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Name of Person Interviewed (or pseudonym): Vinh Mong Tran

Name	Transcript
<i>00:00:01</i>	
Sehjong	Your name please.
Vinh	Vinh Tran.
Sehjong	Can you describe what your profession is?
Vinh	I am an attorney, been licensed for about thirteen years.
Sehjong	How old are you?
Vinh	I'm forty now.
Sehjong	What's your date of birth?
Vinh	January 12, 1968.
Sehjong	Where you born?
Vinh	I was born in Saigon, Vietnam. And January of '68, I believe it was January 31 st of 1968 was the Tet Offensive, and that's the bloodiest day, I believe, in the history of that war for American soldiers.
Sehjong	How old were you when you left Vietnam?
Vinh	I was seven years old.
Sehjong	What area of Vietnam did you grow up?
Vinh	I grew up in Saigon, and then moved out to a little suburb towards the coast called Nha Be but it's still considered part of Saigon.
Sehjong	What was it like where you grew up?
Vinh	It was, in Saigon we're in the middle of the city like New York City. But Nha Be was more of a countryside, and the roads were smaller, the homes were smaller, but it felt like I was in the country in Nha Be although it's only miles away from Saigon.

Sehjong Who did you live with?

Vinh I lived, in Saigon, we lived with my father's parents, my grandparents. And in Nha Be it was just our family. Most of the time it was my father, my mother, me, one younger brother, one younger sister, and then we had a baby brother right before 1975.

Sehjong What are they're names?

Vinh My father's name is Hien Tran, spelled H-I-E-N Tran, T-R-A-N; my mother's name is Phu P-H-U, last name is Le L-E. My younger brother's name is Canh Tran, C-A-N-H Tran. Sister's name is Chilan, C-H-I-L-A-N Tran, and baby brother's Tai Tran, T-A-I T-R-A-N.

Sehjong Tell me a little bit more about growing up as a child, about your education in Vietnam.

Vinh I went to school for about two years in Vietnam, kindergarten was good, we went to a private school. And I believe I went to some first grade because I remember that kindergarten was the only time you could use a pencil. First grade you started using pen. I had also went a little bit in public school, but most of the time it was private school.

Sehjong Tell me about your private school experience. That was actually the first school you attended, right?

Vinh Yes, private school was the first school. It was a Catholic school and I'd never been exposed to Christianity. But, all the students were required to go to have some small Mass right before you could go out to recess. So, that's when I first saw a cross and statue of Mary and Jesus. And at the end of the day the Buddhist kids would get to go home, the Catholic kids would have to stay and do other things. So I was one of the ones that got to go home early.

Sehjong How did they determine who got to go home early? How did they know whether you were Buddhist or Catholic?

Vinh They had an older kid stand at the gate and somehow that older kid knew, you're a Catholic, you're not. And I couldn't tell the difference, but most of the time he knew I wasn't Catholic. One day he mistaken'd me for being Catholic so he sent me back upstairs and I had to stay around some more and attended church a little more than I was supposed to.

Sehjong How old were you during this time?

Vinh I was probably six.

Sehjong Tell me more about this Catholic school, what the lessons were and how you liked it.

Vinh Classrooms were small. The nuns taught, they were Vietnamese nuns. I thought that the school looked really clean and what you'd envision private schools to be. In good order and new building and they had a good playground.

Sehjong Did you have any bully experiences in the Catholic school?

00:05:00

Vinh Not in the Catholic school. Actually in Catholic school, we would play marbles and when we play, you buy your marbles, but when you play and you lose, you lose your marble to the other person. And so that was the game we would play, collect marbles and if you were good at playing it, you collected more marbles. So, there was no bullying but there was a little bit of gambling going on as a kindergarten student or first grader at Catholic school.

Sehjong What happened when you had to transition to a public school?

Vinh Public school was much more dangerous. There were a lot of unruly kids, bullies. And the teachers at the public school, one of the strangest things I've ever saw was in the middle of class if a student wanted to buy a piece of candy or something from the teacher, the teacher would stop the lecture, sell the piece of candy, and then back to the lecture he goes. And I always thought, "wow, it's more important to sell candy than it is to teach you a lesson." But that was the finances of a public school teacher, they had to do that.

Sehjong You said that the buildings were newer at the Catholic school, how did they measure up at the public school?

Vinh Oh, the public school buildings were old, dirty, looked dangerous, looked unkempt. And I wouldn't go into that building unless I knew that was a school and there were adults in there, it just didn't look safe.

Sehjong Why did you have to go to a public school?

Vinh At some point in time I think my parents may have ran out of money. And I had to switch over to a public school for a while.

Sehjong And did you have a bullying experience there?

Vinh Yeah, I had a bully there. And everyday he'd come up to me and say I owe him money for something I don't remember. And I thought if I pay him I'd get rid of him, but every time I'd paid him, he wouldn't remember. And so, I really don't remember how I got rid of him. But I knew that there's a guy that would never remember that I'd already paid him.

Sehjong But you just said that he'd eventually left you alone, or was this an ongoing process till you had left the school?

Vinh My time there was so short I don't remember what happened. I don't remember if he just stopped and went to somebody else or if I stopped going to that school. But it was a very short time. I don't remember a lot of public school. I don't even remember my teachers; I don't remember what they taught me.

Sehjong What was your first experience of the war in Vietnam, did you know a war was going on when you were living there?

Vinh Yeah, I knew there was a war going on. Lots of things. Everyday at night, there's only one channel on TV and it comes on certain time of the day, so you listen to the war news. The adults listen, so I learned about it. Then there's times where when I'd walk down the street in Saigon and I heard planes overhead. Everyone talked about the war. The war was what's going on there so every kid knew we're in a war.

Sehjong During this time, through the eyes of a child, what were your concepts of this war, what did you think about it?

Vinh I thought that somehow we were fighting a different country. That the enemy looked different. They may speak the same language, but they weren't Vietnamese. We had different names we'd call them, [unintelligible], and they dressed differently. So, even though we knew it was North Vietnam and it's really one country, I always thought that they were somebody else. They couldn't have been, the people from the north couldn't be like the people from the south and that they had to be different that's why we were at war.

Sehjong Did you ever see any of the North Vietnamese soldiers?

Vinh I never saw the soldiers, never saw what they looked like, not when I was there, no.

Sehjong But did you see them later on, you said not when you were there?

Vinh I'd see pictures of them as I came to the U.S., but before that, I'd never saw them in Vietnam.

Sehjong Tell me about what your father did for a living.

Vinh My father was in the Navy and he did, in the later years he was a patrol, he patrolled the river there for illegal sales of gasoline or any items that are going on at the river. So, he was pretty much just a police on water, and that was his role in the Vietnamese Navy.

00:10:10

Sehjong So obviously your father was South Vietnamese military person?

Vinh Yes, he was, he was a South. He served in the military in his younger days and he was probably about 25, 26, 27 toward the end of the war and

that's when he got the job as a military police of the coastal region there of Saigon.

Sehjong And what was the name of the river?

Vinh I believe it was the Saigon River, but I'm not sure. I think Saigon River goes through Saigon.

Sehjong Did you're father, was he an enlisted, an officer?

Vinh He was an enlistee, he wasn't an officer. I don't believe he went to college and did all that for the military. I believe he was just an enlisted.

Sehjong Was he high enlisted, or did you know the rank?

Vinh No, he wasn't very high ranking. I don't think he had enough years in the military to get up that high. He was pretty low on the totem pole.

Sehjong What about your mom, what did she do?

Vinh She was a housewife mostly. Like most women back then, you stayed home if you could afford to and if you can't you went to the market and sold things. And I remember during the tough times when they were poor, she would have to go to the market and sell items to earn a little bit of money.

Sehjong Did you ever come across any other South Vietnamese military?

Vinh You'd see them in the streets. The military was like the police, there was no delineation. I don't think there was, there may have been some delineation, but in the minds of a child at that time the police and the military are the same people.

