

Name of Interviewer: Jacquelyn Sy
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Themes: Immigration; Vietnamese and Vietnamese American experiences
Name of Person Interviewed: Julie (Hue) Tang Sy
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Name	Transcript
<i>00:01</i>	
Jackie	This is Jacquelyn Sy interviewing Julie Sy on October 4, 2008. So Mommy- where were you born in Vietnam?
Julie	I was born in a city called My Tho.
Jackie	And what was your life like as a child?
Julie	I was a very, very happy child, and I felt safe to go everywhere with my bike- I wasn't afraid.
Jackie	And did you have a typical routine when you went to school in Vietnam?
Julie	I went to Chinese school in the morning and Vietnamese school in the afternoon. We had to go home for lunch and for nap time and then we'd go back to school for Vietnamese class in the afternoon.
Jackie	Did you feel--- what were your experiences being an ethnic Chinese in Vietnam? Did you feel like it changed your experiences?
Julie	Yeah, sometimes you feel like- [pause] sometimes you feel like you always have to [pause]
Jackie	Defend yourself?
Julie	Yeah, defend myself. You see, Mommy, I mean I played with Vietnamese and Chinese friends but some of them would just stay with the Chinese or stay with the Vietnamese and sometimes I don't like the way they talk. They would segregate themselves.
Jackie	Okay, so you felt like you belonged to both groups.
Julie	Right.

Jackie And do you have a very happy anecdote from being a kid in Vietnam- a favorite story?

Julie Yeah! My parents let me do everything you know; so, I had a happy childhood. Sometimes we would rent a canoe- actually someone would just take us to a certain place of the river and we would swim there at 5:30 in the morning for one hour, and then we would come back and change and eat breakfast and go to school. We would do that a few times every week.

Jackie And what were some of your experiences with the French and Americans that were there?

Julie That was way too far from where I was, so I don't know about that- yeah, but it was fine, I just new that the Americans were in my country; it was fine.

Jackie During the war, did you live in the same city?

Julie Yes- we lived in the same city. I lived in My Tho, so we didn't really experience the war very much except that every night we would have curfew and we had tanks- they would protect the city by parking around the city- and we weren't supposed to go anywhere at night, like at twelve o'clock or midnight.

Jackie Is My Tho is central Vietnam or very south?

Julie Very south

Jackie During the war did you work anywhere? Did you have any occupation?

Julie No, I was a student.

Jackie Did schooling change once the war started?

04:30

Julie Yes. Yes and no because- let's see- I still went to school but I think it was different and it changed a lot after the communists won the war. It was a very sad day; you woke up one day and people were in fear and they had to put red flags all over the city, which is the communist flag. If you rode your bike around the city, you would feel like you don't belong there. It was really sad.

Jackie So, they expected you to still go to school as usual? But there were things that changed that made it bad.

Julie Well, the Vietnamese school continued for 3 weeks after that, but they stopped the Chinese school.

Jackie So then did you go to Vietnamese school in the morning and afternoon?

Julie We couldn't go to school anymore because the communists took over all the families that had money and were considered wealthy- our family was one of them. They took my parents assets- everything- and they put us in jail for about three months. They separated the family, this way they could pump information from each one of us so they could see where we hid our gold and money. Taking our assets was not enough; they wanted more.

Jackie Where did your family's wealth come from?

Julie My dad started with a coal and salt business, and he built it up from there. Later on, he had enough money and he built up a hardware business.

Jackie Besides what you just told me, did you feel like the war affected you and your family in any other ways?

Julie Yes, a lot- we used to have a house and all of a sudden, we didn't have anything. It was lucky that my parents hid away gold, so later on we used that gold to pay for our journey to come to this country.

8:04

Jackie During the war, what is a specific story you have from that time period? Or a story from after the war?

