up, or fine me to the corner to kneel down, or do something or maybe a lot of you know... Trouble.

Kelvin So what was your typical day in Vietnam? Like what do you do every day? Like you say you go to school?

Ken I go to school, when I was a child I'm a child I go to school, and then go home help parent...and play, a little bit

2:18

Kelvin Did you have to work when you were younger?

Ken Well younger was really not have to work, you know just go to school and you know same thing occupation... when we grow up to fifteen or seventeen do I have to work? Too. But its not like work adults, school and work but not really work full time.

Kelvin Let's see so were you in any cultural organization?

Ken You mean like become Catholic or something like that? Our culture was worship generation, worship in family. You know worship, like...parents pass away and children worship then generation worship you know, older generation.

Kelvin ...and is that something that you guys still do?

Ken still do, my parents still worship, I came to visit my parents four times and he still worships, every New Years, you know New Year, and um the day, remember parent pass away.

Kelvin Is there anything you have to wear when you go worship?

Ken My father wear the uniform, long[] uniform, How you say..my English not...Ao Dai..

4:12

Ken (translated) ...we make offerings, and we worship and pray to the ancestors so that they will pray for us.

Ken Now I talk two language can I talk two language?

Kelvin Yeah, you can talk two language.

Ken Maybe we speak two language and you can translate it.

Kelvin So did you practice any traditional arts?

Ken Yeah, I practice a little bit not much.

Kelvin Okay what about as a community did you guys do anything like every Sunday go worship like that?

Ken We don't, no I used to every Sunday we don't when I a child we don't. I just walk to school and help we don't, don't walk to church every Sunday.

5:20

Ken The people that are of Catholic religion will go to the church but the people that aren't Catholic--the Buddhists pray to ancestors and don't attend church. They worship and pray at home.

File 2

00:00

Kelvin Okay so where did you live during the war?

Ken During the war, I'm in the city of Quang Hai (translated) and then had to run away from the war to avoid the bullets and then I'd return back to my home in the city. Move out and move back.

Kelvin So, every time you guys move out you would come back to the original city?

Ken Yeah come back original city, move out about like half an hour or one hour or a couple of hours, then we stay there ten days, four, five days then we go back. That mean when peace then we come back, but not really peace, when quiet then we come back, when war comes then we go again.

Ken (translated) I was young and it was difficult. I had to flee from my house.

Kelvin Did you finally have to move out of the house?

Ken Yeah, we had to move out of the house. Everyone had to flee from the house and go different place where it was quiet and peaceful. Every body leaves the house. Move the out the house. Go different place. The place quite and peace and we stay there a couple of days some times four, five days sometimes ten days, sometimes a month.

Kelvin So, when you guys move out do you guys move as a whole family? Or do you go to different place?

Ken We move the whole family but sometime we got trouble because of war. Sometimes we stuck one brother there, one mother there, then later we call; we lot of trouble that time.

Ken (translated) We fled and the whole family would go but we wouldn't all stay in one place. Brothers and sisters had to split up and go in separate ways. Then, we would find each other and meet up again.

2:40

Kelvin Did you stay in Vietnam throughout the whole war?

Ken We stayed in Vietnam through the whole war, yes. Through 1975, from 1960 to 1975 that was a long time.

Kelvin Very long time. What did you work as during the war?

Ken During the war, really I'm work as fisherman. Yeah, fisherman in the war. I'm working in two, three city. City Quang Hai, City Que Huong, City Phan Thiet, City Vuong Tau, City Long Dien Ba Ria, City Phuc Tinh...back then I was a fisherman.

Kelvin Where in Vietnam are these cities?

Ken The cities, I'm work in the central. (translation) It wasn't the north. I lived in the south. South Vietnam. My city is in the south but close to the East. East close to Da Nang, you know Quang Hai close to Danang, then move to Que Huong, after that moved to Vuong Tau, that's in south. South Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City, Saigon City, before it's Saigon 1975 it's Saigon City, they call it Saigon. You know now it's Ho Chi Minh but before it's Saigon.

Kelvin Were you involved in the war? Did you have to do any fighting?