Sehjong How did they dress, how did you know they were involved in the military?

Vinh They'd have their uniform, and probably a gun with them. We didn't see a lot of them, but we'd see them every now and then.

Sehjong Did you come in contact with any U.S. soldiers?

Vinh Never saw U.S. soldiers, not until the escape. So while I was living there, I never saw an American.

Sehjong While you were still in Vietnam, how did the war affect you and your family?

Vinh I think it's made me a more of a peaceful person as an adult. I saw the dangers of war, I saw, I knew, I had heard about many people who had their sons go off to war and they don't come back. It was just a constant reminder that you, tonight something could happen, there could be some bombs. One of the saddest, or one of the best songs of all time for me

was a song about a soldier dying and coming back to visit his wife for one last time. And I heard that at five or six, and I understood the song. And, I think it has to affect you, when you're that young. And you know that if things don't change, one day you're going to be that soldier, going to war, and you don't know if you'll come back.

- Sehjong** So, when you were listening to that song did you actually think that if the war would continue, that you would actually be involved as fighting in it, did you actually, were you able to conceptualize that as a child?
- Vinh** Yeah I did, at six I knew one day it would be my turn. And the end of the war never, it wasn't a possibility, we didn't talk about when it would end. It was always, there's going to be a war and I thought one day I would be one of those carrying a gun.
- Sehjong** How did that make you feel?
- Vinh** [pause] I don't know, scared? But I pushed it off in my memory to where I knew it was years away and when I thought that when it'd be my turn that I would hold a gun and that would be that. But until then I could enjoy my life.
- Sehjong** As a child in Vietnam, what do you remember most about that time period?
- 00:14:56*
- Vinh** [pause] Everything about life, daily life, in Vietnam had to do with the war and the American's influence on the war. Every bit of news that came out was about a battle. Everything that happened was, "what are the Americans doing to help us now?" And so I never saw an American but I knew that America had a big influence on my daily life. And I never saw the war but I knew that everything that happened in my daily life was affected by the war, was influenced by that war.
- Sehjong** Did your father ever come home and tell you anything about the war or his experiences while you were in Vietnam?
- Vinh** He never told me about his fighting days. But as far as when he was on his patrol, I overheard him say that they found three dead bodies of North Vietcong. And somehow in my mind's eye, I envisioned them looking different, just wearing different clothes and being less than human.
- Sehjong** Really, that's interesting, tell me more about that, why you thought that, about the Vietcong.
- Vinh** I think we spoke as a society of them as if they were less than human. And that they were inherently evil or something like that, and that if you saw one you better shoot them or you gotta kill them or they'll kill you.
- Sehjong** Did you know that you were about to leave Vietnam, and if so, how did you find that out?

Vinh Few days before the end of the war I heard the adults talking about it, planning their escape, what they would do, who would go with whom. And my dad actually took his two younger sisters with the family and put us all near the coast. But after a few days at the coast, somehow they decided that maybe the war isn't going to end or if it's going to end it'll end peacefully. So he took the family back to Saigon. But on the 30th when it did end, he rushed back and he was not able to bring the sisters, they weren't around, so he only got the family, our family, and rushed us back to the coast, and we left on the very last day.

Sehjong You said that you didn't really come into contact with the war, but near the end, as the war was approaching Saigon, were you able to experience some of that, and if so, tell me about that.

Vinh There were some nights toward the end there, maybe April or March of 1975 where there were loud bombings near Saigon. And I think our family woke up and we all rushed downstairs and huddled together hoping that no bomb would fall near our home. In looking back, I thought that was kind of silly because if a bomb hit us, it didn't matter what floor we were on, the first or the second, we're gonna be killed or get hurt. But, everybody felt safe if they came downstairs, and so we all came downstairs and listened to the bombs in the near distance and I think that was the only night I heard loud bombing.

Sehjong Was that your only direct experience of the fighting?

Vinh Yeah, that was the only direct experience before the last day, before the escape. And during the escape I saw some military boats, I heard some gunfire. But a lot of that had to do with how people were leaving the country and maybe there were some Vietcong coming down from the North and they may have reached the coast.

Sehjong Why did your family decide to leave?

Vinh My father, being military, he knew that if he'd stayed, he'd either be punished or killed, so there would be no future for our family. So, he knew that he had to leave and he had to find whatever way it was to get his family out.

Sehjong How did he orchestrate that, how did he manage to get that all together?

00:19:43

Vinh Being military police at the coast, he had access to boats. He had access to a speedboat and his superiors told him days before that he should plan that and take care of his family when that happens. And he did, he put a speedboat aside somewhere and when it came time he rushed the family to that speedboat and we used that speedboat to get out to sea where we got on larger boats and eventually got on a ship that was protected by the U.S. military and that's how we got out of Vietnam.

Sehjong Tell me about what you brought with you or what your family was able to bring with them and the logistics of how you guys left. And how far away were you from the speedboat?

Vinh I suspect the speedboat was at the river, at the coast of Saigon, the edge of Saigon where it meets the sea. My grandparents' home, that's where we were, was in the heart of Saigon and he rushed, my father rushed back on his motorcycle. When he got to us he said, "it's time to go." And I remember we were in our finest clothing. [pause] I sat on the very front of the motorcycle on the gas tank, my younger five-year-old brother at the time [pause] sat behind me, [pause] then my dad and my three-year-old sister behind him, and then my mother when she was holding our three-month-old little brother. I think it rained a lot during that day so he rushed through the city with all of us on his motorcycle in the rain to the secret spot that he had hidden the speedboat. And we all got in the speedboat and left.

Sehjong Why were you in your finer clothes? Was it just you or your whole family?

Vinh I think it was the whole family. We had known that we're leaving. In Vietnam at that time, you may have three pairs of clothing. And so you took the best one 'cause that'll last the longest. So, we were in as much clothing as we could get on.

Sehjong So you didn't take suitcases or anything like that? You just basically left with what you had on your backs?

Vinh Yeah, there was no room for suitcases you just had what's on your back and whatever you could carry on your back. I believe my mom may have had a waist belt where she kept some of her money and jewelry with her but everybody else would just wearing the clothes on our back.

Sehjong How long did it take your father to put you on the motorcycle at your grandparent's home and drive that motorcycle to the speedboat and what was it like around you when that was occurring?

Vinh I don't know how fast we were going but it was probably fifteen to thirty minutes. It was chaotic, there were people all over the streets not knowing where to go, what to do, so it was panic. We knew we were going somewhere, we knew we were rushing someplace and other people were doing the same. And then there were people who were just out there lost, they didn't know where they were going, they didn't know what they were doing. But it was chaotic. If you saw in a movie a scene of a war and everyone was running around lost, that was what it was for us in Saigon.

Sehjong During all this commotion, how would you describe the chaos?

Vinh Somehow even though you know there's noise, it was this quiet [pause] motion. Everything looked like it was in slow motion. I knew though, I knew my dad knows where he's going, knows what he's doing 'cause he

was a police officer. I'd seen him on boats, so I know he's getting us on a boat. So we knew where we were going, but we looked around and I wondered if other people knew where they were going. And some officers were still trying to work that day, trying to keep peace and keep people from violating laws, they were still on the job, I saw some of that.

00:24:54

Sehjong

How old were you when that moment happened?

Vinh

A little older than seven years old, maybe three or fourth months older than my seventh birthday.

Sehjong

Through the eyes of a seven year old what was that like, what was going through your mind? Were you afraid or did you have panic as well?

Vinh

I was more in wonderment, "where are we going, what are we going to do?" I knew we were getting on a boat, but from there, what? So, as we got on bigger boats, I knew once we got on a boat that was big enough that we would make it somewhere, probably end up in the U.S. when it was all done. But I didn't know how long it would take or what would happen next.

