

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRENDAN LY

An Oral History Conducted by Cecilia Winchell and Stefani Evans

Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islander
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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Oral History Project

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The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews with permission of the narrator.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islanders Oral History Project.

Claytee D. White
Director, Oral History Research Center
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PREFACE

“Whatever way it moves forward, I don’t mind helping to make the valley a better city.”

It was by chance that Brendan Ly ended up in Las Vegas, but the rest of his life has been built of nothing but perseverance and hard work. Born in 1973 in Da Nang, Vietnam to a family of nine, his earliest memories were of escaping the country in a boat. After a brief stop in a Hong Kong refugee camp, Ly and his family ended up in frigid Raleigh, North Carolina where he recalls their shock at its frigid climate. Deciding to flock to warmer weathers and relatives, Ly’s family relocated to San Jose, California where he would spend his formative years.

During these years, Ly describes the countless hardships he faced including language barriers, bullying, discrimination, and the various jobs he worked to help support the family. Among them included berry picking, theme park attendant, catering, and working in his family’s mini-mart. No stranger to the tougher things in life, Ly’s steady attitude towards life is reflected throughout his story. After starting college at San Jose State University and deciding that engineering wasn’t for him because of its lack of diversity, Ly chose to study biochemistry and then later ended in Xavier University’s pharmacy program. Through a metaphorical role of the dice, Ly came to Las Vegas post-graduation and has stayed ever since.

Following some time working for Walgreens, Ly and his brother collaborated to open their own pharmacy. Throughout the rest of the interview, he also talks about the traditional Vietnamese view on marriage, the cultural traditions he has kept alive, including a lobster-style dish that is always a hit at Christmastime. He discusses the uptick in discrimination against the AAPI community since the Covid-19 pandemic including two specific cases he experienced at his own pharmacy. Throughout the entire interview, Ly’s steadfast and humble attitude towards life resonates in conjunction with the ups and downs of his own experience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Interview with Brendan Ly

March 27, 2021

in Las Vegas, Nevada

Conducted by Cecilia Winchell

Preface.....iv

Ly begins with his life in Vietnam. Coming from a large family of nine during the Vietnam War, many of his first memories are related to their escape from Vietnam. He details their journey to their first stop in Hong Kong where they stayed at a refugee camp as well as their later sponsorship to the United States. First landing in North Carolina then later moving to San Jose, California, Ly discusses some of the obstacles he encountered while growing up including what it was like to learn English as well as bullying.....1-12

Ly goes into the various jobs he and his family took on throughout his childhood including fruit picking, restaurant work, theme park attendant, catering, as well as what it was like to own a mini-mart. He talks about how working his whole life affected his education and how he became a better student including trying out activities such as tennis. After high school, Ly recounts the story of how he ended up getting into the pharmacy program and some of the obstacles he encountered being a first-generation college student. He also recounts how he ended up in Las Vegas as well as the differences between Las Vegas and other cities.....12-25

Ly remembers some of his first memories in Las Vegas including how he met his wife. He discusses what he thinks of the changes that have happened in the past twenty years. Ly recalls the process of starting his own pharmacy after having worked for Walgreens. A joint venture with his brother, opening this business helped to root both of their lives in Las Vegas. He also mentions some of the community activities he has participated in. Next, he returns to the topic of his grandparents by discussing their arranged marriage and how traditions have modernized over time. Along these lines, he talks about Chinese New Year and the food practices they have adopted for various holidays.....25-35

Ly details some the racially motivated discrimination he has experienced since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. He expresses his own views on where he sees these actions come from, how he feels about it, and how he chooses to react to them. Finally, he returns to a couple of topics including what he remembers about his days in Vietnam, his experience in Hong Kong's refugee camp, his time in San Jose, how he sees the Black Lives Matter movement relating to the Asian community, and touches on his siblings.....35-47



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Good morning. Today's date is March 27th of 2021. My name is Cecilia Winchell. I am here joined by Stefani Evans, as well as Brendan Ly.

Could you please spell your name for the recording?

Sure. My name is Brendan, B-R-E-N-D-A-N. Last name is Ly, L-Y.

Thank you. To start off, we're going to just be asking you about your childhood. If you could tell us about where you grew up, as well as your family, schooling, anything. Thank you.

Sure. I was born back in Da Nang, Vietnam. Living back in those times was very tough in Vietnam because I was born during that time when there was war between the U.S. and Vietnam. Every day was not the same; it was always different. Up until now, the development of Vietnam is a lot different now than back then. I was so little back then even to remember much about it, even to remember the family's life. We were actually a family of nine at that time. I have a younger sister when we arrived to United States; there was another sister that came here, arrived. But back then we were a family of nine, so it was not easy for my parents to raise those kids during those times, especially seven of us. I was real young during the time that there was a war going on. Basically, to talk about what happened back then, I really have a faint memory about it, not too much. I was too young. I hear stories about what happened and stuff like that, but just to go back in time I'm not sure childhood-wise.

I remember mostly when we left the country back in those times, back in '78-79, as refugees. We were running for our lives back then on a boat. To eventually get people to accept us to get on this boat was not easy, either. Luckily that was through an uncle who owned those boats, and we were able to get on this boat during that time. We faced what was talked about back then. There were tons of people that got on those boats. There was a lot. There wasn't any

room left even to fit anybody else. It was hundreds in a very small boat. We were just sailing through those times just to reach cities, anywhere. Basically, during that time when we arrived we were close to the border of Hong Kong. That's where we were close enough to where they could pick us up during those times.

The thing about traveling during those times on the boat, we didn't have water or food to eat during all those times. There were a lot of sick people. Some people didn't make it. It was pretty bad. By the time we arrived in Hong Kong, I still remember those times even though I was still very young, but I still remember some parts of it. But there were a lot of boats at that time and a lot of people during that time as well.

When we got to Hong Kong, I saw tons of people in the refugee area. Most likely they were setting up as a camp. I guess during this time they called it a refugee camp or a concentration camp where everybody is trying to get together, trying to get their families together. Those times were very tough as well back in the late '70s. Basically just to live day by day, it was rough because there wasn't any space or a place for somebody to lay down or something like that. Family of nine, it was not easy to get them together, to keep them where they are and other stuff like that, and so surviving was not easy. It was pretty tough and rough especially every day, there was a curfew, and you cannot be out during certain hours because all those policemen or guards were there to monitor. If you step out of bounds, they use a water hose and hose you down. It's not easy even if it's time to go get water, if time passes and you don't go back to where you live, they water you down and it's not easy. It's tough even to get food and stuff like that as well. Basically, it's harsh during this time, and that was at least nine to ten months at the camp we had to wait before anyone sponsored us to get us to the United States.



