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Name of Person Interviewed: Jimmy Trinh

00:34

Keyan: So you were in Vietnam until you were sixteen?

Jimmy: Right.

Keyan: How was it like growing up in Vietnam?

J: I was a young boy, so by the time I grow up, it was a pretty hard time over there. You before Vietnam war, everybody is poor. And we have to go to the new Communist rule. Everything is new. Even the school you have to study Communist. They force us to study Communist and all those theories. That's now reason why my parents send me away, cause they know that they don't have a future in Vietnam for me. Also, I told you about the when I'm eighteen, I'm going to go to the army. They draft me. So by 16, they send me away by a boat, escape, by myself. It costs a lot of money to escape. We can only afford to send one, me, one person to go. It cost my [unintelligible] 6 bar of gold, just to get on the boat. So my mom pay like 6 bar of gold just for me to get on the boat. And you have to pay in advance you know. So you know that's why I am the only one going first [chuckles].

K: You said you were the oldest son?

J: I'm the oldest son, but I also have an older sister. So I have actually, 3 sisters and one brothers. I am the oldest son and then I have an older sister and 2 younger sister. So does that answer your question?

K: Yeah, definitely. As far as, you said you go to school. Things, you know, for the family, and did you have any chores or a job or something like that?

J: No. By that time, there is no job for me. In Vietnam is pretty hard to find part-time job, for high school student. By that time, you know, like 1982-85, its pretty hard to find a job, even for adults. So there's no way you can find a job, part-time job for high school student.

[Pause]

K: I can assume that during the Vietnam War you were probably very young?

J: Yea, I was born 1970. So I am only 5 year old. You know, I was right, born right during the wartimes. 1970's. During the wartime. My dad is also one of the officer in the South Vietnam. He fighting along the Americans. He actually got injured, his leg, in 1969. He got discharge after that. But yea, so I was born 1970. Just during the wartime.

4:59

K: I don't know if you do remember anything from the war, but are there any stories that you – [Interrupted]

J: I mean, during the war. I remember, I still have very clear picture of 1975. Even though I 5 year old back then. And our house center of Saigon. I remember the [clears throat] street was all dirty and tanks. You know the Communist tanks were rolling through the cities. And grasses everywhere. And you even see some people laying on ground street and you know things like that. That one picture I could never forget. [Mumbles] 1975. Another thing is that my dad and me, we were boarding on the helicopter. We, me and my dad were on the helicopter, you know on the April 30th. So we are ready to take off and go, you know, to escape from Saigon maybe come to U.S. But by that time, my mom got pregnant. She's like 8 months pregnant, on my sister. So he decided to step down and get off the helicopter and stay back in Vietnam. So, because of that, you know, he was sent to re-education camp, just for stay back. If me and him stay on the helicopter, and we were able to came here from 1975, then who know what happen. Because he couldn't leave my mom behind with the pregnant babies, so my sister was born in 1975. She was born just a couple of months after that. So one of my sisters is here with me, she live here in Austin. She born in 1975. She actually became an optometrist now, she's an optometrist here.

[Friendly chat about glasses]

So that's one thing I still remember, because we were on the helicopter but my dad couldn't leave my mom behind. So he stepped down, get out, stay in Vietnam after that.

K: So your sister is here now. Do you have any other siblings or family that was in Vietnam that came over?

8:16

J: So, what happened is, I came – I escaped from Vietnam in '86. So my dad and my mom sent me on the boat to escape from Vietnam by myself. So I was on the boat for like 4 days, and we finally get to Malaysia, a refugee camp in Malaysia. On the way from Vietnam to Malaysia, we got the pirate. We got the Thailand pirate, they took everything from our boat. We were stopped by pirate from Thailand. They took everything from our boat. Good thing that they didn't take away any womens or anything like that. They didn't kill anybody. They just took watches and jewelries and thing like that. They didn't kill anybody. So we were finally get to Malaysia, 4 days later. [Phone ringing] I was stay in refugee camp, sorry. I was in refugee camp for like a years. So when I get on the