Sehjong

How did you know that the U.S. would be your final destination? Did somebody sit you down and explain that that's what was happening or did you assume?

Vinh

My whole childhood was surrounded by the U.S. helping us and when we left that way there was no question that we were heading towards the U.S. We weren't going to stay in the Philippines or Singapore or any other country. We just thought, well, we were they're partner in the war, and now that we don't have a country, they've gotta accept us.

Sehjong

So as a seven year old you understood those concepts?

Vinh

Yeah, I understood I was going to America, I wasn't going anywhere else.

Sehjong

And what happened to your grandparents, what happened to them?

Vinh

They stayed behind and they suffered for six, seven years under Communist regime. After we became, my parents became citizens they petitioned for the family's immigration. And they were one of the first ones that were allowed to come. In '83, my grandparents and aunts and uncles immigrated. So they didn't have to go through the boat escape like that of the Boat People. A few of my relatives couldn't wait, so they left and they were with the group we call the Boat People, but most of my relatives were sponsored over and came over on a plane.

Sehjong

Tell me about the experience of when you reached the speedboat that your father had set aside, tell me about what had happened then.

Vinh Once we got to that speedboat, I saw that it was a wooden speedboat, probably about twelve to fifteen feet. And I knew just looking at it that it could go fast and that made me feel safe. Once we got on, they put blankets over us, because of the rain and because they didn't want us to see what was going on. But we felt the movement of the boat, we knew we were going fast. My father and his subordinate drove the boat out to sea and they found a large, I'd say a boat the size of a ferry boat, maybe forty, fifty to eighty feet long, that was traveling out to sea and people were hopping onto that boat. So, everyone that was on the boat was helping other people hop onto it. The way they did that was you'd throw your rope from your little boat onto their bow, was it [unintelligible]? Bow's the back? [unintelligible]

Sehjong I'm not sure.

Vinh I think it was the bow. And as they tied the boats together, the people on the smaller boat would jump across and board the larger boat. And our family made it over safely.

Sehjong How many were on the speedboat, you and your siblings, that's four, and your mother and father, that's six, and then his subordinate, that's seven?

Vinh His subordinate and his wife and their baby. And his subordinate is also his brother-in-law, which is; his wife is my mother's younger sister. So these two guys worked together and they were married to the sisters, so they arranged to leave together. So my aunt had her little baby boy, so our six, plus their three, made it nine people on that little speedboat.

00:29:38
Sehjong How far were you on the speedboat until you got to the larger boat where you threw the rope and had transported yourselves unto the larger boat?

Vinh Wasn't very far. We probably were in that speedboat for maybe fifteen to twenty minutes, thirty minutes max. We were fairly close to the harbor when we saw that boat.

Sehjong How many other people were on the larger boat?

Vinh There were hundred of people on the larger boat. We sat and watched more people come on. I think it was hours that we sat there watching as more people hopped on and hopped on. I think it was late in the afternoon before we found another spot on the boat to go to. But, I saw hundreds of people hop on and then we were not the first few, because once we were on there I saw a lot of people on there already. But sometime in that day I saw a family pretty much like ours that had a little canoe and not a really speedboat, but they made it up to this big boat. And they tied their boat onto ours and they helped the elderly, they helped the grandparents over first, and then the two older kids came over. And then it was their mother's turn and she was holding a baby. She walked and tried to attempt the jump, she didn't make it, and she slipped and went straight into the water. And I saw go straight into the water

holding her baby. I didn't know what's going to happen to her, I don't know that she can swim with the baby in her arm, and at that moment the family cut the rope and stayed behind with her. And then all I could see was two older kids who were probably nine or eleven years old crying with their grandparents, and at that point they don't know if they'll ever see their family again.

Sehjong The family that had cut the rope, they had cut the rope and stayed behind in the canoe?

Vinh Yes, they stayed behind in the canoe. They stayed behind in the canoe I guess to save the mother and child, but I don't know if they'll ever meet up with the other four again.

Sehjong So they're essentially split-up?

Vinh Yes, they're family was split-up.

Sehjong Did you see anyone, other than that get hurt or die from that trip?

Vinh No, that was my only time. That was my only time.

Sehjong How long were you in that larger boat?

Vinh We stayed in that larger boat all the way [movement, attempting to re-adjust the HiMD recorder mic clipped to Vinh's shirt which was beginning to become incorrectly positioned] till we made it to Singapore, and from Singapore they transported us on a cargo ship--

Sehjong Can you just hold it actually? [asking Vinh to hold the HiMD recorder mic instead of leaving it clipped to his shirt since it was becoming incorrectly positioned]

Vinh ...that was hundreds of yards long, and thousands of people were on there. We all found a little spot for our family and we stayed there for the next twenty-something days. We made it into Guam on April 25th, of 1975, I'm sorry, of May 25th, of 1975.

Sehjong How did the people on the boat get food or supplies, how did that work?

Vinh I know that the military kept supplying our ship with food and water and supplies 'cause I saw them transport every few days the food over. And each time we'd wonder okay, what are we getting to eat, what is it that they're dropping off? So we knew that people knew we were out there, they were helping us, they were feeding us, and we knew we were going somewhere. Definitely our captain knew where he was going and so we're not lost at sea. We were confident that we were safe and on our way to a destination that's certain.

Sehjong These military supply ships, how did they actually transport the supplies to the ship and which military was it?

Vinh It was the U.S. military and I think they bought boats along side the ship and they tied the two boats together and transport some in. Sometimes we even heard helicopters just drop loads of food onto a spot on the ship, we knew that was happening.

00:34:33

Sehjong Did you see any of the U.S. military personnel?

Vinh No, no, we didn't see them, I didn't see them.

Sehjong How did you know they were the U.S. military if you didn't physically see them?

Vinh Well, I knew it wasn't the South Vietnamese military. The only other one that we knew as the U.S. military. Now in Singapore we met up with the Singapore military, Malaysian military. But once we left Singapore, it was the U.S.

Sehjong Where did you say you arrived in Singapore?

Vinh Somewhere in Singapore we were harbored. We weren't allowed on their land, but we were at their harbor, and then they transported us onto other ships, larger ships.

Sehjong Would this be considered a refugee camp?

Vinh Well, at Singapore we weren't even allowed to be on land, so there was no camp. So we were transported right away on a ship and then we're off to Guam. And once we made it into Guam, there were tents, large tents that they had put up on the beaches, and cots within these tents, that we felt, well you know, it is like a refugee camp. We're out here on an island, on a desert island, living in tents like the soldiers were. And they were feeding us, and documenting us, and gave us some clothing. We were told we'd be there for a little while before they'd transport us to the U.S.

Sehjong How long were you there for?

Vinh I think two to three weeks. Two to three weeks and then they transported us to military camps in the United States.

Sehjong What were the conditions of the camp in Guam?

Vinh It's like living on a desert island. It was hot, lots of sand. Food, you had to line up for your food, I really don't remember what we ate. Probably lots of fruits, lots of water.

Sehjong Were there any medical personnel? Were you given physicals or any kind of check-up?

Vinh I don't remember that but I remember knowing that there were medical personnel and that there were people there to take care of us. It was a strange feeling of you're on a trip, but you really don't know what's gonna happen next. You don't know if you're going to get a chance just to live life. People are going to take care of you but you just don't know how long you'll be there before you actually get to be on your own again or to actually live outside these camps and outside these walls.

Sehjong How did your family find their route to the U.S. from Guam?

Vinh They put us on a big plane with other families and I remember the plane going to Alaska for a pit stop and refueling. We weren't allowed to get off the plane, but the plane sat on the runway for about an hour or more. And I remember looking out and seeing snow and seeing one of the doors open and it was cold. And from there they flew us to Arkansas. And we stayed in Fort Chaffee in Arkansas for the rest of the summer.

Sehjong What kind of a plane was it?

Vinh It was a DC-10, I remember people saying it was a large DC-10.