Times photo by Dixie Varven

Marjorie Gelbin greets Ly family
Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship is sponsoring them

Vietnamese family is reunited

After eight months of travel, the Ly Van Khue family arrived at Raleigh-Durham Airport Thursday for a joyous reunion with relatives who came to Raleigh as refugees last year.

Ly, his pregnant wife and their seven children ranging in age from 4 to 16 years old were reunited at the airport with Ly's brother and his family, whom they hadn't seen

in almost a year, said Marjorie Gelbin of the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship, sponsor for the family.

Mrs. Gelbin said the Ly family, a "boat family," escaped from Vietnam to Hong Kong last June.

"They're a very lovely family," said Mrs. Gelbin who met the Lys at the airport along with a Viet-

namese interpreter from Meredith College.

Mrs. Gelbin said Ly, an auto mechanic, has several job offers and will be able to go to work soon. The family will stay temporarily with a church family until they can be settled in a permanent home.

The Ly family is the first refugee family sponsored by the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship.

We were lucky enough to have a sponsor that sponsored us at that time, and we are grateful for this couple that got us to the United States. At that time, we were blessed that we got the news that we were able to travel and get out from there, not as a lot of other people were, and especially it's not easy to get a sponsor to get nine people from there to United States, and that's for a sponsor to get us there, that was a blessing.



Staff photo by Dixie D. Vernon

Refugee family arrives

The family of Ly Van Khue is welcomed at Raleigh-Durham Airport Thursday by members of the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship of Raleigh. Ly, his

wife and seven children are Vietnamese refugees who were brought to Raleigh by the church.

During our arrival to the United States, I remember I was about six years of age when I arrived. It was on the East Coast where we landed in North Carolina, the city of Raleigh, and when we got there, it was completely two different worlds. From where we were to where we were at, it was completely different. Raleigh, North Carolina during that time was so, so nice. When we made it to U.S. land, it was a complete turnaround for us. Up until now I still remember what happened when I arrived in the United States. I was so young back then, too, but I still have some feelings for the people who sponsored us. We are very grateful up until today for what they did for us and how they got us there to begin with.

As a child growing up in United States, it wasn't easy because English was more like my second language, and it was hard even to speak English. I was too young even to learn English back home. They didn't teach me during that time I was in school. When I got here, to be able to

go into school and to learn English, I was struggling for years and years because it's not easy to adapt to a different culture. The reason my parents got us from Vietnam to here is because they wanted to provide us a good education, to provide us that. I mean, that's why they wanted the help because we didn't have that back in our country. That's the reason why when we got here, I mean, I took it a step at a time to learn the language. At the time it was like taking baby steps up until six years of age.

We didn't know anybody in the country at that time on the East Coast when we came in. It was pretty rough for our family, for my parents trying to find jobs and trying to provide for us at that time. I owe a lot to my parents, what they did for us. Now they live in San Jose, California. That's where they're at right now. They're doing great. They both are retired, but right now they're very healthy and all good stuff like that even though my dad is in his eighties right now.

But going back to North Carolina, for him to find jobs, he started out doing mining. I was too young to even know what he was doing in mining. It was a tough job, as he described it, for not too long, though. My mom was trying to do cleaning stuff. We stayed in North Carolina only about a year or so because the weather there was just so harsh. We couldn't handle it because where we lived in Vietnam, the weather was so warm and humid. Arriving in another country, a different type of climate, it was not easy. For us to even handle a foot of snow, even if we put on tons of clothing and mittens, we still couldn't handle it. Our hands would crack. It was tough.



By the time we knew we couldn't live there anymore, that we couldn't survive, we had to leave that state and move over to San Jose, California where some of my relatives—my mom's relatives—lived. They would shelter us at that time as well. Up until then I still remember that living back in those times was not easy, even in the United States. It was harsh. But we were trying to survive, and my parents were trying to provide a better living place for us. San Jose had a lot of better conditions. Even though it was cold, it wasn't snowing like North Carolina. We lived with a group in San Jose, California at that time. We started to see a lot more because a lot of people in San Jose were Asian American people. But in North Carolina, there were more

American people. We didn't see much Asian community there, so it was difficult. When we came to California, it was a lot better. We blended in a lot more and seeing our relatives, at least we knew we weren't alone during that time.



At that time I started going to school. Even though we lived in my aunt's place, it was so tight that we all had to squeeze in just to lay down, like no space where you rolled back and forth because the space is so small. It's like a two-bedroom place, but we all had to live in the living room space at that time. Space was limited where we grew up, especially since there were nine of us. My sister arrived, so it became ten of us during that time. My mom had to raise little babies when she grew up, but we managed to survive. We managed to survive during that time. Making an income was not easy for my parents, especially raising that many kids. Raising one or two kids is manageable, but raising eight kids total was not easy, including a baby. I considered myself still a baby at that time, at six years of age still a baby. I didn't know as much. I see there are other Asians.

During those times going to school was not easy, either. Even if you're speaking in the native language, you were speaking it, but understanding it was hard. Just going through the process is not easy. Taking courses is not easy. The process of that growing up, it was difficult for me. It wasn't easy. Up until high school it was hard, all those years. Let alone going to school and you're facing a lot of adversity. My parents don't have a car at that time. They can't take us to school or anything. We basically had to walk to school, a distance away. During those times we walked to school, and we didn't know what we're going to face after that. I was so young and my sister was young, but even my older brothers were young. During that time when we went to school, where we lived a couple miles away and we had to walk to school.

Going to school is one thing. And just to talk about growing up, getting bullied by kids that we went to school with, I was bullied many times during my time and it was scary. Getting bullied by somebody that we didn't know and a lot of stuff was new, that was a scary time. I remember I was going with my sister, every day we went home there was always somebody waiting for us, kids that were in our same school waiting for us after and pushing us around. Not only that, the scariest thing is that I'm not sure how this kid, a little bit older than us, not only tried to bully us, but used a knife and stuff like that and tried to threaten us. That was the scariest thing. Every day we had to face them walking home and kids using that. Every day we got threatened by them. Even though we told our parents and our parents tried to talk to the school, basically they can only say one thing and talk and talk, and so what can we really do at that time? During those times of the early '80s, it was not like where we are now where everything we're taught is solved right away. It's just wait and wait and whether the kids are turning around or not isn't up to us. Luckily enough, one day those kids were chasing us and during that time I had a friend that was learning Kung Fu, so he knew karate. He would be able to walk us home, and he

actually beat them up really silly where they wouldn't be able to threaten us at that time anymore. This guy would not be able to threaten us after school and follow us home. I had to say that was one of my friends that helped us through that time as well.