refugee camp I was like 16. I were a minor, because I didn't go with anybody. I stayed there for years then I able to come for to United States. I have an Uncle, one of my cousin, he live in Louisville, Kentucky. So he sponsor me to come here, come here to the State. So I came to the State and stayed at the refugee- at the his place in Kentucky for 6 months then I went to Chicago. So I move to Chicago, went to high school in Chicago, I finished high school in 3 years. And I worked my way up through college, I worked part time. Actually I do, I work full time, the last 2 years in college I work full time and go to school at night. So actually it took me 6 years to finish my college study, bachelor degree. But I was able to finish college Computer Science degree. Took 6 years but I was able to do that. Then I sponsor-I became a US citizen. So I came here in '87, in 1992 I became a US citizen. Then I filed sponsorship to bring my family here. I sponsor my mom, my dad, my brother and my sisters. So they able to bring them here 1994. So 2 years after I became US citizen I was able to bring them here. All the family were here and – [Interrupted]

K: Did they all come to Chicago?

J: Yea, they all came to Chicago. And they include the sister, my sister, the one born in 1975. She's the one that also optometrist there. So I able to brought them here, and they able to go to school here, get education here, they all finish college, and now they are doing good.

K: When you went to Chicago for high school, did you have any family or friends there?

J: I got a cousin of my mom, actually a cousin of my. I knew one guy there, he was single, so I was able to move in, stay with him. And go to school there, go to high school there.

K: But your Uncle was still in Kentucky?

J: My Uncle is still in Kentucky.

K: Your family now, are they here in Austin with you or are they in Chicago?

J: No, my mom is still in Chicago with my brothers. My dad passed away in 2002. But my mom still in Chicago. My mom, my brother, and my sister, my younger sister still in Chicago. I have one, the older sister is in Houston, Texas. And then the younger one is in Austin with me.

Nancy Bui: This is the eye doctor?

J: Yes, the eye doctor.

13:49

K: How was it in Malaysia, in the refugee camp?

J: Refugee camp is tough. [Pause] We didn't have enough food by then. When I were there, it was too crowded there. So every Monday there's a boat coming from the inland, coming and they would bring food in. So they give us one weeks of supplies for the whole food supplies for the whole weeks. But by the 3rd day, like by Wednesday, we all run out of food. [Chuckles] I was 16 by then, so we eat a lot. We always hungry and there's not enough food. So what we did was we normally went to the temple. They have a temple and a church on the islands there. And they have a lot of rice. We just get some rice back and just cook it. Cook rice and eat. Just deep fried. We have fried rice, everyday we had fried rice. In the morning we had fried rice, in the evening we had fried rice. But the last 3 days of the weeks, fried rice every day.

K: What kinds of food did they bring for the supplies?

J: So they bring in rice, they give you some sugar, some a little bit of everything. Like 2-3 eggs.

Nancy Bui: You have to cook them yourself right?

J: Yea, we have to cook. But we just, like I told you, for the first 3 days we ate all the supplies for the whole week. So they give you like 5 Instanoodle packet for the whole week but we put all together in one bowl and finish it in 2 days [chuckles]

K: Was there any time, towards the end of the week, the temple didn't have food, was there any hard or tough times?

J: There some people that were there, they some refugees was stay in the camp for a long time. For some reason, they couldn't go anywhere. No third party country that was willing to accept them. So they stay there for 2-3 years, 4-5 years. Those guy they have a business there too. They have relative sending them money. They got money, so sometime they donate to temple, to church. If you have money, you can buy food there. The Malaysian government, they have a market there that you can buy if you have money. Only the people that don't have money then they suffer, but if you have money you can buy food.

K: Did you make any friends there?

J: Yea, I make a few good friends over there. And I still keep in touch with a couple of them.

K: Did they come to the States?

J: I have a friends, that actually in Australia right now. One of them was my high school classmate. She live in California.

18:16

K: Was it hard coming into the US with your Uncle, as far as the governments, and crossing the border?