Sehjong Did you have normal seating, how were the amenities inside the DC-10?

Vinh It was a commercial plane. It was the first time I'd been on a plane but I realized it was commercial because it had all the seats. There was nothing military about it. On the side of the plane, I believe they had a commercial logo, it wasn't a military plane.

Sehjong Do you remember what the commercial logo was?

Vinh I think it was Delta, it may have been a Delta DC-10.

Sehjong In Fort Chaffee, when you had arrived, tell me about that.

Vinh Well, we're living in these military camps. And it was like military life. You had apartments or looked like apartments and every family would have their own little room. But the food would be cooked at a kitchen, and you were designated which kitchen you would go to during mealtime. And you'd carry your little card with you, so that they can stamp, and know that you're from this area and therefore ate at this kitchen versus another area and another kitchen. And then there were schools for kids, there were lots to do and as the summer went on, fewer and fewer people were there as people were moving out, they were being sponsored out. And you started seeing empty apartments and empty rooms. And we were sponsored out sometime in late August – early September.

00:40:08

Sehjong In terms of language barriers obviously, how did you guys negotiate that?

Vinh Well, all this time we were just speaking in Vietnamese. During the escape and during the time at Fort Chaffee the military camp, we spoke

Vietnamese, that's all we knew and so there were probably a lot of translators around.

Sehjong Tell me about the sponsor program or how that worked?

Vinh I discovered later that the U.S. had a great program of asking churches within every little community to come and interview families and sponsor a family per church so that our number would spread out in the country and it wouldn't, no one of our city would feel the impact of these new immigrants. And so we were spread out throughout America. It took years for us to get back together in one or two towns, but most of us that year were sponsored to little bitty towns throughout the U.S. My family was sponsored to Palestine, Texas by the First Baptist Church there. And in that town, there were probably four other families sponsored during that year by other churches.

Sehjong Tell me about the sponsor, how that happened, how they sponsored you or what the process was like?

Vinh I think that the church would send members to the camp, to the Fort Chaffee, and then they would interview a few families, and then they would pick one out of those families to sponsor. And I think the pastor of First Baptist Church of Palestine liked my little sister and thought that our family would be right for their church. And so they decided it would be our family and we were happy. I don't know how many times we interviewed, it may have been twice with different churches, but at least this one picked us pretty soon, so we were happy.

Sehjong So they met with your family and got to talking to you and everything, and how did they translate?

Vinh I don't know if there were other translators around, but I remember that during that same time my father's employer-boss, his family was there too and they spoke some English and they may have translated some for my family but there may have been other people there translating, but I know that my parents didn't speak the language, and they answered questions, but I'm sure it was just in Vietnamese and other people translated for them.

Sehjong Where did they do this, they do this in a place, or?

Vinh They had it in a little building within the military camp, so we would just show up at that building and the church would be inside and members of the church would meet and greet and talk and then we'd go home afterwards, and they'll let us know their decision.

Sehjong When was the very first time that you had contact with U.S. soldiers?

Vinh Probably sometime in those camps, I'm sure they were policing. I never walked up to one and talked to one, and didn't remember them much in

my memory other than they were the guards at the gates and they were the police officers in the camp.

Sehjong Basically your first time having come into contact with U.S. military personnel was in Fort Chaffee?

Vinh Yeah, Fort Chaffee, Arkansas.

Sehjong What about in Guam or in the DC-10 airplane?

Vinh I'm sure they were there, but I didn't notice them.

Sehjong When was the first time you came into contact with [non- military personnel] Americans?

Vinh The church member, the church group was the first one and then when we got to the U.S., they met us at the airport and that was when we really met a lot of Americans.

Sehjong Which airport, the one in Fort Chaffee or Palestine ?

Vinh The airport in Tyler, Texas which is an hour away from Palestine. They flew us from Arkansas to Dallas, and from Dallas to Tyler, and the church drove up to Tyler to meet us and drive us back home to Palestine.

Sehjong During the interview in Fort Chaffee, did the pastor or the members of the church, did you meet them?

Vinh My parents did, I don't remember the meeting, but I'm sure I may have been in the room. But I know my parents met them.

Sehjong When you and your family had arrived in Tyler, Texas to meet the people from the church, what was that like?

00:45:09

Vinh It was neat 'cause we were traveling on planes, and then they'd get us from one plane to another, and then when we finally got out I thought, wow, you know, we're going somewhere. And the church people were very welcoming and they were very joyous and happy and they treated us very well. And they took us to a house that was wonderful and fully furnished and food in the kitchen and furniture all over the house and toys everywhere, and so they went out of their way to really help us start our lives.

Sehjong What was it like in Palestine, Texas? Tell me about Palestine and everything.

Vinh It's spelled like Palestine, but the people there pronounced it Palesteen. It's a nice small little town, it had about 12-13,000 people there, still does now. Good east-Texas Christian folk live there and it was a nice little

town to adjust to living in America and learning American culture 'cause there were very few Vietnamese and we saw very few Asians.

Sehjong How many Asians or other Vietnamese would you say were there at the time?

Vinh There were three or four families—

Sehjong Of Vietnamese?

Vinh --of Vietnamese 'cause other churches had sponsored some too. So there may have been four churches in that little town that did that, but a few of the families moved away right away, they moved to the big city so we ended up being ones that stayed probably one of the longest there.

Sehjong How close was the house that the church had helped put your family up in relation to the town or the church itself?

Vinh Well, it was two doors down from the big church and it was a nice little white house and it was close enough to downtown to walk to downtown, and it was close enough to the supermarkets to walk to the supermarket, and their high school was downtown too so everything was very convenient, we could just walk and didn't need a car for awhile.

Sehjong How did your parents acclimate to life in the U.S.? Was it a culture shock to them? How did they handle that, and how did you handle that?

Vinh I'm sure it was tough for them because they had to wonder how they would support their children, and they had to wonder [pause] if they'd ever see their family again. As they found out that you could send money to help support the family at home, they did that. But I'm sure at their age, they were in their mid-twenties, late-twenties that was a lot of stress.

Sehjong How did they learn English?

Vinh The church would send people over and teach them each night and then they also learned at work.

Sehjong Tell me how they got a job and where did they work?

Vinh The church found jobs for them. At first, they found a job at an upholstery shop for my father and then they found a job for him later at the glass factory. My mother worked for a sewing company, and when that company closed she went to work with my dad at the glass factory. For the late '70s the glass factory paid pretty well giving a lot of hours and they were good employees so they did pretty well there. And living in a small town the expenses were very low so they were able to save some money and send it home and put some money aside for their future.

Sehjong When did they start you in school?

Vinh I think they started us right away. I started in first grade, my little brother was kindergarten. We rode the bus to school, they told us where to go in the morning, what time to stand there, they'll be a bus that comes by. And I think they were there the first few days to make sure we knew, after that we were on our own to catch the bus each day to get to school.

00:49:41

Sehjong What was the name of the school?

Vinh Rusk Elementary I think was the first school we went to. It was close to the house, but Rusk Elementary, went there for two years.

Sehjong How did you learn English at Rusk?

Vinh The teacher slowly taught us English each day but then each day they would put my brother and I on a bus and we'd head over to the middle school or high school and then there were some special teachers there who taught us how to speak English. I remember we did that for awhile. Each day we'd go and see these two special teachers, it would be just the few of us in the room and they'd teach us words.

Sehjong You said a "few of us," who else was there besides your brother?

Vinh Some other Asian kids, some of the Vietnamese kids that were in town.

Sehjong So they interrupted the school day to pull you out of class and then bus you over to the middle school or high school, have your English lessons and then bus you back to Rusk?

Vinh They did, they did that. And I think they did that for at least two years.

Sehjong After two years, what happened then?

Vinh In that little town, every third grader went to one school, every fourth grader went to one school, all the way up to high school. So, by the time you hit third grade, you knew everybody who was your age group in that town.