Julie After the war, all the teenagers were sent to the countryside to do farming. Girls could sometimes go to an organization and work on weaving baskets- I did that for a while- so that way I didn't have to go to the farm to do farming, but my brothers had to. Later on, my family saw that we didn't have any future in Vietnam, so they tried to pay an organization that would buy a boat and that would let the people leave the country illegally. The first time, I got cheated. We lost some money and got thrown in jail.

10:10

Jackie Was it the boat people who cheated you? Or were just unlucky that somebody caught you?

Julie No It was the boat people and the government who were corrupt. They took our money and pretended; they sent us to the boat and we had gone one mile and then we were caught.

Jackie And so, the second time?

Julie The second time, the government knew that they could make so much money this way; if these people don't want to stay here, why not just let

them go and then take all our assets and money and everything. So, they allowed the people to leave the country legally, you just had to pay a lot of money if you could afford it. My parents would get their gold out- of course only after they put us in jail for three months and they couldn't find any of our gold; so, when we came out and got back to our house. They only let us get our clothing and then we had to rent another apartment and stay there. While we stayed there, the gold we had hidden in the countryside, where we have a summerhouse. Later on, when everything calmed down, we slowly dug the gold up and used it to survive and pay for the trip to come to the United States- to pay for the people who organized the boat.

Jackie What were the conditions like on the boat? How many people?

Julie I would say my boat was very small. Maybe it was about twenty-five feet long and about ten feet wide and it was one of the fisherman's boat and they fit like a hundred or a hundred and fifty people in there, mostly children and women.

Jackie Are you describing the second boat?

Julie No, the two boats were totally different and had different people. I'm talking about the boat that I actually escaped on. The first one was a similar boat but we only had two families on that boat, but the second boat was legally, so they wanted to put as many people on that boat. They don't care if you live or die as long as they take your money. I left with my younger sister, my older brother, and my two nephews. They pushed us all into the cabin where they usually kept the fish- they kept all the people down there. We were so sick and we could not breathe. During the second day, we were about to get to the border of Vietnam when we got into a storm that was really strong and our water pump broke. The captain used to be a soldier and so he was so afraid that we would have to turn around, but he knew if we continued going, we would die at sea. He finally decided that we had to go into this island, which they used to keep really dangerous prisoners. We went there and had shelter for one week.

Jackie Do you know the name of that island?

14:40

Julie Dao Côn Sơn

Jackie What year did you leave Vietnam?

Julie 1979

Jackie What month?

Julie July

Jackie After you were on that dangerous island for a week, what happened?

Julie After that week, they contacted the mainland center, asking to send someone out to replace the water pump. Then we continued to go, and this time they would not let us take too much clothing and everybody only had three outfits because they were afraid the boat would be too heavy. We left Dao Côn Sơn and after one or two days, we saw a pirate boat. We tried to go over to them to ask them for directions to get to the refugee camp and for some reason they ran away from us. We were told that we were very lucky. Maybe because our boat was so small, it didn't look like we would have a lot of money and it wasn't worth it for them to come near us. They actually ran away from us, and then we were just drifting at sea for another day.

Then we saw another fisherman's boat; this one was from Malaysia. We asked them by using sign language to ask them where the refugee camp was. They said they would show us the way, but they wanted our gas tank. We saw no point in having the gas tank with us, so we agreed to trade. They pointed out the direction of the refugee camp and took the two drums of gas; we put it down in the ocean and floated it to them.

When we got to Malaysia, one of the islands called Pulau Bidong, we were so happy. We said, "Alright! We're going to have Coke and apples!" When we got in, the government in that refugee camp would shoot into the sky and warn us not to go anywhere near [to the shore.] They sent one of the Vietnamese men to swim to our boat and tell us that we had to go to Kuala Lumpur and that's where they would take care of the paperwork and then [afterwards] we could come here. Otherwise they would not let us go in there.