J: No, there's 2 ways to get for the US government to accept you to the US. Either, you are son or daughter of Vietnamese, South Vietnamese armies. So my dad who was officer for the South Vietnam, and I can provide the documents or paper, then the US government will allow me to come to the States. Or if you under 18, the US government will take you. Or another ways if you have a relatives in the States already, they can sponsor you from the refugee to the States. But if you do not belong to those, you don't have that, then you cannot go to the US. You have to go to other countries like Australia, Canadas, French.

K: So it was very easy for, you completed all the requirements.

J: I got the requirements. I was a minor and also I got the documents from my father. So I able to go quick, it only take me one years. Some other peoples they stay for 3, 4 years and still could not go.

20:00

K: Just one moment, excuse me. [Looking for camera]

[Nancy took this time to ask me a few demographic information]

[Nancy took some pictures with her own camera and excuses herself]

K: What University did you go to?

J: Went to the Chicago Illinois University.

K: You said you were working full time, did you work for the school?

J: So at eh beginning, I actually work at the Chinese restaurant as a waiter. And after couple months, I when I moved to Chicago, I worked at a video store. I work at a cashier, and a video man. It was a Vietnamese store, selling videos and music and things like that. And after that, I start work for PC companies. PC retails. PC companies that we build computers and selling computer parts. So I was working at a technician to build PC for them. After work in that place for couple years, I start working at the consultant for consulting company. A computer consulting company. I worked on that full time, went to school part time. So after that, after finish college I still work at the consulting and now in 2000 I moved to Austin and work for Dell computer. So right now I still work for them.

23:45

K: Was it hard to be here without your family, your friends and family?

J: In beginning, its tough. Its tough, because when I first came here I didn't speak a whole lot of English. Even though I study some English in Vietnam and some English in refugee camp, but still pretty new. When I were in high school, I got picked on by some bigger guy. And I remember when I were in PE class, I got picked on by some big guy and things like that. I mean, [pause] really is a [pause] that's just like small stuff. For what I have been through before. Like get on a boat, escape, it's a small boat, its like small fishing boat. You can get on the boat and go across the ocean and get the camp. So being picked on in high school is not , its not really. So just concentrate in study and finish. Took me only 3 year to finish high school. I were like junior in high school in Vietnam already. So when I start high school here, they put me in freshman and I already know the material, so I can skip a couple class and move up. But its hard, when you came here by yourself and don't know English. Then it's pretty hard. When I went Chicago, I had to walk to school everyday in the snow. That's really really hard. And you walk and you have to walk back and go to work, it tough. It tough. I don't know if I can do that now. It's amaze me how I can do that before, I don't think I can do that now. There's no way. By that time, you just do it, you don't think about it. Now, you put me on that, okay get on that fishing boat and try to escape again, there's no way. I would never step on that small boat. Imagine the fishing boat you try to cross the ocean, with that boat! No, there is no, no way I would get on that boat again. I think its happen to everybody by that time. Not just me, but all the peoples that live in that times. All the refugees that came around that time, they all doing the same things.

K: When you came to America, the culture I'm sure was very different. Did you find anything funny about our culture? Anything unique or something you weren't used to?

J: The cultures [pauses] I guess because I'm young I don't see a whole lot of different cultures. I was able to adapt to the culture here. Just try to learn, learn English. Try to pick up, just be just like everybody else, just blend in. Sometime it hard, like I said, In high school and have a very small room for Asian student there and I got picked on and things like that. But when I went to college, pretty much nobody pick on me any more. Cuz when you in college, its totally different, they don't pay attention to you. You work, do your own things and nobody. You know here, the hall is really big. You don't want to show up to class, its your loss. Who cares? It's different with high school. So I don't see a lot of culture shock or anything like that, maybe cuz I'm young.

29:31

K: As far as your Vietnamese culture, do you still practice Vietnamese culture? Do you think of yourself as more American now or Vietnamese?

J: Right now, myself, pretty much think like American peoples. But I still go back to my root. I still go to the temples, still go to Buddhist temple, still speak Vietnamese. And we still watch music, the videos, movies sometime. I still try to improve my language skills, still reading and things like that. But, yea, I mean I'm pretty much like Americans now. If you put me in Vietnam now, I wouldn't know what to do over there. I spend more than half of my life here. It's been like 21 years here? And I lived in Vietnam for only 16 years. I was too young to when I was in Vietnam. My whole life is here in the States.