4:38

Ken In the war, I'm short term, I'm not really fighting but I have to hold gun M-15 gun. I had to hold the gun to guard Can Gac. I had to stand guard for two hours at a time. Watching for viet cong but a lot of the time we couldn't kill them. You know if I see him, if I see him run around a lot, but he say we don't, we don't kill, we kill, we get killed all, because they a lot. Then, so hold gun and just watch them. You know have to hold the gun all the time.

Kelvin So in your case you're not actually in the real army, you're just in the community...

Ken Yes, community city...

Kelvin Let's see, did you have any family that was involved in the war?

Ken Yes, my brother he was in Su Dong Ho. He was in East close to Hue. My older brother went to Laos and fought in Laos. He fought in my city and he fought all around. He's the real war, he play the real war. My brother, my older brother.

Kelvin Okay, so he was a soldier, which side did he decide to join on?

Ken South Vietnam, yeah he is South Vietnam. Vietnamese army, army President Nguyen Van Thieu. That mean American help Vietnamese, not Communist not that kind. (translation) He was part of the Republic of Vietnamese Soldiers. In Quang Hai, Da Nang then there was fighting, fighting with communists but he's okay.

Kelvin Did you ever see American soldiers?

Ken Yes, community city...

Kelvin Okay what did you think of them?

Ken When I was younger, American soldiers came to my country a lot. But we were very happy we were very pleased to see the Americans. Very happy we say hello to them when we child, when they came we were ten

or something like that. (translate) When we were young and saw the American soldiers, we were very pleased and waived "Hello" to the Americans. We waved because we couldn't speak English.

Ken We don't speak English we just say something like, "Hello, Hello" and we wave and we were very happy that they stay at our village. Every children very happy with soldier American.

Kelvin You talked a little bit about how the war affected you and your family?

Ken [looks confused about question]

Kelvin Okay let's say your dad was a fisherman in Quang Hai, let's say during the war you guys have to change?

Ken During the war, my daddy still living in Quang Hai, he work Quang Hai, he still worked fisherman. But I'm moving, I'm move to four, or five city. After the war...still during the war I'm move to four or five city to work as fisherman.

Kelvin Did he tell you to move?

Ken He not tell me to move but this time I'm look like a young man then I'm volunteer to move because I'm not safe to stay there.

Kelvin Okay, because you might have to join the army?

Ken Yeah join the army... before then after then go back home then go to work. Then go to work but different city. I'm move to Que Nhung, Nha Trang, Phan Thiet, Da Nang, Phan Ri, Vuong Tau. I'm move a lot when I was young I'm move a lot. I'm move here, move there, move, move, move, there. One year move further south.

Kelvin But your dad always stayed?

Ken My dad always stayed in Quang Hai.

10:21

Kelvin What do you remember the most about that time?

Ken I remember the most is 19...the war very heavy... that's a good question... I'm in the war 40 years ago this year. 1968 Mao Tung, that's a good story here. Mao Tung war a lot of problem, the communists from the North came to the South and the fire and they killed many, many people, they killed many, many Hue...many, many Hue...talk about many people crying. They came from North, from Hue they came my place Quang Hai, then that time I'm in school, ah no, we have to move the whole family, then fighting, oh a lot...that mean just new year...New year people then, people crying, people pass away, die and too many... they killed too many people, and now they just memorizing this year. That's forty year that's the bad for remember war. 1968.

Kelvin And that was just right there in your city?

Ken In my city, and a little bit out farther about seven hours and they kept following out here. From 1968 Que Sun, Hue city, Da Nang, Quang Nam, Quang Ay, Que Nhun, Binh Dinh, they fire from the east from Quang Hai, Que Yung, go back to east. Hue, east. A lot of people know about this. I really see many communist come and get killed too. The soldiers from army and nationals they kill both. Kill a lot. I could see about twenty killed in the morning laid out in the morning. Walk past they kill and watch them and the tank. Put bomb and all the house burn down, then they run many people crying and our city destroy. All Quong Hai, my city (translate) the place that I live doesn't have any more homes...everything was destroyed by the tanks. All houses look like sand...nothing left. The whole village was burned down. All land left. Bomb down and fight all and a lot of fight. Destroy all... all land. That mean the bomb on top because they coming down there and soldiers American up there they put bomb down, fire all... and fire a lot of fire.

Kelvin So the actual bombs that actually took down your house was American bombs?