But being at that time seven or eight years of age, what do you know? You don't know anything. You just want to go home and do what you normally do. You never expect it. It's just a thing where people are being bullied or even called names and all this stuff. Throughout my whole life I got bullied all the way up till high school. My kids nowadays, we take them to school and they never face this stuff. Back then, we walked to school all the time, so basically there's always somebody out there—kids that see you as either Asian or different—where they didn't know what we are. Maybe they took advantage of us, but for some reasons we didn't really know much. My parents knew a lot about it. Basically, they said, "Just watch out for yourself." Basically, find a place where we could lay low or something like that, just trying to be careful and look out. But even if you did try to report it, it's kind of hard to go look at the system and say that that is the one that threatened us. We didn't want to go and offend the other person because they could give more violence. Throughout the whole thing, when I went to school even up until a freshman in high school, I still had to go through walking to school and kids that were seniors at school would wait for me. During that time there was a lot of land that wasn't built up. There was a lot of dirt land where we had to go through, a lot of roads where there's nobody but it is a lot shorter distance to walk. Unfortunately, those kids knew where we walked to school and went home from school, and they were always waiting for us. You hear stuff on TV where kids get bullied. I do understand because I grew up in it and I've seen it, and it's not easy. Your life is at risk all the time. You don't know what those kids are thinking.

But one day when I walked to school at that time, I actually had a bike and rode a bike to school. The scariest part of that time was when those kids always targeted me and my sister—actually, it was my brother at that time. They taunted us. Not only that, but they're carrying guns. They're carrying guns on the street. At that time, we were scared for our lives. They would carry like a rifle. There wasn't anybody at that time that we saw, but it was the gun that they carried. It was scary, kids at that age and time and having that kind of weapon. We at that time thought, no, we're not that big compared to a lot of kids. We were very small. That's the early '80s when I got into school and high school, and they actually followed us home and threw stuff at our house and other stuff like that. That was not something—I mean—throughout my whole life I actually got bullied, from kindergarten to high school. Kids come up and then push you around and all this stuff. You see it on TV and then you flashback and say, "That was me; it happened to me." It wasn't easy. Learning wasn't easy already let alone to get in all this stuff surrounding us. I mean, just a brief case of my childhood growth up until now. There was a lot of stuff in between as well, but just seeing the transformation from where we were in Vietnam up until United States. Those are two different worlds. As I say, to look back, I'm blessed to be here in the United States. I can't say anything bad from then.

Thank you for that. That was very comprehensive. Could you go back a bit? I wanted to touch back on how old were you when you left Vietnam?

When I left Vietnam, I was probably around five and a half, six years old when I left the country.

About your sponsors, who sponsored your family, how did you guys know these sponsors?

What was the process of getting these sponsors? How well do you know them?

Basically, the Hong Kong government has a list of our names. Even up until now, sponsoring happens every day that sponsors people to the United States from another country. Back in those

day basically the sponsor just picked, almost like people who are adopting kids or something like that; it's no different, the process is very similar. They found somebody, a family that needed help, and so they sponsored us. A couple that was living in North Carolina, our sponsor at that time, so they sponsored us and they provided to us a lot as well. They provided and got us a place to stay. It was a blessing that we were lucky enough to have a very nice sponsor. It was a couple that sponsored us, and they are like our second parents. We've been in contact recently, in the last few years. They passed away from old age and health conditions. But that's what happened. We just happened to be lucky. It's not because of what we are. That couple just happened to sponsor us, came across our family. It's kind of hard to describe what happened or why they sponsored us. The person who sponsored us just said relatively that they found us as a family of nine that needed help, so they stepped up and got us to where we needed to be.

I want to touch on one last thing here. Do you have any memories of your grandparents or extended family?

Yes, my grandparents. Back in our country, growing up sometimes the older generation would tend to have a wife here and a wife there going back in history, back in the China dynasty. My grandmother—actually, my dad—doesn't know who his true mom is because, for some reason, no one seemed to tell my dad. I guess up until now my dad doesn't know who his real mom is. My grandfather is Chinese Vietnamese. He is originally from China. I guess he met his wife back in China, actually, so they migrated to Vietnam. My dad didn't know; he was too young. He doesn't know who his mom is. He only knows his dad. Basically, my dad grew up only with my grandfather, and my grandfather met another lady, which became my step-grandma during that time. My dad considers having a step-grandma to grow up.

I know about him faintly because we had to sponsor him to the United States back in the day, but not recently. We came first to the United States, and I think it was back in the '90s when one of my family members sponsored my grandparents to the United States. I got to know him. They lived with us back in San Jose. He was actually a businessman throughout his life. He sells stuff and buys stuff and stuff like that. But one day when I did mention to him about my dad's mom, he changed the subject for some reason. I'm not sure why. I'm sure kids want to know who their mom is or dad is, but maybe they don't know this. But up until now I don't know the true story of my dad's mom.

Recently, a few years ago, he actually moved back to Vietnam. You know how elderly people like to live where they grew up, they're more comfortable living where they grew up, just the people surrounding them, the community. It's not easy to pick up and then move to another country and live the same life. It's not the same. When they moved to the United States and they lived with us, it's not easy for them. They weren't happy even though the living was a lot better for them. They were not happy for a few years. My parents said, "If you'd love to move back to Vietnam, then it's okay." Because my dad wants to see them happy. Basically, they said, "If you'd love to go back, then we will get you back to where you love to live." Basically, Vietnam was where they'd love to live. Recently, in the past few years, he passed away, but he did live past ninety. I think he was ninety-one or something. Even though he had some health conditions, he was clearly... That's what I remember about him.

Now could you tell us more about what and where was your later education?

My education?

Yes, after high school.

Oh, after high school, yes, sure. Basically, from high school, I went to San Jose State. It was in the same city. To study at that time, in high school, you don't know what you're really studying, and it's hard trying to pick a field out to go into. Even my elder sisters, if they go to school and they have their own field of study and to pick your own field and study, it wasn't easy. Even to go back in time, I actually was working a lot more than I was studying.