Sehjong When they separate you by age group it's in the same building, right? Or is it different buildings?

Vinh Well, because they had so many old schools, the third and fourth graders were together in one building, the fifth graders were in one building, the sixth and seventh were together, and then the eighth and ninth were together, so they were all in different locations.

Sehjong So high school started after ninth grade?

Vinh High school for them started in tenth, yeah.

Sehjong Oh, tenth through the twelfth?

Vinh Yeah.

Sehjong Okay, so what was the name of the third grade school?

Vinh Third grade was Southside Elementary, fourth grade was the same. Fifth grade was Washington Elementary. Sixth grade was, sixth and seventh was um, boy I forgot that name, maybe Davy Crockett? I'm not sure because what actually happened was sixth and seventh grade used to be the high school for the black folks and the fifth grade was elementary for the black folks, and when there was desegregation they used the black high school to be the sixth and seventh grade, school for the sixth and seventh so we had pretty good building that looked like a high school, it was just a little smaller.

Sehjong I didn't realize that it was during desegregation during this time. Did you understand those kind of concepts and racial issues in the U.S. at your age?

Vinh At that age, I didn't because everyone was desegregated, we were going to school together. All races were mixed.

Sehjong Oh, so this had happened already by the time you got here.

Vinh Yes, in that town they had already mixed everything together, so I didn't see any segregation, but I knew that there were parts of town where poor people lived, and parts of town where rich people lived, and I started observing the differences, I mean if the school bus pulled up and it was a brand new bus, you knew there were some rich white kids will come out, and if it's a beat up old bus, you knew that there was some poor black kids coming out, and I looked at my bus, and it was an in-between, and I knew that I was in between there somewhere.

Sehjong When you were going to these schools, how did you integrate into American culture and life and what was that process like for you?

Vinh The kids, I found my place. I think I was accepted by the rich white kids because I was very athletic. And I remember that I learned to play soccer in the little league and did well, and some years my parents just didn't know when to sign me up, and they, the team, by the time, I think we were in the fifth or sixth grade, that there wasn't enough athletes in the city to have one league, so they decided to have everybody join one team and then we'd go to another city to play in their league. Well, every kid had joined already. They went out and played, and they lost their first game and then they saw that on the other team there was this Asian kid who was pretty good, so they remembered they had an Asian kid in town who was pretty good. So, their job was to go recruit me to play.

00:54:25
Sehjong What was the sport that you played?

Vinh It was soccer, and I remember a rich kid came up to me and said, “you know we had a game last week and we played against the team from Nacogdoches, and they had an Asian guy that’s just like you, and we want you to play on our team.” And I said, “well, isn’t it too late for me to join? And I don’t know if my parents have the money to pay.” And they said, “coach said, ‘you just come out.’” And I did, I just came out and they had a shirt for me, and I got to play and I didn’t have to pay. And that was when I knew that, since we only had one team, and I was the best player on the team at that age group, I knew that I was one of the best athletes in town. So, that helped me, really assimilate with the Americans really well, and they accepted me through athleticism. And then in the classroom in that little town by the time you get to sixth or seventh, I think seventh grade, they took the top thirty students and put ‘em all in one class together all day long. So I was in that class, so I had a good understanding that I was near the top of my class, and athletically I was one of the more talented kids in town.

Sehjong What age group, and what level of education was this again, that this happened?

Vinh It started in seventh grade. And I stayed there till the eighth grade, and then ninth grade I came out to Dallas, Texas.

Sehjong So your family moved to Dallas?

Vinh Yeah, my family moved to Dallas when I was starting ninth grade and then the middle of my eleventh grade they moved to Austin.

Sehjong In Dallas, what was the name of the school that you went to?

Vinh Went to Bryan Adams High School in east Dallas at the very edge of town. That summer, summer of ’83, my parents decided to move to Dallas. Since the glass factory was about to close down they decided to take their savings and go rent a little place in the inner city there and open up a little Asian grocery store, a very small one, and they did that. So that summer, I helped, I was 14-15 years old, I helped. And somewhere, I don’t know, I believe maybe August, I had learned that when you are a minority kid in inner-city Dallas you can opt to go to a school that had fewer minorities and you could pick any one of those schools. So I got a list of schools that I could go to, and I drove to each one and looked to see the area and the school itself and how long it would take for me to get there and I decided that Bryan Adams was the best one and I enrolled there.

Sehjong Why did they have that program with the minorities, I don’t understand that?

Vinh You know, I think that program was there to help further desegregate the schools. If you were a minority kid inside the city limits and you wanted to go to a school that was at the edge of town that were majority white you could go. And that helped desegregate the population. And if you were a

white kid living in a white part of town you can go to a minority school. It helped, but what it did was it allowed good athletes in inner cities to go out to these schools at the edge and participate and make that school even better. And what I'd discovered was that yeah, a few of my teammates were these kids that were good athletes and they weren't allowed to go out and play there.

Sehjong

When you were going to Bryan Adams High School in Dallas, were you still playing soccer?

00:58:52

Vinh

Going into that school I had played soccer. They didn't have high school soccer in Palestine, but they did in Dallas. I was also a football player in eighth grade in Palestine and I did really well there, but they questioned whether or not I would be big enough to play ninth grade ball for them. But in Dallas, they didn't question that, they just let me play, but in Dallas, when I showed up, they'd never seen an Asian football player, and the coaches had never seen one. So, the coaches asked me if I'd played before, and I told them I did. Then they asked me where, and I told them where. Then after I told them where then they agreed to go ahead and let me suit up or put me on the team. And they gave me the oldest, crappiest uniform and equipment they had. And I knew that that's what they were doing, but I knew that I had to earn respect to get the new stuff. And then in time, if I got to get on the team, that I could get that. I have a fun story about my first day walking up to the coach's office and asking for permission to play. Before I made it into the door there were these two big white kids, they were about 6 foot-plus, really muscular, and I thought, "boy these kids in Dallas are big, they didn't have kids that big in Palestine." And I looked at them and they looked at me and they said, "you playing football?" and I said, "yeah," they said, "what position?" I said, "quarterback," and I looked up at 'em, and they just looked at each other and smiled. And then we walked in the door. Well, after I'd gone to the coach and got my equipment, and I got to practice that day so I put it on and we're out and I looked at these two kids and they're in their pads and they're out there and they weren't linemen. I thought they were big linemen, they weren't linemen, that was the starting quarterback and the back-up quarterback. And I looked at them, I said, "there's no way I'm going to beat out these big kids, they're huge." But as I watched them, I started seeing that they had weaknesses, and I thought that I had a chance. And I did, I saw that they were big and slow, they were strong kids, but they were too big and too slow. So, I made it a point that I would be faster than them, and that everything I did was quicker than them. And at the end of the first practice, the second string kid was moved to receiver, and I became second string. And about the end of the first week of practice, I got to practice with first string. And at the beginning of the first game, I was told I would play quarterback the second and the fourth quarter. At the beginning of the second game I was told I would play the first and the third. At the beginning of the third game I was playing first and third, that other quarterback had to learn a new position. And as I threw him the ball, if he would've caught the ball we would've won the game. But it hit him in the hands, he got hit by the other players and

broke his ankle and so he was out for the rest of the season. So, he walked around with crutches the rest of the year. His friends, who didn't know the story, would say that he's injured so that's why Vinh is the quarterback, but everybody on the team knows that he got hurt playing receiver and not quarterback and for the rest of the year, that was my position. Word got around the school that there was an Asian kid playing football and that the Asian kid was the quarterback, and all the Asian kids were looking around for some big guy. And I didn't know that they had known, but later in the next semester when I asked a girl out, and she found out I was the football player, she told me, "everybody was looking around for some big guy, we didn't realize it was you, you're so small." [laughter] And that's when I knew that they didn't know I was the athlete.

Sehjong [laughter] How small, what was your size in high school during this time?