18:03

As he was telling us that, our boat was drifting to the backside of the island, and there was a Vietnamese guy who was standing on the rock; he shouted out and told us to break the water pump to sink the boat. Sinking the boat was the only shortcut to getting on the island because otherwise, if you go to Kuala Lumpur, then you have to wait for the paper work. Sometimes the boat would have to be at sea for two weeks before getting to go onto the Island.

Anyways, we sunk the boat and swam in. They were so angry at us, but they saw that the boat was sinking and they pointed the gun at everybody and made us all sit down. We were very scared and did not know what was going on. They actually beat up the captain because they were angry

that even when they told us not to go in, we went in. We said that so much water came into the boat and we were scared the boat was going to sink.

That night we slept on the beach and continued to stay there for three months. In October and November, the water was getting so close to where we were, we knew we were going to have to move further inside because we could not live on the beach anymore.

20:08

Jackie

So, what were the general conditions of when you were on the refugee camp?

Julie

Very crowded and dirty because people did not organize anything. When I jumped out of the boat, I got bruises on my legs. Although I tried the best I could to keep it clean, it looked to be in pretty bad condition. It was lucky that my brother in law's brother happened to be a doctor ended up in Pulau Bidong. He came to look for us because he heard that we had ended up on this island. He came to look for us and he treated my bruise on my knees, and he said, "Otherwise, if you don't treat it, it could get infected in a few days." I was so lucky about that.

21:18

Jackie

While you were on the refugee island, where was the rest of your family?

Julie

My parents still lived in Vietnam with my brother and some sisters who had married. A year later, my parents would also leave Vietnam.

Jackie

Did they have to leave by boat?

Julie

Yes, they also left by boat. They were robbed by Thai Pirates. My mom lost just about everything that she had brought with her- all the jewelry and gold. Whatever she had left over with her, they took everything, even the jade she was wearing on her wrist. She had painted it with nail polish so it would look yucky, but the pirates still said, "You take that off or we will cut your hand off to take that jade bracelet." She had to do everything she could to take it off and give it to them.

22:45

Jackie

Did they [your parents] stay in a refugee camp?

Julie

They stayed in an Indonesian camp, and they stayed there for more than a year with my sister and her family.

Jackie

Didn't you have sisters and brothers in other places in the world?

Julie

Yes. During the time we stayed in the refugee camp, we had a lot of countries come to interview us- like Canada, Australia, France, Germany, and the USA. Because we had relatives [in the US], a younger brother and a younger sister who came to the United States in 1975. The minute they heard we had ended up in that refugee camp, they went to the church and

asked for sponsors. I got a lady named Irene Brace who sponsored me and my sister and also Mr. and Mrs. Phillips sponsored us by taking care of paperwork, taking us to the hospital and dentist, and taking us to school and stuff like that.

Jackie Did you have correspondence with Auntie Irene when you were still in the refugee camp?

24:35

Julie No.

Jackie What were some of the questions you were asked when you were interviewed to immigrate to the US?

Julie They asked us if we were involved in some kind of communist organization. They also asked us if we were criminals and of course I was in jail but I was in jail because I had tried to leave the country.

Jackie What ultimately made you choose to come to the United States?

Julie Because I had family here.

Jackie If you didn't have family in the US would you have considered going to other places?

25:24

Julie We thought about that. We thought about going to Canada, but I'm glad that we did not because the United States is still the best country- that's what I always tell my kids, how lucky they are to have been born in this country.

Jackie I agree. [pause] Can you describe the situation of when you started living with Auntie Irene? Where were you?

Julie That city was called St Louis, Missouri.

Jackie Did you fly there? How did you transition after the refugee camp?

Julie I stayed in the refugee camp for eight months, and on the ninth month, they let us go to Kuala Lumpur, which is the big city of Malaysia to have a transition [time] for paperwork, before they would send us to America. We stayed there for one month and then we flew to San Francisco and then had a connecting flight. When we got down to San Francisco, we saw the cafeteria and we saw strawberries, and we wanted to eat them so much, but we didn't know what to say and we didn't have money either.