I left out a lot of stuff. Actually, I didn't tell you a lot about my time, my family. There was a lot more. When we came to San Jose, during that time jobs were very limited. We were trying to find a job here and a job there just to make a living. Basically, during that time in San Jose, I was so young, I was about eight years of age when I started working already. I started working really young at that time. But this is not during the school year; this is during the summertime. Basically, our cousin that lived in San Jose, they got us a job in summertime where we had to go and—what do you call it? —picking fruits in the field. We were in the field. During the summer we were in a field in the city called Monterey, somewhere a few hours away. We wake up pretty early, my parents, a few of my brothers and stuff like that. I was so young at that time. I was eight years of age. My parents said, “You are too young to go anywhere. You need to be home.” But for some reasons, I didn't like to stay home, so I told them, “Take me and I can do whatever I can do. I don't have to work.” Basically, during that time we'd go every morning at four o'clock in the morning and drive to a place where they needed to pick fruits and other stuff. Every day like that; waking up at four o'clock in the morning, every morning. You have to be there early to have a seat because if there are too many people there, they cannot take you in. You can only go from one field to the next field to whatever field during that time. For some reason, years and years we were doing work like that, for a few years. It was tough, very harsh. When people talk nowadays, people who do farming and all that stuff, it is not an easy job. That

is a harsh job to work in the field, to pick strawberries, to pick cucumbers, any vegetable that you can think of. Not only that, it is in a field. Even if you pick at the stuff and put it in a bucket or whatever, you still have to carry that stuff to somewhere a distance away. There's no machinery where you can just dump it in the machine. Now we have machinery. But what we were doing, we had to put sticks between the two buckets and carry it, and that was a long distance. It wasn't just around the corner to go from one field to the neighboring field just to carry the thing. My dad was the hardest worker to carry those buckets. Those can easily weigh forty pounds, fifty pounds. To bring this bucket, every time, one thing is that we have to use a punching card—just like when we go to work we stamp in and stamp out—it's like they have to stamp it to show how many buckets that we sold to them, so at the end of the day they add up how many buckets we made. And it's a harsh time. It's not easy. The weather was cold early in the morning, and you go to a place where people can say, "Oh yes, you're in this morning," or you're not. Sometimes we have to go to a different field to get into that time. That was the only time where we saw there were jobs. I was actually working when I first started; I remembered I was eight years of age. I was working until my parents said, "You know what?" Working in that field was not easy, waking up and having that many family members to go and do the job. And they're paying us like pennies, just to make a living, even though we had to do it. There's no choice. From that moment on, we couldn't handle it. It was just too tough.

My parents had to go and do other jobs, which is, they had to go to work in the restaurant. What they had to do is work in a restaurant at that time. I, myself, by the time when I was old enough, when I was about thirteen years of age, they had a program, a government program where I could sign up and work in the school or anywhere. It was some type of student working

or something like that, and I was working for San Jose City College just to deliver machines to the classrooms and stuff like that. Any job that they provide to me, I took it.

I was also old enough to work for one of those theme parks, the theme parks close by, they call it Great America. Up until now it's still going on, Great America. I was there for a few years.

The next obstacle that I worked; my parents were working under my brother-in-law. The next hardest job was the catering job. That was vicious work as well. I believe that was even worse than working in the field as well. Waking up at three in the morning and lasted until ten o'clock at night when our job was done. For me that was during my off time from school. You see catering trucks driving around and selling food. You haven't seen behind the door and how it works. For us, because in order to get ready, every morning where do you get the ice? Where do you get the food? You had to get the food and many other things. It took a lot of work behind closed doors. And you have to find the route where you'll be able to go to those routes because you cannot just drive the catering truck around and sell food because there are other catering trucks there as well. It's their business, so you cannot just intrude in their place. You had to own the rights to be at that location at a certain time. Basically, you had to pay for those routes and those routes are yours.

Starting early in the morning, we were shoveling ice and using the wheelbarrow to get the ice to the catering truck because it's not close around. That's the reason why we have to use the wheelbarrow to do it. Without it, you cannot just carry a bucket and carry it around because it takes so much ice to fill up the catering truck to keep stuff cold and stuff like that. That was harsh. I remember during the summertime where I had to come out there and help the family out. Help them not only in the morning, but also the night shift when they came back without the ice

because it's melted and clean it out and all that stuff again. We don't want to put the ice in right away because it's melted by early morning. Basically, you have to clean out the old ice and then you have to come back in the morning and put back the new ice because that ice that we have at night, we cannot put it back in right away because it will melt by morning. Basically, we have to clean everything out and whatever the expiration or whatever it is that doesn't last, we have to throw it away and stuff like that and then clean it up and prepare for the next day. We did that for a few years. For a few years, I mean, it was tough times. It was like that from morning to night. There were like two shifts, the morning and overnight shift and something like that.

Most of my childhood growing up from there, eventually when I was in school, after school I couldn't hang around with my friends and play basketball. After school I had to go back home and prepare to help out with those jobs. I didn't have much of a childhood with my friends and stuff like that. Basically, I hang out with my friends mostly during school. After school, my friends have fun, but not me. Most of the time, I'm usually like that. I'm working more basically—because I guess I loved working so much—even though a lot of the time my friend asks me to go out, I would say, “I can't because I've got to work.” I started working so early in life and I have adapted to it. It seems like I have a chore to do every time after school and other stuff.

But to focus on education, it was hard for me, too. How do you have the time even to take class and go to school and study, especially myself during that time? I was still classifying myself as ESL, which is English as a second language. Getting ahead for me was...I was always behind. I was always behind. I was always that kid that couldn't pass that stage where I should be at or worse. Because my mom and dad—they're basically Vietnamese—so they didn't know much English. I couldn't rely on them to say, “I don't understand this. I don't understand that.”

Even my sisters, they were too busy on their end and doing a lot of stuff. My brother helped me with some of it. Still, they also struggled with their own thing as well.

It's not easy for myself. When I find time, I try to study and educate myself and read more and stuff like that. But up until high school; that's when I started to turn around. I started to take more classes during the summer of my eighth grade and for some reason, I took courses in high school and was able to come out from my English second, ESL, level to a different level. I was writing a lot more. I took courses and studied a lot more about writing and stuff like that. In high school I took the next step and became a regular kid; I wasn't classified as an ESL anymore at that time. It was a bit harder and more challenging and I had to work a lot harder even though I came to the United States when I was six years of age, but still, it wasn't easy. If someone gives you a book and asks you to study and understand it; it's not like that. For us, we had to take baby steps and understand. You thought English was easy to learn? It's not. It is hard for a person that is from another country to come in and learn that language. It's not easy. I can speak English more fluently now. It took many steps to get here.