Ken Must be Americans, must be, but they fight all, then they drop down for communist die and that mean the fire up. So that mean yeah something like that so you know...before we just move, but after probably soldier from Vietnam put bomb down, but they can't burn the house until somebody put something down.

Kelvin What is it Napalm or something like that?

Ken (translation) some type of gun and grenades and helicopters... I remember the trenches would be dug up to my shoulders--four feet. And communists would run away from the helicopters in the trenches.

Kelvin Where you can just snake in and out?

Ken Yeah snake in and out. I used to have...my daddy in Quang Hai, my daddy make the bomb shelter. The basement L. He would dig the bomb shelter in the shape of an L. When the bombs were fired at us, we would have to hide in the shelter. When I'm a child, I go down I'm ten or nine. We hear the sound HOOOOOO... BAM! Bomb, we had to sleep in the shelter, the basement, wood on top, and then sand on top...whole family had to come in there...my daddy have one and I'm the one to move in there many times. Move inside and stay in there until don't hear any bombs, we come and breath.

Kelvin It's not very big right?

Ken It's very little; it's this big, about the size of the dining table about four feet.

Kelvin So the whole family had to come in here?

Ken The whole family had to come in there.

Kelvin How many people are in your family?

Ken That time nine people. You have to stay very tight, you know but there's sand, and very dangerous. Sometimes the communist soldiers would go down into these basements and shoot the families. That's why we made the L shaped. Because if it was straight, the communist soldiers would just shoot straight forward and kill the entire family. We stayed in the corner of the L.

Ken They have a gun, and if we don't make L we get killed when they come in and they knock, knock and they kill inside. That's why many people get killed straight in basement already that's why we have to stay around the corner right there. Go in here everybody stay right here. They question, they shoot straight, the gun it shoots right here.

Kelvin Did anybody ever get caught? Or get locked up?

Ken No family not. Just my brother, no problem at all. Yeah, he fine. After he get out of war he fine.

Kelvin Did any one have to go to the reeducation camp? I think it's the one that the Viet Cong ran where they teach you how to live under Communism?

Ken Probably, my dad probably yes, but me, I'm lucky I'm not there not take me after '75 I'm gone. You know '72 then I move to many place, then I don't stay with the Communist. Probably my daddy and some my brother because the Quang Hai with the army. After real army I'm move so I'm not visit him a lot.

Kelvin So they don't tell you about that?

Ken Family will tell. Sometimes family just tell story. Well, we stay with the Communist, they against Americans a lot. Communist very upset American. They wanna kill American. They always upset with American because they say American kill their family, you know their people. So my parents just talk like that just have stories of war in...well my parents tell story in Japan too. Talk like that with Japan war too. Was 19...but I'm not born, or I probably was just one year. My parents came to Quang Hai and jump up to...that time fight too. And that time I'm little--too little--I'm just one year so I dunno. They just talk story.

20:48

Kelvin Did any of you're family suffer disabilities because of the war?

Ken Yeah they very suffer, yeah suffer a lot. We suffered a lot during the war. That mean the East place, VERY troubled, more than South, South Vietnam too, we are South, we are not North, North means communist but we very suffer. VERY its some time we don't have enough food...and

you know when we are in the war my mom give me the cloth... (translate) she just kept in rice inside. And carry around and we put it together and cook and eat in a rice pot. But from cloth, we wear across our chest. And you give to someone to cook otherwise you get hungry, then problem. So I'm the one to carry all around the neck. My mother kept it wrapped. If you lost this way or lost that way then you have to move. Then I'm missing too, I have the rice in there...with friend I take the rice out and I give it to him and we put in the fan. Put it in pot and cook and eat together...I carry that and all my brother.

Kelvin So everybody has to carry their own?

Ken Their own, yeah their own. My mother made because the war. When move war, she always ready to make by hand...this one, then cut by hand...then put the rice and drop into and wrap and put here. Go carry like belt, boy across on the neck, then move in, we don't know. That's why I say when you stop place you give that rice to people to put in the pot to cook together, and just that like that.

Kelvin You stayed there a little bit after the war right?

Ken Yes.

Kelvin So how was life like then?