Jackie You were sent over without a translator or guide?

27:04

Julie We had a nun. She did not speak any Vietnamese; she was just supposed to take us to the airport and make sure we got onto the right flight. Then we flew to St. Louis.

Jackie When you flew to St. Louis and situated your life there, you lived with your sister? And did you continue school?

Julie I did not stay with my sister because she worked all the time and that's why she had to look for a sponsor. My younger sister Hong and I stayed with Mrs. Irene Brace who was a widow. My younger brother stayed with a couple called Mr. and Mrs. Atkins. My two younger nephews lived with my sister. We went to school everyday.

Jackie High school?

Julie No, because first we had to learn English, so they sent us to the International Institute.

Jackie What was your relationship like with Auntie Irene? Did you feel like it was more out of charity or like you were her second daughter?

Julie We felt like daughters to her because she was very sweet. At first, because we had a language problem- so every time we wanted to say something to her, we had to either use sign language or we would have to open the dictionary and try to find the word. Because of that, we learned English so fast. We had to think in English to speak to her.

29:16

Jackie How quickly would you say you became comfortable with English?

Julie Pretty fast. I went to the International Institute to learn English and they taught English to all the foreigners. They would let us take the tests to see what level you are. At the beginning, I was in the very beginners level. I had to start learning from A-B-C-Ds and then every month they would have a test for you to take to see where your new level is. Every month I would move up a level. In seven months, I finally finished. They said, "Alright, you already finished here- there's nothing more we can do." Then I wanted to go to college, but I didn't have my paperwork from my high school in Vietnam with me. So they said that I had to finish by getting at least a 'C' average for nine credits. If I passed that, I would be able to continue to go to school there.

Jackie And you did?

Julie I did, and I almost finished two years [of college], but then we had to move to another city. I needed a couple of credits more [to graduate] and I asked the principal to accept some of my electives to replace the credits for the PE class, but he wouldn't. Therefore, I didn't really have two years.

Jackie The whole time that you were transitioning into your new home in the United States, what were some of the things that you found similar between your home in Vietnam and your home in the US?

31:46

Julie Vietnam and here are totally different. First of all, in Vietnam I lived in the city. So pretty much we could just get out of our house and we could buy anything- food and everything. They had it along the road, but over here you have to have a car. You have to have someone drive you just about everywhere.

Jackie What were some of your favorite differences when you came to the US?

Julie The food- the food here is totally different. Also, we didn't see a lot of Vietnamese or Chinese people around Kirkwood- that was where we were staying. The people were very nice. Another difference was religion. We had to go to church every Sunday with my sponsor. Although we did not understand much, I liked the music they sung at church. I met my husband a year and a half later [after coming to the US] at a party, and we got married after six months. My first daughter's name is Jennifer, and we lived in St. Louis for about five years.

Jackie Do you think of yourself as an American or a Texan now? Do you still consider yourself Vietnamese?

33:50

Julie I think of myself as American. I think of myself as a Texas too. In Texas, the weather is very close to the weather in Vietnam, and I guess that's why there are a lot of Asians who live in this state; also, we have a lot of Asian food here, too.

Jackie Do you consider yourself more Vietnamese or Chinese?

Julie Chinese. Although I speak Vietnamese better, but because both of my parents are Chinese and because I went to Chinese school most of my childhood.

Jackie Why do you think your sisters and brothers who also have two Chinese parents consider themselves to be more Vietnamese than Chinese?

Julie Because some of my brothers, especially the older ones, went to school before there were Chinese schools. They only went to Vietnamese school, so they identify more with the Vietnamese than the Chinese.

Jackie Did you ever hold a job after moving to the US?