K: Have you gone back to Vietnam yet?

J: Yea, I went back to Vietnam once in 2000. I went with my mom, just to visit. Over there, there is a lot of changing. I got lost, I tried to go back to my old high school, I got lost, I couldn't find a way around. Things change, but the Communist is still there. The Communist government is still there, they still control everybody and things like that. You don't have the freedom like you do here.

K: The Communists. Was it as bad as you remember when you were 16?

J: When I was 16, I didn't have a lot of interact with the Communist. My dad generation, my dad and my mom generation they were involved more. But I wasn't involved with the government that much. So when I grow up here, I look back and look at the history and the videos and all the documents I read, I can see how the Communist treat the Vietnamese people and it pretty bad. There's no human rights, they don't have human rights, they don't have freedom of speech and things like that. So when I went back to Vietnam in 2002, I have to be careful what I'm saying when I were there. So if I'm saying, I have to watch cause you don't want to say anything to offends the government. Something that's not good for the government, even though you saying the truth, you don't want to say it out loud.

33:48

K: Is there a song or music that reminds you of Vietnam?

J: Yea, when I was in the refugee camp. Every week, there's people coming and going. People over there, long time, it was their time to go to leave to the States or some other country. They always played the same song, that same song over and over when people leave. So when I first get on and listen to that song and it make me feel blue. Thinking "Oh man, when I going to leave here?" But finally my turn come, they play the same song for me when I leave the islands. So that one of the song I never forget. I can write out the song name for you if you want.

K: What is the name of the song?

J: The name of the song in Vietnamese is NGHIN TRUNG XA CACH.

K: What does that mean or translate to?

J: This is far away, after this going to be far away. We will never see each other again. It's like goodbye song. [Writes song name]

K: When you heard it when it was your turn to go, was it the same sadness or was it happy?

J: It bring goosebump to my spine, even now when I listen to that song it bring goosebump to me. That same singer that sing that song. It special, meaning song. I think like 99% of Vietnamese population that refugee, they know about this song by this famous singer here.

K: Is there anything else you would like to share?

J: What else you want to know? This is not for your project? Anything else you want to know or learn about?

[Small discussion about project]

J: The interesting thing is, the time I spent in the refugee camp. Even though we waiting and we don't what happen, but it's a fun time. Maybe cause I'm only 16 by then, so I'm like carefree. But we were there, just even though we don't have enough food, at least we were free to do whatever we want. We could go swimming, we could go worship everyday, we go do volunteer work and clean up around the camps. It was a memorable time, fun time for me. I think it's the same for all the people whoever stay at the refugee camp there. They never forget that time. But after that, you come to the States, it's all about- you came here you go in a cycle. You have to follow the cycle. So to go really fast, you cannot slow down. You have to work, earn your living, earn your education. You just go, you just work and go through the whole cycle. Now, its getting better. I finally can say, it slow down a little bit, I can take vacation if I want to. It's a long journey, and I'm really grateful for this country, for America that's allowed me to come here and escape from the Communist region and have a freedom life here. Earn my education and things like that. That's why they call that this land the promised land. You can do anything you want, as long as legal [chuckles]. So I'm really grateful that America gave opportunity to come here, I don't have to deal with the Communists anymore.

40:00

K: Do you ever think about how it would be different if you didn't come?

J: Yea, I look back and thought about it sometime. It could be millions of things happen by now. You never know. I could be die, as I said, if I was in Vietnam I would be enrolled in armies. And I have to go fight with the Cambodia, the Chinese people. So who knows what happen, I might be dead by now. Nobody knows. But one thing I know for sure, I wouldn't be as freedom as I am right now. I wouldn't be able to gain the knowledge, the education that I have right now if I stay in Vietnam.

K: Nancy was saying that you got married a few months ago?

J: Yes, in July.

K: Any children planned?