Basically, when I got into high school, I would be able to progress to the same level as the other kids. Then I started to say, you know what? I'm not where I need to be. I'm continuously learning. Even up until then I've still got kids that bullied me, bullied me all the time. I just ignore them, but it's not something I go and fight back. Kids sometimes, they just want to scare you or whatever. To me, I was small at that time. I wasn't that big. I was small. But when I get to that same level, I say, "You know what? I've seen enough. I don't need to fight back and say *I can beat you* or whatever. I don't need to do that because I don't need to be you." A person can do violence or whatever it is and come and do this to you. It doesn't mean you have to fight back. You don't have to because if you fight back, what do they do? They fight and

beat you and there's no purpose. To me there wasn't a purpose. It was like people trying to take advantage of me, but I don't need them to destruct me all that time because in high school I started to develop a lot more. I learned more and I had seen more, and I started to understand more.

During those times to keep my mind busy, I joined a tennis team in high school. I was in varsity. I moved from JV to varsity, so I actually progressed from my freshman year to sophomore year. I learned the game. My parents were not athletic or anything, or even my older sister. It's just my brothers, we learned ourselves and we progressed. I got better and moved my position to varsity, and I was number two for three years. I couldn't beat the number one because he was too good. Basically, I broke the school record for most wins in my four years at the school. My name is on the wall of the coach's office. That record, I'm not sure it's broken or not. I haven't been there for quite a long time.

To move on from high school, I had no major...because a lot of time I never thought about what to study because I basically was just working, so I never thought about what I wanted to do. I worked a lot, so I basically didn't understand what I should do.

My dad worked his way from the field to catering, and then after that we did a grocery store. We couldn't be able to handle the catering business anymore—and so we basically went into the minimart. The minimart that my brother-in-law owned was right across from the DMV at that time. That job, wow, it's just long hours, like starting from eight o'clock in the morning up until ten o'clock at night as well, long hours. Typically, at that time when I didn't do anything, I would go out there and help them. But that was also hard work. This job, you had to go find food; cheap, in order to make a profit out of it. That business is not as easy as it looks, there was a lot of work to it. Everything that you see in the front? That you see when you go and

buy groceries? You have to see what's behind it. It is a lot of work behind the door. It was a lot of work. Even if you buy stuff from the vendors, your margin is just so slim. It was about a ten percent margin. It was just such a narrow margin. Not enough to survive. In order to survive you had to be able to find stuff—during those times, back in the days where we had to buy stuff on sales—well—you had to find a niche. Find stuff on sale from a bigger grocery store and be able to buy those stuff and bring it back to the market to make a better margin because a smaller store, we can't survive by the margin; we couldn't make a profit out of it to sell their stuff and resell it back; it was so narrow; so that we would be able to buy and sell it back. That was the back end of it. And be able to...not just to buy from the vendors but to also bring it in and restock it. It was a lot more. Every day when we had to find stuff like that we had to buy and put it back into the shelf in order to generate a little bit more profit; otherwise, you can't meet the profit margin to pay the rent, to pay the other stuff. You may sell a lot of stuff, but the margin is really narrow for a lot of mini stores. It was very narrow even to sell beer, to sell a lot of stuff in the front, it's really narrow.

Not only that, we were in a bad neighborhood where crime was pretty high. We try to make a living. What they do? They come in and rob us? What do they do? They come in and steal from us? Every day like that. Your margin is so narrow, and every day is like that. I was there a few times when we got robbed. It's just sad. What can we do? Just take the money and go. Just hopefully they don't shoot you or anything like that. I was still so young just to even be there. I was afraid to work at night. I mean, it is scary. It can happen anytime. To run that place and I've seen it happen all the time on TV and all that. I said, "Yes, I was there. I remember how it was because I've seen it, and it happens very often." It is sad to see, but it happens all the time

anywhere, but especially in the neighborhood where we were at. Fortunately, nothing happened to our family. They came and we were blessed that nothing happened. That was then.

Then my dad said, “You know what? It happens so often; we have to exit that business.” And that was not easy. Basically, he was doing other stuff and other stuff like that.

Flashback to high school again, I worked so much and I never think about education. I thought that after high school I would just go to work, find a place, and go to work and basically work for people. I never thought of being at where I am right now.

Basically, I went to San Jose State right after high school. When I came there, I classified myself as electrical engineering. The funniest thing is when I signed up for some of those courses, and my first day in class changed my mind right away. It was one of the engineering courses; when I went in, I walk into that door and say, “Why are there so many males? I don’t see a female in this field.” That’s the time when I walk out and I say, “You know what? This is not diversified. Undiversified field where there’s too many males, and what do they do? I’m sure they come to compete with each other, a lot.”

I walked out and went home and decided to change my major to biochemistry. I signed up for this major the next day, and I say, “You know what? This is more diversified.” It’s different, every group from male to female to Asian to all ethnic backgrounds. It was a mixture of everything in that field. Even though that field was challenging, I did enjoy it.

Years in, I thought I would be in this biochemistry field instead. I thought I was going to be doing labs and stuff like that. One day, I just look at a brochure in school. Looking at a brochure about the field, actually, to guide me in it because during that time the Internet wasn’t there yet. You have to pay premium to get access to the Internet, but there wasn’t much to go on the Internet and search what you wanted to do. They would show at admission and stuff like that.

One day I ran into this field and looked more closely at it and said, “You know what? Pharmacy.” And I started to focus more and read more about pharmacy. By the time when I got into my second year in San Jose State, I progressed more into that field and applied to several schools and got their pharmacy brochures.

During that time, I focused more and had a better feeling about what I wanted to do, so I applied for a pharmacy program. I got accepted to Louisiana. I’m not sure behind me if you can see this stuff on my wall. It was on the wall that I had from New Orleans. I studied there. Actually, I transferred there and studied there for four years. I actually was held back one year.

Just to go back to being an Asian American, we kind of have a lot of disadvantages. When I applied there, I had been accepted to go into the program, and there was a lot of paperwork that was dealt when I was there. In New Orleans, the school I went to was Xavier University out of New Orleans. You’re going around...I know how a lot of people look at you as an Asian and they start to separate you from their own background. You start to see a little bit that you weren't accepted when I was there because it was more an African American school, so for us, there weren't that many Asians that were in that program at that time. For me, I understand where I come from, and I know I’m going to be at a disadvantage in this program because of my ethnic background. I accepted that I’m probably going to face it when I get there. When I got there, I said, “Oh, it’s going to be tough.” I knew it already.