Julie Yes, after I got out of the International Institute, I asked my sponsor to help me find a job. My first job was at Coney Island, which is a place that serves desserts and snacks in West County in Kirkwood city. I worked there for six months, but I wanted to work in an office. I took some classes at night at Merrimac College, so I wanted to work in an office instead. My sister's sponsor just happened to be President of May Company. He helped me get a job and I worked in Record Retention. I was so happy to work there because this way I could do my homework. I just liked working in an office more. I worked there for two years, and when my first daughter Jennifer was born, I decided to stay home and take care of her.

Jackie During these endeavors, when you were going to International school, Merrimac College, and during your job, how did you feel American's perceived you?

Julie They were very nice and very helpful. I couldn't have asked for better.

Jackie Did you ever feel people just felt sorry for you or were they just genuinely nice?

Julie I think they were just genuinely nice people.

37:14

Jackie When did you get your citizenship?

Julie My husband is from the Phillipines and he came to this country in 1977. He got his citizenship first. When I got married, I could apply for my citizenship sooner. I got my citizenship in 1983.

Jackie In what ways have you been able to keep your Chinese and Vietnamese heritage?

Julie Living here in Texas, you pretty much can keep that because you can see a lot of Vietnamese and Chinese people. There's Chinatown.

Jackie Do you still practice a lot of the same festivals or traditions that you used to in Vietnam?

Julie Some- like the Moon Festival. We would have moon cake and at New Year's we would give red envelopes, which is called hong bao.

Jackie In what ways do you feel that some of the culture has been lost since you've come to the US?

39:11

Julie Well, sometimes because we're so used to the American calendar, we don't keep track of all the cultural activities. Also, we don't live that close to Chinatown.

Jackie Are there any other specific memories that you'd like to share that I didn't go over?

Julie All I can say is that life in the refugee camp was really miserable- the conditions and everything- but I had a lot of friends there, so that made up for everything. Thinking back, if I had to do it all again, I would. I would still have left Vietnam and come here so I can have a better future and my children can have a better future.

Jackie Do you ever think about going back to Vietnam?

Julie Maybe someday. Right now because its' under Communists, I still don't feel comfortable. I paid so much and it almost cost my life to come to this country and I don't trust to go back there and something will happen over there and that's why I still hesitate to go back to Vietnam at this point.

41:05

Jackie Do you still keep in touch with anybody who is still in Vietnam?

Julie No- because most of my family is here. Some of my aunt's are still there, but it's more like my older sisters still keep in touch with them.

Jackie What are some ties you still have with Vietnam? Could you tell the story about your house? How they recently contacted you?

Julie After fifteen years, they told one of our relatives to contact us, and tell us that if we wanted to return to Vietnam to take the house back and fix it up. They would let us. We had one year to go back and make a claim for it. Out of all of our family, none of us wanted to go back. Why would we do that? We left that place because we didn't want to have anything to do with communists. Why would we go back there?

Anyways, five years later, they put our house on sale for 350,000 USD and they want whoever to buy that property to fix it and take off one of the floors; it used to have seven floors but now it only had six floors because

they had taken it off for construction purposes. The house leaned forward a little bit. Now they turned that house into a mini-hotel.

Jackie If you went back to Vietnam, do you think you would stay in your old house?

Julie Maybe

Jackie I know you like Paris by Night and Vietnamese music- do you have a specific song that reminds you of your experiences and memories in Vietnam?

Julie I don't know. I like a lot of Vietnamese songs but at this moment, I cannot think of which song.

Jackie Is there anything else you would like to share? Perhaps something you think I missed? What are your greatest hopes for your children as Vietnamese/Chinese Americans?

Julie I'm very happy that my three children Jennifer, Jacquelyn and Kevin grew up in this country. We've moved to many places and we like Texas a lot, except for having to run away from hurricanes. I'm so pleased that Jacquelyn goes to UT and has a bright future. My oldest daughter and Kevin might go to UT also.

45:30

Jackie Do you think any aspects of American culture has influenced your children negatively?

Julie No. They are very great; this is the best country compared to the rest of the countries that came to interview us. We waited so long, we just wanted to go anywhere they would accept us, but I'm glad that we did not.