Vinh I was five-foot-two, I weighed one-o-five.

Sehjong This was in ninth grade, right?

Vinh This was ninth grade. I was five-two, one-o-five in ninth grade. I grew to about one-fourteen in the tenth grade. It was a nice high school, but I think I got onto a team that had a lot of good athletes, and in the forty-year history of that high school, there was a window of two years where we were really good, and that was the year that I was there on the varsity team. We had some athletes that got scholarships to go to D-1 school, and some of 'em even played pro-ball. So, we were lucky, but my playing encouraged other Asians to try out. And that was where I first discovered that I was a little different than most of the Asian kids 'cause I was so assimilated, and that was because I grew up in this little town where I didn't speak my language to anybody else, and I learned to speak English because I had to. And I knew that I was different from the other Asian kids, so I was very Americanized.

01:04:41

Sehjong And the other Asian kids were not?

Vinh They weren't, they had a tough time to assimilate. And the other Asian kids fit the mold of the stereotype Asian kid: who was this nerd, who wasn't very athletic and a scholar. Well, most of them were and I was the complete opposite: I wasn't in their smart classes and I was playing athletics. And I played whatever they had, I played football, I ran track, I even wrestled. And then, I believe after my sophomore year, my junior year, the soccer team had dared me to try out for the soccer team, 'cause they said, "well, Vinh, if you're a good football player, see how well you do on the soccer team." And I didn't let them know that I had been a good soccer player, so somehow they told the coach that I would be out on the soccer team after my football season's over. I didn't know, but the coach had reserved a full set of uniforms for me for when I came out, I thought that I'd come out and have to try to make it on the varsity, I may be JV. But as soon as I made it out, he let me on the field. Things came natural again, but I knew that for two and a half years my body had grown into a

football player type of an athlete, not soccer. So, I was able to run into people and really not get hurt, 'cause I'm was used to that. And I remember one of the first games I played, I couldn't stop myself so I just kept running into the guy. And I ran over him and he got hurt, and I stood back up and I thought, somehow I just instinctively know how to position my body not to be hurt when there's a collision. And so, other soccer players on other teams would stay away from me and they just let me have the ball. In that one season I earned a starring job on the varsity team and got to play a lot more than the other Asian kid on team, and he'd been on that team for two, three years. And I didn't know that I could do that, coach just put me on and I was able to do it. So I enjoyed soccer at that level also. So I knew that I was a good little athlete 'cause I worked hard at it, I wasn't gifted with a great athletic body, but I was gifted with a very intuitive mind and a very quick mind. I could come up with lots of ways to improve in athletics and have shortcuts to figure things out. My mind fit perfect for that mind of a quarterback in football, and that's why I really enjoyed playing football, 'cause I thought I was the chess master out there. I wasn't the big athlete; I was the guy that could get the ball to whoever I thought was really our star. I would outfox the other players on the field.

Sehjong Tell me about your experience when you were playing football and you were playing, I remember had once told me about this time when another Asian person had seen you play. What was that about?

Vinh I was warming up, a quarterback gets to come out and warm out before the games first, we'd toss the ball around. We were in Fort Worth, Texas playing against a team there. They would have little kids out there who were ball boys and they like to run around the football field and give footballs to the players. This one little Asian kid, he was probably ten, eleven years old. He grabbed a football and he was tossing it to me and he looked into my eyes and he realized I was Asian and he froze. He didn't know what to do; he just stood there and looked at me. I made eye-contact with him and I smiled and I said to him, "yes, I'm Asian." And he smiled back and it was a shock to him and I think I asked him if he was going to play football one day and he said, "yeah," then I said, "well, good luck." And then he gave me the ball and he kept looking at me like, "I can't believe I just saw an Asian football player."

Sehjong And how did that make you feel?

Vinh It made me feel good that I saw another Asian kid out there because I remember when I was his age I had dreamed about playing high school ball and dreamed that I'd be the quarterback for the team.

Sehjong How old was this guy and how old were you at the time?

Vinh I was sixteen, seventeen, he was probably ten, eleven years old.

Sehjong Oh I see. Did you feel that maybe he was looking up to you?

Vinh I thought he felt, “oh my God, there is an Asian football player,” and I don’t know if he kept an eye on me that day or that night, but I was out there playing quarterback, so that was a double surprise for him.

Sehjong When you were playing football games, how would the opponent team regard you?

01:09:50

Vinh They saw me as this very little bitty kid. And usually when a short guy runs out there he’s out on the edge of the field but I had a quarterback number on. And I was calling the plays and I’d line up and they knew I was a quarterback. But the other players, I think I frustrated the defenses because they couldn’t find me. When they looked for a quarterback they couldn’t find me back there and my players have already adjusted to it, they said they don’t even look for me, they just look in the air and wait for the ball to come. If the ball comes, they catch it. Well, the defense, they like to find that quarterback and they can’t find me ‘cause as soon as my linemen stand up, I can’t be seen. I still don’t remember how I’d find these players; I looked through the gaps and see the receivers. I remember there’s one play where there was this big six-foot-seven kid, who ended up going to Nebraska to play offensive tackle for them. We were playing against him and he was rushing me from a defensive tackle and I was the quarterback and I turn around to throw the ball and see this big kid, six-foot-seven, and he’s got his arms out like a big bear about to tackle me. So I didn’t know what to do, I squatted down as low as I could; I jumped to the side, and then stepped around him. And you could see on video, he wrapped his arm up and he grabbed a bunch of air and then he turned around, didn’t know where I was. As I got around him, I stood back up again and threw the football and made a complete pass. And that video was played over and over by my coach and we all laughed, we had a good time laughing because the big guy didn’t see where I went. And I knew instinctively, I had to get down low ‘cause he’s so big, six-foot-seven, I had to get really low, he couldn’t get down as low as I could. So I had squat as low as I could, just move my feet real fast to get around him. And I did, but that was one play that I thought, “it must’ve looked funny to the people.”

Sehjong As a football player, you were younger, in a lower grade-level but you got to play on the varsity team, right?

Vinh Yes, what happened was during my freshman off-season, we had a coach change-over, and the new coaches didn’t know what grade I was. So they just tested you based on your talent. And seven of the sophomores made the varsity team, and I was one of the seven. They had already put me as the second string quarterback. I had beaten out the guy that was older than me during the off-season. So I knew that it was a lot to play on varsity, but I was on varsity as a sophomore. Seven of us made it in. They kept us up there; we learned a lot that year. It was one of my sources of pride because I never played junior-varsity football and I never played junior-varsity soccer. I made it to the varsity right away. I really enjoyed those two years that I spent on the varsity team in

Dallas. The first year went one and nine, we lost every game we played. The only team we beat was one little team that was near our school. Then because we lost, we weren't very good; I got to do a lot of things. I got to play, I got to return kicks, I got return punts, I got to play quarterback, play tailback, play receiver. I did a lot of things. Now the second year we specialized and we had a lot more athletes. So I only got to play quarterback most of that year. But one the things I did realize was somehow, I had the knack for always making the tackle. So they put me on the kick-off team and told me I was the safety, I'd be the last one to tackle anybody if they made it pass everyone else. In my nine grade year, this one kid from Tyler did that. He past everybody else, and so I thought, "I'm going to run up to the side line then hit him at the sideline." And he made his move but I didn't go for it, and I hit him at the sideline, so I saved a touchdown. Well, everybody reminded me that that was good, and from then on I was always the safety. Which wasn't good news because after that I was stressed out 'cause I was the safety; if I didn't make the tackle there would be a touchdown. Well, the very first game of our junior year, we didn't know how good we would be. The very first kick-off the kid ran it all the way back to me and this other kid, and we looked at each other, we were the safeties, we were the fastest ones on the team, we looked at each other and said, "oh, no, this year can't be this bad," and it is the first play of the year. And then we looked at each other and said, "we gotta make the tackle," so we did, we made the tackle and we were relieved, we thought, "wow, I hope they don't do this all year long, because we're gonna be stressed out." [laughter]

01:15:02

Sehjong

[laughter] Tell me about the Asian players that had joined after having seen you. I remember you had once told me about them not fairing as well.