There was a lot of paperwork. There was stuff that happened there. There was financial...my dad didn’t have a lot of money at that time as well, so I had to borrow loans. Basically, there was an issue of paperwork that couldn’t get me in that year, so I had to be able to go to that school to hold on to that position to get the paperwork done and other stuff. It was a lot of headache. Actually, it wasn’t, but it’s giving you a headache. You know what? I don’t mind.

I'm still young at that time. You can hold me back a year, I don't mind. I didn't quit. I knew I wanted to study the program. There was a lot of frustration at that time. What can you do? You're going to a place where I've never seen so many people that didn't seem to like you as much. But when I got into that school alone, just a student alone, the students were nice, very nice. Even though they are African American kids, they are highly educated kids. To me, I've seen them and they treat you very nice. The back door stuff; that was the scariest part. The financial place to all this stuff, the paperwork that you do around it. That one was the hardest one. The social worker, all this stuff. They're more like pushing you down. That's basically it until I got into the program.

When I got into the program, it was hard at the beginning because there was so much subject that was given to you at that time compared to high school and SJSU. I thought I was prepared for everything from high school to the undergrad program, but I was taking twenty-one units at that time, twenty-one, twenty units every semester. I thought I had prepared myself, but when I went into this program, it was a different transition. The course was a lot harder, but I would be able to manage it. It was a tough program at that time for me, for myself, from where I came from, from what I did, and from an ESL kid to where I am at this level, becoming a pharmacist for the last twenty-two years.

But during the time when I was studying the pharmacy program, I had a very good professor. They were great professors. They were my teachers. They were great throughout. They guided me throughout the whole course.

But when it came down to it, the last year of the program, the question is: Where to practice? What state am I going to go to? My mind during that time is always Las Vegas for some reason. I have no family here. No family whatsoever. It was always my target; it was Las

Vegas. I mean, the gambling city of the world, who would want to live here? In my mind this is not even a place where you would raise your kids either. But I guess in your mind it's your destination that was put into you for some reason. I mean, it just came up one day that that was the place that I chose to go to. Up until now I couldn't explain to myself, why here? Even my parents, "Why? A place where you gamble where you lose all your money."

But there's more in Las Vegas actually. It is not just a gambling city. It was a lot more around it. Just like I said, you see the front, but you have to know what's behind it. If you'll be able to see what's behind or surrounding it, you see Las Vegas as a city where anyone would want to live, anyone. It is one of the cities where...even my kids, I took them to different cities around the country, and at the end of the day it was Las Vegas. They were comparing. It was Las Vegas. They went to Seattle, Washington and at the end of the day, no, it's Las Vegas. Seattle, Washington is a nice city, but it wasn't when you see behind the door of Seattle, what's more behind it.

I took them back to my school in New Orleans, Louisiana. I'm not sure if you've even been to Bourbon Street and other stuff like that. Once my kids saw that, it wasn't a place for them either; it was not. It was a party city. Back in the day, New Orleans was not safe. They were the number-one city, like the murder capital. And I was there. I saw guns shoot and hear noises of gun shooting. It was scary. That was in that school, in that area; that was in the center of it and hearing all kinds of stories. Every day there were kids around the city getting shot at. It was bad, too, New Orleans. That was that time when I was in school. That was a bad time. I was afraid for myself. I was afraid to step out the door. After school I just went home. I was terrified. To be number one, to hear that kind of news out of the city, it's scary.

Living in New Orleans, it is scary as well. Not only that, when it rains it pours and then when it pours it floods. I was in several of those hurricane floods. I was trapped there a few days in the hurricane. I was there for a major one, for one that really collapsed the city back in the 1990s when that big hurricane came in. Luckily enough, on the road when I drove—I couldn't see the road when I drove home because I was in school and studied late and came home. The water was coming down so hard, so hard that you couldn't see. The windshield wiper was so fast you couldn't even see the road. I was on a freeway during that time. I guess the hurricane came in and I had to get home. When I stopped on that bridge, there was so much water that if I were to run into it, I was done; I couldn't get out. I was the first car there to stop. Right ahead of me there was water enough that it filled on top with a foot of it. You go down to the freeway—there was a dip where you drove on the freeway. There was a dip and that dip was filled with water, and no way anybody can pass that thing. After you go in, you're done; that's it; you're under the water. Luckily enough, I stopped at that time, and I was safe at that time.

The apartment that I stayed in, it was flooded a few times. It rained so hard it flooded inside. It would go up to your leg. The one thing about then, the city of New Orleans is below sea level. Anything that rains or something, it gets flooded so fast because they couldn't pump the water out fast enough. When it rained it was like people pouring a bucket down; it was so hard. It takes only a few minutes to flood and that's why that city floods a lot. Up until now, I see that the city floods a lot. Once you see it, there is no way you can get around that; that city cannot get around it because where they are and how they are and the atmosphere they are, it just rains so hard and gets flooded. I'm not sure what kind of system they can put in to make it better there, but I don't see it.

Back then compared to Las Vegas, now, I'm still happy here. I'm fortunate to be in Las Vegas. But whatever people say out there, you have to live here to understand the community here and what kind of people we have here. I recommend anybody that asks me, "Is Las Vegas a good place to live?" I say, "A hundred percent," from day one when I came here.

When I arrived here in 2001, I got hired by Walgreens Pharmacy. They recruited me back in New Orleans in the pharmacy program. They came in and they recruited us. I signed up and I worked for them for a year and a half or so. Then that's when I started to open my own place with my brother, and we were there for at least eighteen years.

What were your first memories of Las Vegas, and where did you live when you first arrived here?

When I first arrived here, I was living in an apartment where I would be able to actually recruit one of my friends that was from the same school—actually two friends from the same school. They lived with me at the apartment on East Flamingo. Every time whenever I drive across it, I say, "This is my first place that I lived in Las Vegas." Every time when I drive by I stop there for a moment just to see it, where I started. I was over on the east side of Las Vegas when I moved into Las Vegas. Basically, we had a three-room apartment.