Jackie I'm very glad that you are here as well. Thank you for your interview and your time. It's been a very beneficial experience and I look forward to sharing it with everyone else.

Julie My pleasure.

Excerpts

Subject: Education

Name Transcript

2:54

Julie: I went to Chinese school in the morning and Vietnamese school in the afternoon. We had to go home for lunch and for nap time and then we'd go back to school for Vietnamese class in the afternoon.

3:10

Julie Yeah, I had to defend myself. You see, I played with Vietnamese and Chinese friends but some of them would just stay with the Chinese or stay with the Vietnamese and sometimes I don't like the way they talk. They would segregate themselves.

3:20

Jackie Okay, so you felt like you belonged to both groups.

3:23

Julie Right.

4:38

Julie: Well, the Vietnamese school continued for 3 weeks after that, but they stopped the Chinese school.

4:47

Julie We couldn't go to school anymore because the communists took over all the families that had money and were considered wealthy- our family was one of them. They took my parents assets- everything- and they put us in jail for about three months.

Subject: Pre and Post Vietnam War- Daily Life Interrupted

Name Transcript

3:45

Julie: Yeah! My parents let me do everything you know; so, I had a happy childhood. Sometimes we would rent a canoe- actually someone would just take us to a certain place of the river and we would swim there at 5:30 in the morning for one hour, and then we would come back and change and eat breakfast and go to school. We would do that a few times every week.

4:30

Julie Yes. Yes and no because- let's see- I still went to school but I think it was different and it changed a lot after the communists won the war. It was a very sad day; you woke up one day and people were in fear and they had to put red flags all over the city, which is the communist flag. If you rode

your bike around the city, you would feel like you don't belong there. It was really sad.

8:12

Julie

After the war, all the teenagers were sent to the countryside to do farming. Girls could sometimes go to an organization and work on weaving baskets- I did that for a while- so that way I didn't have to go to the farm to do farming, but my brothers had to.

Subject: The Escape

Name Transcript

8:09

Julie

Later on, my family saw that we didn't have any future in Vietnam, so they tried to pay an organization that would buy a boat that would let the people leave the country illegally. The first time, I got cheated. We lost some money and got thrown in jail.

10:21

Julie

It was the boat people and the government who were corrupt. They took our money and pretended; they sent us to the boat and we had gone only one mile and then we were caught.

10:58

Julie

The second time, the government knew that they could make so much money this way; if these people don't want to stay here, why not just let them go and then take all our assets and money and everything. So, they allowed the people to leave the country legally, you just had to pay a lot of money if you could afford it. My parents would get their gold out- of course only after they put us in jail for three months and they couldn't find any of our gold; so, when we came out and got back to our house. They only let us get our clothing and then we had to rent another apartment and stay there. While we stayed there, the gold we had hidden in the countryside, where we have a summerhouse. Later on, when everything calmed down, we slowly dug the gold up and used it to survive and pay for the trip to come to the United States- to pay for the people who organized the boat.

13:48

Julie

I would say my boat was very small. Maybe it was about twenty-five feet long and about ten feet wide and it was one of the fisherman's boat and they fit like a hundred or a hundred and fifty people in there, mostly children and women.

13:59

Julie

No, the two boats were totally different and had different people. I'm talking about the boat that I actually escaped on. The first one was a similar boat but we only had two families on that boat, but the second boat was legally, so they wanted to put as many people on that boat. They don't

care if you live or die as long as they take your money. I left with my younger sister, my older brother, and my two nephews. They pushed us all into the cabin where they usually kept the fish- they kept all the people down there. We were so sick and we could not breathe. During the second day, we were about to get to the border of Vietnam when we got into a storm that was really strong and our water pump broke. The captain used to be a soldier and so he was so afraid that we would have to turn around, but he knew if we continued going, we would die at sea. He finally decided that we had to go into this island, which they used to keep really dangerous prisoners. We went there and had shelter for one week.