J: Yea, we planning. We waiting. I want to have a kid before I'm 50 [laughs]. I'm 38 now.

K: May I ask how did you guys met?

J: I met in Austin.

K: Is she Vietnamese as well?

J: Yes. She is Vietnamese also.

K: As far as the future goes, do you guys speak Vietnamese with each other?

J: Yes, we do.

K: Whenever you do have children, how would you teach them?

J: When we have children, the first thing we would try to keep or Vietnamese heritage. Cause when the kid born here, you don't have to worry about them learning English, because they will learn that in school. But if you don't teach them Vietnamese, they will forget Vietnamese. You don't have to worry about teach English, they will teach in school. But we would try to teach them Vietnamese and keep the Vietnamese heritage.

J: You have to write an essay about this?

K: [Explain in further detail about project] Anything else you would like to add?

43:45

J: My journey is not as bad as other people. I had a friend that I met at the refugee camp and his boat was on the ocean for like month and half and my trip was 4 days. From Vietnam to refugee camp in Malaysia it was 45 days. It's a big boat, but they got robbed by the pirates like 10 times. A woman got raped and they took the women away. So when he, the friend, came to the refugee camp, for the first month and half, he was scared of the ocean. He would never stepped in the ocean. We went swimming at the seashore and he just play on the shore. He was so afraid of the ocean for month and half. He was so afraid of everythings, because he went through too much drama on that boat. But after couple he got better and he able to act normals and go swimming and things like that. So, there is lot of stories about different refugees. I got lucky too. My journey is long journey but I got lucky I able to go through without any real damage. I didn't loss anybodies. But I knew some families, they lost whole families. Whole families, just one person survived. The husband, wife, daughters – they tie up, the Thailand pirate, they tie up the husband right there and they rape the wife, the daughter right in front of him. So there are some horrible stories about refugees. So compared with other people, I am pretty lucky.

K: That is good for you. Did your wife go through the same kind of experience?

J: No, she didn't. So that's good thing. [pause] Anything you want to know? Anything else? You think you're good for your project?

47:05

K: Ya, its great!

J: Okay, thanks. Good luck in school.

K: Yea, I need to work as hard as you did.

J: yea, that's one thing I look back. I want to appreciate. Sometimes I see, I'm afraid of my kid, the next generation, my kid, my grandkid, they wouldn't appreciate what happened. Right now I saw my nephew, they take thing for granted. Everything is ready. They want a video game, okay, their parents will pay for it. But they didn't know how hard their parents had to go through to get to today. They don't know that. That why one thing we want to preserve the history, the Vietnamese history. So that the next generation can look back and appreciate what their parents and their grandparents been through, so they don't take things for granted.

K: My parents are the same way. [Story of my mother's journey as a refugee]

Thank you very much. Have a good day!

49:30

Summary

The interesting thing is, the time I spent in the refugee camp. Even though we waiting and we don't know what happen, but it's a fun time. Maybe cause I'm only 16 by then, so I'm like carefree. But we were there, just even though we don't have enough food, at least we were free to do whatever we want. We could go swimming, we could go worship everyday, we go do volunteer work and clean up around the camps. It was a memorable time, fun time for me. I think it's the same for all the people whoever stay at the refugee camp there. They never forget that time. But after that, you come to the States, it's all about- you came here you go in a cycle. You have to follow the cycle. So to go really fast, you cannot slow down. You have to work, earn your living, earn your education. You just go, you just work and go through the whole cycle. Now, its getting better. I finally can say, it slow down a little bit, I can take vacation if I want to.

Mr. Trinh's words are very direct about his life. I think that correcting it into "proper" English would take away from his words and the story.

I find it interesting that in what some would call a hard time in his life, he found it to be the best time. It is a theme I have seen many times. For example, I have met religiously oppressed prisoners tell of their time in jail. They would make jokes about how many lashes they received each day. Also, many students in college extremely dislike the suffering of studies and tests, but looking back, everyone agrees that it was the best years of their life. What you may think is suffering and hardship can easily be an enjoyable and rewarding time.