After a few months, one of my roommates said, "You know what? I want to move back." To where he grew up because he grew up in New Orleans for all his life. He met his wife back there, so he had to move back. I was with the other roommate, and he also decided to move out as well and went back to his city. Basically, I was by myself now, there. It was not easy to be there by yourself, not anybody around you. I had to get a smaller place for myself, which is across the street from the place where I lived. There was a one-bedroom place right across the

street. Every time when I go there, there's one on this side and one on the other side, and I knew this was the road I'm always going to remember.

To grow up and to live there...just to say a story about how I live in Las Vegas and how I met my wife. What's interesting about the story about my wife is my wife was actually from San Jose, California. She is a year younger than I am, so she's a class under. She went to another high school, so she never went to college at the same school until I had left San Jose State; when I left she came in, so we never met. When I graduated in New Orleans from the pharmacy program, my senior year, I was actually introduced by a friend who I got into the program because at that time I guess I was a mentor to them to guide them to what they studied, what they wanted to do. I actually recruited a good amount of my friends to go through the program, at least eight to ten of them, eight to ten of my friends to go into that program back then, including one of my best friends that we went to high school with. Interesting to say, one of the friends that I got into the program is my wife's best friend, which I didn't know at that time. Basically, when I graduated she introduced my wife to me at that time. We started to say all this stuff and date. I have to say that from states away, from San Jose to where we are, it's a small world where everything collides together. It's kind of hard to explain, but it's very unusual. I met my wife, first met her there in New Orleans and realistically she was from San Jose, and not far away; her parents' house was just only a couple blocks away from my parents' house. Yes, it's just a couple of blocks down the street.

We got married about a year and a half down the line when I was in Las Vegas. That's what happened. She saw where I lived in Las Vegas, how I lived in Las Vegas, and that's how it began. Every time when I drive by that place where I lived, I always think about it. That's how I first started living in Las Vegas. The place where I lived over on the east side, it wasn't that safe.

It's not really a nice area either to begin with, but at that time I don't know what part of the city is nice and what part of the city is not. I just happened to land in that area.

You've obviously been here a while. How have you seen Vegas change in your time here?

Yes. When I was here—years before I moved to Las Vegas...I always think when I turned eighteen, *ooh, I'm going to go to Las Vegas*. I'd say, "I'm going to go and have fun down there." But every time when you drive on I-15 right outside of Primm and you see that light, "Ooh, I saw Las Vegas." But by the time you get there, it's not Las Vegas, so you have to drive another thirty-something more minutes to actually see the city. Back in the days there wasn't that much growth even though there were a lot of lights. I saw the glimpse when you were driving and you see tons of lights, but during that time when I moved to Las Vegas, there wasn't much going on. We didn't have the 215 beltway. There wasn't a beltway yet at that time. I had to drive on a frontage road to get to work and around the area. The 215 hadn't been built until recently. At that time, we had the casinos and a lot of those apartments and the things that were built around it. To say from the time where I was until up until now, I have to say this city has built so much. There is so much. To compare how new this city is, we are one of the newest cities in the country based on the average of the year of the homes built. People who come into Las Vegas from other countries or other cities, they see the Strip only. They don't see what's outside when you drive fifteen minutes, twenty minutes out. You see a complete city surrounding the Las Vegas Strip. Basically, once you're outside, you're actually in another city; you're actually not living in Las Vegas. The only time I actually felt I was in Las Vegas is when I drive right on the Strip and say, "Ooh, I'm in Las Vegas." All this time I never realized until I got there, I say, "Man, I'm in Las Vegas." But when I was outside, I guess I was either too busy working and never realized what we have in the community, in Las Vegas basically.

But I have to admit there was a big transformation from where I was up until now. The city has grown a lot bigger, a lot cleaner. It was a big community that got together and all this stuff when it comes together during bad times and other stuff like that.

Could you tell us more about what it was like starting your own pharmacy practice?

Sure. This is something that was very unusual as well. Things just happened that you couldn't explain. When I started working for Walgreens, I basically was a floater. I was filling in for a pharmacist position where there is no pharmacist at that time. They classified me as a floater. In the valley where they needed a pharmacist, they put me there. They put me there to relieve the other pharmacist on vacation or just something like that. Basically, I had seen the city from the east, north, west side; I had seen everything in the valley. Even though now the valley is really wide—it can take you an hour to get from one place to the next end—back then it was a lot closer. I was a floater, so I basically floated around the whole city. I was never at one location until I was a year in when I was actually officially put somewhere in Henderson, close to the Green Valley Casino. I was officially at that location for about half a year.

To tell how I got to open the business, the pharmacy. Actually, my older brother, who I have another brother in between, he's four years older than I am. He is the one that bought over the marketplace—a minimart—from my brother-in-law because at that time my brother was doing other stuff with his wife. She was working for her sister selling clothing and stuff like that. One day my brother-in-law decided to sell the minimart, and my dad told my brother, "Why don't you just buy off this place so at least you have a place you can rely on?" Not to be depending on his wife's sister to sell. One day he bought the place off. He was there for three years. He described that you're in there almost like you're in prison from eight o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock at night. You actually got trapped in there for all day long. It is not

easy to work that many hours in a day every day, from Monday to Sunday. It never stops and it's not easy. He was there for three years. One day he called it quits and he put it up for sale.

He saw I was done with the pharmacy program and leaving to go to Las Vegas, so he decided he wanted to come here to Las Vegas as well. I was there first and I told him, "Yes, it's a nice community. Maybe you can afford to buy a house or something like that, whatever that you make from the market." At that time, he said, "What happens if you don't have a place to work at wherever you want to work?" At that time, I didn't own a pharmacy. I was working for Walgreens. We were trying to figure out what he wanted to do. You cannot just come down here and live without a job. How are you going to pay for your mortgage and all this stuff? Basically, we were trying to narrow down the options. "Oh, why don't we do 99 Cents Store?" It was hard back then. I've seen a lot of people shop at 99 Cents Stores, where everything is 99 cents. The margin was pretty high when we looked into it. It was like 30-something percent margin. Even though it may sell for 99 cents, but you buy in volume and when you buy in volume you make a lot of money. People don't just go in there and buy one item; they buy a whole cart of it. That's the concept of the business. We don't buy one 99 cents item. It looks cheap, so they buy more. At the end of the day it's equal to the same amount of money that you pay at other places.