14:38

Jackie

Do you know the name of that island?

14:40

Julie

Dao Côn Sơn

Jackie

What year did you leave Vietnam?

Julie

1979

Jackie

What month?

Julie

July

14:49

Julie

After that week, they contacted the mainland center, asking to send someone out to replace the water pump. Then we continued to go, and this time they would not let us take too much clothing and everybody only had three outfits because they were afraid the boat would be too heavy. We left Dao Côn Sơn and after one or two days, we saw a pirate boat. We tried to go over to them to ask them for directions to get to the refugee camp and for some reason they ran away from us. We were told that we were very lucky. Maybe because our boat was so small, it didn't look like we would have a lot of money and it wasn't worth it for them to come near us. They actually ran away from us, and then we were just drifting at sea for another day.

Then we saw another fisherman's boat; this one was from Malaysia. We asked them by using sign language to ask them where the refugee camp was. They said they would show us the way, but they wanted our gas tank. We saw no point in having the gas tank with us, so we agreed to trade. They pointed out the direction of the refugee camp and took the two drums of gas; we put it down in the ocean and floated it to them.

When we got to Malaysia, one of the islands called Pulau Bidong, we were so happy. We said, "Alright! We're going to have Coke and apples!" When we got in, the government in that refugee camp would shoot into the sky and warn us not to go anywhere near [to the shore.] They sent one of the Vietnamese men to swim to our boat and tell us that we had to go to

Kuala Lumpur and that's where they would take care of the paperwork and then [afterwards] we could come here. Otherwise they would not let us go in there.

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Anyways, we sunk the boat and swam in. They were so angry at us, but they saw that the boat was sinking and they pointed the gun at everybody and made us all sit down. We were very scared and did not know what was going on. They actually beat up the captain because they were angry that even when they told us not to go in, we went in. We said that so much water came into the boat and we were scared the boat was going to sink.

That night we slept on the beach and continued to stay there for three months. In October and November, the water was getting so close to where we were, we knew we were going to have to move further inside because we could not live on the beach anymore.

20:08

Jackie

So, what were the general conditions of when you were on the refugee camp?

Julie

Very crowded and dirty because people did not organize anything. When I jumped out of the boat, I got bruises on my legs. Although I tried the best I could to keep it clean, it looked to be in pretty bad condition. It was lucky that my brother in law's brother happened to be a doctor ended up in Pulau Bidong. He came to look for us because he heard that we had ended up on this island. He came to look for us and he treated my bruise on my knees, and he said, "Otherwise, if you don't treat it, it could get infected in a few days." I was so lucky about that.

Subject: Family Matters

Name Transcript

5:21

Jackie Where did your family's wealth come from?

Julie My dad started with a coal and salt business, and he built it up from there. Later on, he had enough money and he built up a hardware business.

Jackie Besides what you just told me, did you feel like the war affected you and your family in any other ways?

Julie Yes, a lot- we used to have a house and all of a sudden, we didn't have anything. It was lucky that my parents hid away gold, so later on we used that gold to pay for our journey to come to this country.

21:18

Jackie While you were on the refugee island, where was the rest of your family?

Julie My parents still lived in Vietnam with my brother and some sisters who had married. A year later, my parents would also leave Vietnam.

Jackie Did they have to leave by boat?

Julie Yes, they also left by boat. They were robbed by Thai Pirates. My mom lost just about everything that she had brought with her- all the jewelry and gold. Whatever she had left over with her, they took everything, even the jade she was wearing on her wrist. She had painted it with nail polish so it would look yucky, but the pirates still said, "You take that off or we will cut your hand off to take that jade bracelet." She had to do everything she could to take it off and give it to them.

22:45

Jackie Did they [your parents] stay in a refugee camp?

Julie They stayed in an Indonesian camp, and they stayed there for more than a year with my sister and her family.

Jackie Didn't you have sisters and brothers in other places in the world?