Vinh

They didn't know how to play the game. Somehow I learned to play the game and I learned through, whatever it was I learned it. But they didn't understand the game and they didn't know how to play. They were bigger kids so that the coach would put them at linebacker, running-back, tight-end, and those are tough positions to learn to play, if you don't know how to play you get hit all the time. They made it through the Spring practice but they didn't come back out for the team in the Fall. So, somehow they just knew that football wasn't for them. They were all on the JV, while I was practicing with the varsity and two of the kids were my age but one of them was older than me. And they didn't fair too well and they didn't take the time to ask me to teach them how to play, and so they didn't come out for the team the next year. In fact, the only other Asian kid on the team was my younger brother who was a year behind me, and he played quarterback for the ninth grade team.

Sehjong

Was your brother very good?

Vinh

He was very good, he was a quarterback; he was as good as I was. In one practice when I was a junior and my brother was the JV quarterback, I was the varsity quarterback, well, our team had lost the game the week

before, the coaches mad at us and they made us hit hard. Somebody hit the other quarterback and he was out. So it was down to me and my brother was called out from JV to play quarterback. So for that day the only two quarterbacks on the Bryan Adams team were the two little Vietnamese kids, and that was me and my brother.

Sehjong When you had left Dallas to move to Austin, tell me about that experience. I remember you saying something about you had determined to put aside football to focus on your academics.

Vinh When my parents came to us and said we were moving to Austin, I told my head football coach. And he took me into the principle's office and they talked about it and they told me there's an option of me staying with a player's family for the football season and finishing out my football career in Dallas before I go to Austin with my family and this was in maybe February of my junior year. I made the decision a few days later to move to Austin and stay with my family instead of playing football for this team next year. Part of that was to be with my family, and the other part was, since I'm not getting any bigger or stronger, I would never play college ball. And so I should focus on my education and when I go to college it would be for academics and not for athletics. And that helped me decide that I needed to be in Austin. And when I got to Austin, a little bit of me thought about playing for the school, but when you go from a district champion team that won many games and you were the starting quarterback and your position to have next year, and then you go to a school that lost nine games and the level of skills were not there, and they ran an offense that was very dangerous for a little quarterback like me, I definitely didn't want to play for them and didn't let them know that I was even an athlete. So nobody at that school knew that they had a player from a district champion team who could've played quarterback for them, no one knew.

Sehjong How was their offensive strategy dangerous?

Vinh In the '80s they had a veer offense scheme, where the quarterback would take the ball and run sideways down the line. And then that would give the defensive tackle, the defensive end, the strong safety, the linebackers a chance to hit him sideways and I knew that any of those sideways hits that were at my knee could rip my knee apart, and I wasn't going to allow that kind of risk on my little body. My team in Dallas, we didn't run that offense, we would allow the quarterback to run straight back and hand the ball to the tailback or keep the ball and then turn around and throw. That's more of my offensive and so the team in Austin ran the veer offensive which made the quarterback run sideways, I knew I wouldn't risk myself, my health to that. And I should just be happy that I had my two years on varsity and that we had a lot of success and that I didn't get hurt playing football, I never had broken bone, didn't rip anything up. So, keep my health, go to school, get an education. I had enough good memories from football already, I'd made my point. I was starting quarterback, I played in the Cotton Bowl, I've played in great stadiums,

I've played in the playoffs, and I had enough good memories. My next step would be to achieve things in the classroom.

01:20:34

Sehjong

What high school did you attend in Austin, and what grade were you when you arrived?

Vinh

I arrived as a junior in the second semester, junior, and I finished out my senior year at McAllen High School. I did nothing in athletics, I didn't even play soccer for them; I did nothing. I just went to school, finished up and was just looking forward to just getting to UT.

Sehjong

You had your eyes set on UT in Austin, when did you decide you wanted to go there?

Vinh

Well, my [laughter] senior year in high school when I met some of the other UT students that were there a year ahead of me. When I met 'em and when I talked to 'em I thought they weren't as bright as I was and they're there at UT. If they could do it, heck I could do it, and I could get in and do well. So, it gave me a lot of confidence because before that I didn't think I could make it to UT. But, since they did I thought that I had a shot and then I was really confident after that.

Sehjong

Once you got into UT, how did that happen?

Vinh

I had to go to a summer program because I wasn't a scholar, I had spent too many of my years playing athletics in high school. And my grades weren't good enough to get into UT the normal route, so I went to the summer school. And back then if you made a 2.5 or above you would be allowed to enter as a freshman in the fall. Well, my GPA was way above that and I thought summer school was fairly easy. And I made it in really easily. So, I continued to go to school in the falls, spring and summer and graduated in three and a half years with a Bachelor in Business Administration.

Sehjong

In college, were you a part of any Vietnamese or Asian organizations?

Vinh

Yeah, I did, I joined a few and I was very active with the Vietnamese Student Association. I ran for president of their organization as a sophomore, served as a junior and in that year we raised \$14-\$15,000 dollars, and we donated it to the refugee camps in the Far East. We had a really good time as students there and I had a good time in the Vietnamese Student Association. That allowed me to pretty much show some of my leadership skills and some of my visions for future students at UT. Those were some good years that we had there.

Sehjong

What made you wanna decide on a career in law, how did that come about?

Vinh

That came about by going here and there as a kid to translate for people. I found that when you translate you help people understand things. Then

I took a class called "Practical Law" and I really loved it and I decided as a tenth grader in Dallas that I'd become a lawyer one day. I really respected lawyers, they were intelligent people. I thought they knew almost everything, so I told my teacher at that time that I would go to law school and I'd be an attorney. And she was a student teacher so she was very encouraging, she said, "that's great, man." And I remember asking her, "what's the best law school in Texas?" She said, "UT." Then I told her, "then, I'll go there." [laughter] Then a few years later when I realized how hard it was to get into UT, I kinda regretted that little statement--

Sehjong [laughter]

Vinh --but I tried as hard as I could, and I did get in, but it was through a lot of luck and a lot of hard work. But I didn't understand how difficult it would be to achieve that goal when I set it in the tenth grade. But I was glad that I did achieve it.

Sehjong I remember you had telling me something about a contact you had that helped maybe get your application over the top into UT Law, tell me about that and how you got to know that person.

01:24:53

Vinh It was through my athletics, football. My head football coach in Dallas was so good that he taught me, as a quarterback, how to understand the game, how to outwit the defense, how to take advantage of what the defense was giving you. And I took that into football at UT and I created my flag football team. We used our brain to outwit these other athletes. Half of us were Asian the other half were basketball players and non-Asians. But in time, most of us were Asians. And we'd get up there and outwit these white kids and we had some tough words that were said to us, some kids actually said, "I can't believe we're getting beat up by a bunch of Asians playing football, our game!" We laughed but, if they were being funny. They couldn't believe that there's Asian kids out that knew how to play the game. Well, I taught them how to play, receiver, and I knew how to throw the ball so we were very effective as a team. One of our players that we asked to play was a graduate engineering student who had a father figure and he asked the father figure to come out and take pictures and join our team. 'Cause each time we'd play and we'd win in the playoffs we'd go and celebrate and we had get a drink or go to eat some snacks. And so we had a good time together, we became friends and family almost. In time this gentlemen watched us go through the whole playoffs and we'd lost in the championship game by one point in our very first year. So, if you take the time to go back to Gregory Gym and look at those old pictures, and you look in the Independent League in 1989 or '88 and you see Independent, Napalm Bomb were the runner-up, that was my very first team. Put it together and we lost by one point in the final game. We continued that success; we continued playing like that but as the years went by this gentleman watched as I served as president of VSA [Vietnamese Student Association] and all the volunteering that I did, and all the leadership skills that I showed. By the time I was a senior he asked if I wanted him to write a letter of recommendation. I had

discovered that he was pretty high up on the totem pole at UT. And I discovered that at a football game when I flipped through to see who was the chancellor who were the vice chancellors and the assistant chancellors. And it turns out that he was the Executive Assistant and Vice Chancellor. So, he served two roles at the Chancellor's office, of which is just right underneath the Chancellor himself. That meant that he was above the President at the university. So when he asked if I wanted a letter of rec I gladly said, "yes, that would be great." And since he knew me on a friendly basis, he saw what I did as a person, and as a volunteer, he never looked at my grades, he just wrote a letter of recommendation based on his experience with me and I know that that was a very valuable letter because every law school that applied to I got accepted in. I've never seen that letter, I've never read it, I don't know what it says. But whatever it said, it was very powerful because I was never rejected. And I know that my getting into UT was really helped a lot by his letter.