Ken Well I'm stay after the war. After the war 1968 still you know after war but still very suffer, still bad, still hungry, too many people get hungry, my daddy we don't have, sometimes some day when we not working we don't have enough food, I have to eat less than I ate...half, because my mother don't have the money. So I just eat two bowl or just one and a half bowl. Supposed to eat three bowl for when boy for get full. But some day I eat just one or one and a half because my mother said we don't have more food. So everybody don't eat. Yeah, stop eat. That's very suffer when after the war. Very problem. Then, we all walking because of fight sometimes a couple of weeks, fight then we don't know what we do. Sometimes hungry, like my family, when I'm move to different city, my sister told me they have to eat the root...tree. Eat the root tree, don't have the food. Eat the root tree like that and just drink water. Yeah because the war is no money. Very suffer, you talk about that and many people cry.

25:30:00

Kelvin Let's talk about Immigration. You said you left Vietnam in 75?

Ken I left Vietnam in 1975 airport; thirty. Then you want me to tell first place, second place? The first place we stopped in Philippines we stop in Philippines for one day. (translation) One day I live in the Philippines then the people transferred the ship over to Guam. We were flow on airplanes to Guam. Put in airplane to Guam. You know put our whole family to Guam. We stay in Guam two and a half months. We stay in Guam and line up and that time American help. American help all the refugee. Then

the move us to Elgin, Florida, you know Florida then we stay there three months. Three months there and after...there we stay there we eat a month and a half you know they support our food and everything, we just stay there... you know refugee. And they moved us to Arkansas, Fort Jeffrey, Fort Jeffrey, Arkansas we stay there couple of months. We stay there April 30 to November and sponsor from Catholic. Yeah, sponsor from Catholic sponsor all, many refugee have to move out to the camp. We stay in the camp. So the first place I'm arrive, we stay in Mississippi, Jackson, Mississippi, the first place. Then that time, we stay there I'm work. First I have to work the sponsor Catholic work in restaurant. Work and clean up the restaurant. So my brother in law and me work in there. So I work in there for a few months than I'm looking for a new job. Then I'm training for upholstery. Then, upholstery I work about seven months in Mississippi then my mother-in-law family they want to move to Texas, move to Houston, TX. Then we have to go out here. We move down here then first 1976. 1976 then me and my brother go to school again, college at night and training mechanics training machinist, training welding, I'm do work sometime two jobs, I work Kroger too, helping move, in Montrose. Then, after that then I'm still study at night. Working machinist at night but the same time...I'm work two job, one upholstery, that time they pay three dollars an hour. Then I keep study, study English at night ESL. Then I'm keep welding, you know study welding in Blalock, Houston. I'm looking for the job but still hard. So still is hard. You know hard to get the job to you know I'm get the same salary. So I'm staying with this business. I learn upholstery pretty quick. I make good job. I think its hard and I just keep my job since there are two here. In 1984 I open my own shop. You know that means small, I work for somebody five years. I work for the American man, then he retire, and I open my own shop. Very, very small but I work with the one helper and later 1985, my work for [unintelligible] then she get laid off. Then she come back work for me. Work together with me we both work and we have the business and we have three employees. Then work upholstery real good since then we make pretty good money, we work for very high quality, you know all antique furniture, and people all in Houston very good. 1990 we moved to Sugar Land, I'm stay in Bellaire. We bought a little house there in Bellaire, our children growing up, all four children, Cathy, Huang, Jon Tran, and Sam Tran, that time in elementary school. We thought the good place we move Sugar Land, for good schools elementary schools, and Clements High School in Sugar Land. We build this house in 1990. Very new from Newmark house. So I'm still have a house in Montrose, you know that's the workshop. Before I had a shop but now I moved out to the house. For shop just work for retirement. Play work. You know it's not real hard work, it's just play. Work just so, so, not work real hard like before. Like many year I'm work very hard, very hard at work. Many hours, from six to six twelve hours a day. Upholstery here, then I love my job. Upholstery means very good work for me. Then I love this job and people say I'm the very best upholsterer in town. That's what people say. Then I work for many designers in Houston. I used to work for Mark Hampton when Bush president, you know Bush daddy. I used to work for Lloyd Benson too, but he passed away already. From two of the designer

but we work many people. Lot of antique furniture. [some names] quite a bit people in Houston. Furniture, that's my job.

34:02:00

Kelvin Why did you decide to come to America?