Julie Yes. During the time we stayed in the refugee camp, we had a lot of countries come to interview us- like Canada, Australia, France, Germany, and the USA. Because we had relatives [in the US], a younger brother and a younger sister who came to the United States in 1975. The minute they heard we had ended up in that refugee camp, they went to the church and asked for sponsors. I got a lady named Irene Brace who sponsored me and my sister and also Mr. and Mrs. Phillips sponsored us by taking care of paperwork, taking us to the hospital and dentist, and taking us to school and stuff like that.

41:05

Jackie Do you still keep in touch with anybody who is still in Vietnam?

Julie No- because most of my family is here. Some of my aunt's are still there, but it's more like my older sisters still keep in touch with them.

41:48

Julie After fifteen years, they told one of our relatives to contact us, and tell us that if we wanted to return to Vietnam to take the house back and fix it up.

They would let us. We had one year to go back and make a claim for it. Out of all of our family, none of us wanted to go back. Why would we do that? We left that place because we didn't want to have anything to do with communists. Why would we go back there?

Anyways, five years later, they put our house on sale for 350,000 USD and they want whoever to buy that property to fix it and take off one of the floors; it used to have seven floors but now it only had six floors because they had taken it off for construction purposes. The house leaned forward a little bit. Now they turned that house into a mini-hotel.

Subject: Coming to America

Name Transcript

24:37

Jackie What were some of the questions you were asked when you were interviewed to immigrate to the US?

Julie They asked us if we were involved in some kind of communist organization. They also asked us if we were criminals and of course I was in jail but I was in jail because I had tried to leave the country.

Jackie What ultimately made you choose to come to the United States?

Julie Because I had family here.

Jackie If you didn't have family in the US would you have considered going to other places?

25:32

Julie We thought about that. We thought about going to Canada, but I'm glad that we did not because the United States is still the best country- that's what I always tell my kids, how lucky they are to have been born in this country.

26:58

Julie I stayed in the refugee camp for eight months, and on the ninth month, they let us go to Kuala Lumpur, which is the big city of Malaysia to have a transition [time] for paperwork, before they would send us to America. We stayed there for one month and then we flew to San Francisco and then had a connecting flight. When we got down to San Francisco, we saw the cafeteria and we saw strawberries, and we wanted to eat them so much, but we didn't know what to say and we didn't have money either.

Jackie You were sent over without a translator or guide?

27:04

Julie We had a nun. She did not speak any Vietnamese; she was just supposed to take us to the airport and make sure we got onto the right flight. Then we flew to St. Louis.

Jackie When you flew to St. Louis and situated your life there, you lived with your sister? And did you continue school?

Julie I did not stay with my sister because she worked all the time and that's why she had to look for a sponsor. My younger sister Hong and I stayed with Mrs. Irene Brace who was a widow. My younger brother stayed with a couple called Mr. and Mrs. Atkins. My two younger nephews lived with my sister. We went to school everyday.

45:34

Julie This is the best country compared to the rest of the countries that came to interview us. We waited so long, we just wanted to go anywhere they would accept us, but I'm glad that we did not.

Summary

When we got to Malaysia, one of the islands called Pulau Bidong, we were so happy. We said, "Alright! We're going to have Coke and apples!" [But then,] the government [officials] in that refugee camp shot into the sky and warned us not to go anywhere near [the shore.] There was a Vietnamese guy who was standing on the rock; he shouted out and told us sinking the boat was the only shortcut to getting on the island. We sank the boat and swam in. They were so angry at us—they pointed the gun at everybody and made us all sit down. We were very scared and did not know what was going on. They beat up the captain because they were angry that we went in even when they told us not to. That night we slept on the beach and continued to stay there for three months.

In the transcription of my mother's interview, I have chosen to correct grammar in some instances such as false starts but for the most part left her words in tact. I admire and love her very much and will always be profoundly thankful for everything she has accomplished in order to give me my life here in America.