Sehjong After you had gotten out of law school and passed the bar and everything, what made you want to, cause you said you were general practice law, what made you want to do that?

Vinh I had worked at large firms and had looked around at what they did and what the atmosphere was like, and I knew that wasn't for me, I didn't fit in. I like the relaxed atmosphere of a small firm and I like to be my own boss. I didn't want someone else to be making my decisions twenty or thirty years down the road as to whether or not I had a job. So, I knew that the way to go would be to have my own small firm. I didn't want a big firm because I thought that'd be overworking myself. I wanted a firm that was small enough so that I could still manage it and still have a time for my family and my life. So I knew that I'd go small. And I would serve the Asian community because Asian community needed a lot of attorney's at that time and we didn't have a lot. I'm glad to see that there are more of us now. But there were so very few back then and I wanted the Asians to know the law and then to understand it, obey it and then take advantage of knowing the law.

01:30:08

Sehjong When did you become a U.S. citizen?

Vinh My parents became U.S. citizens in the early '80s. They didn't know how to apply for their children to be automatically approved, so they kept trying and it took us four or five years but we finally got it by 1987, right before I graduated high school. We were approved in San Antonio just months of my going to college.

Sehjong Do you consider yourself as an American or a Texan or Vietnamese or Vietnamese American, how do you identify yourself?

Vinh I'm a Vietnamese American. I'm very American, I have Vietnamese heritage, Vietnamese values in me. Texan, I don't realize that as much, I maybe more Texan than I think I am. But first and foremost is that I'm a Vietnamese American, Vietnamese being the qualifier for the American

part, mostly American and what version of American because Americans come from all throughout the world. So, I'm an American from Vietnam.

Sehjong What do you think of U.S. policy during and after the war now that you know about it and looking back on it now?

Vinh It's very difficult because I come from the South and the South Vietnamese government and military have their version of the war, and the Americans have their version and the North have their version. In looking back at all this, I was disappointed that there had to be warfare to decide what type of government Vietnam would ultimately have. Apparently it must have been so very valuable because they fought for thirty years.

Sehjong How old were you when you first went back to Vietnam to visit?

Vinh It was in the year 2001, so I was about thirty three, thirty four. I was glad to see that there were no more fighting. There was peace; people were working instead of fearing that some night they'll lose a relative. It was sad to see the poverty. It was good to see some of the richness in the Vietnamese culture were there. But when I went back in 2006 or 2007, some of that richness was gone because of the stress of life now and the way the Communist government runs the economy and the level of work they put the people through just to make it by each day is so disheartening that it was tough to see.

Sehjong Does your family, you said you're grandparents had come to the U.S. later on. Do you have any relatives in Vietnam?

Vinh Practically none. I have one uncle who chose to stay there all those years and he has chosen not to communicate with anyone, so I don't know where he is, what he's doing, but everybody else is here in the U.S.

Sehjong How about your siblings, what are they doing now?

Vinh My younger brother, who's two years younger than me is the office manager at my law office. My younger sister, who's four years younger than I am is an attorney in Dallas at "Thompson, Coe, Cousins & Irons". She went to law school at SMU. She's a very good attorney there in Dallas. She's married to an Irish American, who's also an attorney. They have two kids now. My baby brother, the kid that was a few months old in 1975 when we left, he is an attorney at "Locke Lord Bissell & Liddell" here in Austin, he does real estate law. He went to Harvard Law after UT undergrad. We all earned our degree at UT, our undergraduate degree at UT. I stayed here for law school, my sister was at SMU and my baby brother went to Harvard Law. I believe it was May 25th of the year 2000, twenty-five years after we left, I took my parents to Cambridge, Massachusetts to attend my brother's law school graduation. And I looked at my parents' faces, what they were wearing, and [emotional] I saw two first-generation Americans living the American dream, coming over here and working their heart out for twenty-five years, standing at

what is the most power and richest and most acclaimed university in the world, watching their son earn his degree. I thought I was witnessing an American dream. We thought that maybe two or three generations down then we might have someone go to Ivy League schools but we never thought that it would be our baby brother. He's a great young attorney now in Austin, will make partner with his firm next year. [emotional] Everyone of my siblings, when I think about them, they make me very proud. They're each self-sufficient. I've never had to help them out in anyway other than emotional help, emotional sharing. They're very successful kids, very successful adults and I'm very proud of them.

01:36:32

Sehjong

Is it important to keep your cultural identity?

Vinh

Yes.

Sehjong

Why is that?

Vinh

Because every American that meets you needs to know a little bit about you and about where you came from. When I mean American, they're going to meet a Vietnamese American. They're gonna know what is it about being Vietnamese American that's a little different from some other American. And if I don't know that, I can't share that with them, and that deprives them of an opportunity of meeting a Vietnamese American.

Sehjong

What is your opinion in terms of the future of Vietnamese culture in the United States?

Vinh

I've seen it grow in thirty-something years and I'm amazed and I'm glad and I'm proud because we started out with literally nothing and now there's so many success stories, there's so many firsts and so many talented Vietnamese. And the community is growing in wealth and in education and in contribution to the U.S. in so many ways, that I couldn't have imagined this twenty or thirty years ago. The first Asian American in space is a Vietnamese American. For one year there, in college football the best athlete was a Vietnamese football player, Dat Nguyen. We have Vietnamese who are world champions in athletics, world champions in all kinds of categories, scientists, Nobel Prize winners. We've done very well, we've grown as a community and I hope that we keep our identity. I think that with the new influx of recent Vietnamese immigrants, it will allow us to keep our identity and allow us to grow stronger as a community.

Sehjong

Are you involved in politics at all?

Vinh

Only [laughter] when I help who I call my uncle, Hubert Vo, and his campaigns and his public functions. I'm proud of him. He is a great politician, he's helped the Vietnamese people out a lot. I've watched him grow from an eighteen year old young man with nothing except the clothes on his back to build his family and his wealth to be financially independent and to be wealthy enough to run for the State Representative's office. When he ran, he beat the most senior person in

the State, the most powerful State Legislator was defeated by him, a rookie politician.

01:39:21

Sehjong

You had named the song, well you had talked about a song, that reminded you of Vietnam. What was the name of that song?

Vinh

It's called "Anh Khong Chet Dau Anh," which means, "you will never die." Because the Vietnamese language doesn't specifically state what tense you're using the word in, it could mean past tense, present tense, future tense, so "Anh Khong Chet Dau Anh," simply means, "you will never die," and that may mean, "you didn't die, you haven't died, you will never die," but it's a very popular song. And I got a chance to meet the singer and she had told me that every time she sings that song, she has to cry. [emotional] It describes a soldier who comes home to visit his wife after he'd died. He came to her in her vision at night and she said to him, "you will never die."

Sehjong

Well, I think that's it. Thank you so much.

Vinh

Thank you Sehjong.

Sehjong

No, thank you.

01:40:44