Ken Oh, in 1975 war and you know during the war we do not know we come America. We just thinking we go somewhere else. Go on the island will be bad. But after we leaving from Vung Tau. We riding the big boat the boat about 30 ft 35 ft boat. That time I'm driving the big boat. We driving the boat for about 3 or 4 hours then American big ship they pick us up. They pick all of us, and then we destroy our boat. Have to destroy because left boat there on the sea. When I was in the middle of the ocean, an American ship came and picked us up onto their ship and took us to the Philippines and then to Guam. Really we do not know we come America. We do not know, we just leave and American took us to come over here. We not decide we go American. I do not know American before. We not in Vietnam and decide become American. American take refugee.

Kelvin So you guys all got on a boat and left Vietnam.

Ken Right we all left Vietnam in a boat in 1975. We the first some people left after '78 and a lot of problem too.

Kelvin Out of the boat people there were a hundred thousand who left Vietnam during that time.

Ken Yeah...in 1978 a lot of trouble from Thailand, we lucky we left, we America, after 6 hours Americans pick us up. We don't have to travel a lot of danger at all. Yeah, we don't have all that problems. But we did not know we would become American, we are refugees. So American they already have a plan to pick us up. (translation) At that time the president let us come to America.

37:00:00

Kelvin What did you bring with you onto that ship?

Ken When I came to the ship, really I don't bring nothing, just clothes. Might have some gold, a little bit, but not much. Nothing. Just a couple of clothes. That's all. Don't have nothing.

37:46:00

Kelvin So did you have a choice to come to the United States?

Ken I mean no choice.

Kelvin So once you got picked up by the ship did they ask you "do you want to come to the United States?"

Ken They already had a plan. Yeah we no choice, left me no choice. They move us to come America. We no choice we say no or yes. Well in the boat then they bring you over here. Nobody know where we going! You know some people go to different place. Different country. But we are lucky we come to America.

38:39:00

Kelvin You came to the United States as a refugee status, not because you had a family.

Ken Not because we had family we were refugees.

Kelvin ...and you said you were one of the earlier ones?

Ken That mean the first one, some people earlier too if they have relationship with the American. But we are not related to American but we the first after 1975. That means the days the war we move out. Some people move out after '76, '77, '78, '80 they still come, come. Because after they stay with Communists, a lot were hungry, a lot of trouble. But I'm lucky I leave early.

39:34:00

Kelvin What kind of questions were you asked when you applied to immigrate? Like did the soldiers ask you questions?

Ken Immigration? You mean in the boat? Or after came America?

Kelvin All of it.

Ken That time just soldiers they really don't ask. They know already that we are refugees. American soldiers don't ask about immigration. You talking about when becoming American citizen? Oh well...that time when you become American citizen.

41:00:00

Kelvin Did you have to see a doctor or anything like that?

Ken Yeah that time I'm have to see a doctor. That time we were at camp, one day I have the very problem, stomach, I have to lie and they checked my health. Doctor in the camp they helped. Doctor, dentist, you know, all around.

Kelvin Did they have to check you to make sure that you are okay to come to the United States?

Ken Yes they check. Check up when came to United States. (translate) They checked my health. They do real good before we come America.

42:17:00

Kelvin What was the hardest thing about starting a new life here in America?

Ken Okay the hardest thing about starting a new life here, that mean you study English. English is the hardest. We hard working from Vietnam, so we don't have a problem by hand with work you know. But hardest for us--English. Study English is difficult. Very difficult, the hardest.

Kelvin My dad can speak alright, but I have an aunt who's been here for thirty years...can't speak English.

Ken Yeah it's hard, hard for me. Even my wife, she still not speak English well at all. Maybe, "hello, how are you?" That's why in some my business, I know all words for that. In different world here I'm in trouble sometimes. Like you speak normal its okay. But go inside, experience, in different papers or something, different job...different business so different name, English is not the same, you know like if you go education and for school so you know from beginning all like first grade to twelfth and you all you reading so you know they know, but for me and my wife we still get in trouble. We have to look at the scenario, this scenario means look this way that way. We still get in trouble. That's why every time we scared to sign any thing you know. Because sometimes in America here you sign, then maybe later you said yes or no then they say yes you did here sign, then we scared.