At that time, we say, for some reason, we got on the Internet—at that time it's online already. There's the Internet. His wife scrolled down and saw a pharmacy for sale. At that time I was working; I was under contract with Walgreens and I had to work for them for a couple of years or something like that. I worked for them and during the time that pharmacy was put up for sale, my contract was about to expire. We decided. I said, "You know what?" I'm not sure at that time I was knowledgeable enough to run a pharmacy. I was trained back in the program, but I never trained to open a pharmacy. They train you for all these things but never train you for what

if you own a pharmacy? What is in there? What is behind it? I know there's a lot because there's a lot of people working in it, not just the owner of a pharmacy. You have to deal with the law. You have to deal with a lot of stuff. A lot of stuff has to be accounted for. It's not an easy process. At the moment I came in and said, "You know what? I was working so hard for Walgreens. Let's do it." He sold that business out and got back money, and then I was able to loan some money to assist my brother and sister—which is my second-oldest sister—that we would be able to loan them money and be able to pay them back down the line. That's when we owned that pharmacy.

At that time when we owned that pharmacy, the one weirdest thing is that the previous husband who owned that pharmacy, I think they went into some type of lawsuit; someone was suing them for misuse or something that happened during that time. When things like that happen, when a person does sue you—the insurance is happy for one thing that they collect your money every time—but when it comes down to a payout, basically whether they're going to sell you that insurance in the future or not...this is what happened to these two couples. The case went through or whatever and they had to pay out. The insurance decided not to sell them the business license insurance anymore. I believe they had no choice but to sell the business. This just happened to us as we came in at that time and bought over that business. We did pay a premium based on the location where we're at. We didn't think short term. We thought about long-term, but I never realized up until eighteen years later.

You've mentioned community several times. I was wondering if you could tell us more about what you consider to be your community here in Vegas.

Back then I did some community work, like service to the elderly, some of those walks that they have in the community to the elderly to try to come and see them, how they're doing because I

can service them, too. I would be able to go around the elderly community. They have those nursing homes, other stuff, and be able to oversee their medications and other stuff like that. My kids, they had some community work and they also joined soccer league and other stuff in the community, so I was able to be involved in some of the community as well, to see them go and play those games and stuff like that, outdoor games, indoor games. Even though I was a tennis player, my kids for some reason, they never picked up a racket and played tennis. What they do is they pick up a ball and then kick the ball basically through their entire lives. All three of them play soccer, so they're involved more in the community in playing soccer. Every weekend we're out there and support them in their playing.

If you could talk about the traditions and festivals that are important to your family that you want to pass down that you learned from your parents.

Tradition, like our tradition?

Yes.

You mean like Asian... Basically my dad and my mom, of course they grew up in a country where everything had to be their way whether they would be set up to meet another girl or find you a girl or whatever. Fit their needs in the area. That's how my mom and dad met, because of my grandparents, which is my step-grandmom, set them up, my dad, who he should be with. My dad, of course, he disagreed. For some reason, my dad is a very hard-headed person. He doesn't accept a person that set him up and say, "Yes, this is your wife." That's not who he wanted to be. But back in those times, of course you had to listen to your parents and what they wanted to put you in. Basically, he met his wife through a setup under my grandmom to meet. For quite awhile in the beginning, they never really considered themselves as husband and wife. My dad never really accepted my mom as a wife because he doesn't know who she is. Relatively, he listened to



his grandparents that this person should fit you or whatever, but it's not easy to put two people together and say it's okay. In our culture here in the United States and the culture in Vietnam, it's two different kinds of culture. Our culture here is once you're together, a lot of times it's hard to break up that marriage. They consider it just a one marriage kind of thing in our culture. Once somebody is introduced in that culture, my grandparents introduced them together and said, "This is your wife," that's what your wife is; that's it. Until they get to know each other, they become husband and wife. That's how they transformed their kids after that.

I consider my parents pretty hard as well; I thought they followed the same first step as their parents and introduced me to another girl as well. This is a time when I say, "You know what? We're in a different kind of world, and I have to meet the one that I consider will be my wife." They refused to accept it and they become very hard-headed and said, "This is not a person for you," or, "This is not a person for you," or whatever in their mind, especially because they protect their kids very well and make sure they have the right person that they grow up with.



I understand what's behind it. Any parent wants their kid to have a very, very successful marriage of their life.

The trend where we grow up from where years ago, back in the '70s, the '60s, up until 2000, the trend of a wife is a lot different. The cultures are trending a lot different. Kids are making their own decisions even though you don't believe they know what they're doing and they also believe we don't know what we're doing as your parents. Until they learn themselves, they realize that the parent is right a lot of times because they live longer versus they just live their life right now because young kids nowadays, they don't see that. They've seen a lot of stuff on videos and stuff like that and they learn it from that, but they don't realize that they have to grow up through the same process that we grew up ourselves. They have to go through the same obstacles and it takes time to grow up. They cannot just grow up overnight and say, "I'm an elderly person," and know what you're doing. It's not that. It takes many steps to get there. Even myself, I believe I took a lot of steps to get to where I am. Probably I did take the wrong step a few times, but I fixed my mistakes.

Based on culture-wise, my parents, of course, even up until I passed the pharmacy program, they still wanted to set me up with a different person, somebody else, and think my wife might not fit, whatever it is. I understand where they come from, but it's my decision at the end of the day. I may be spending fifty years with her. I tell them, "If you live fifty years, then you marry them." It's not easy. It's something that you bond with. It's not something that you say, "Hey, this is good; they will fit you." That's not how it works. Even a two-person couple living under the same roof, it's not easy because there are always differences between the two. The culture here is that if you don't like each other, we just separate and go each other's way. In our Asian community, it's hard. We thought if we break it up, we're classified as a failure or that we didn't pick the right partner to share the future with. That's how our perception is. That's the reason why our parents see it that way because they want you to pick the right one that will last forever.

What about celebrations, festivals and holidays that you still celebrate?

I don't remember back in Vietnam that we celebrated any holidays except for New Year's festival from our country. In the United States, we basically celebrate every holiday from New Years to Easter to Halloween to Thanksgiving to Christmas. Christmas is our big thing where a lot of our family gathers to one place. My sisters are in San Jose, so we basically gather most of the time during Christmas. We hadn't missed a Christmas before COVID started, the last Christmas. That was our first miss in the U.S. that we haven't celebrated. Basically, we celebrate every holiday that's here in the United States that we know of.

What foods do you typically make?

To compare food-wise American food versus our own food, Vietnamese, you can eat somewhat American food, hamburgers and stuff like that. For me, I couldn't eat that every day. It is a tough

thing, even to say pizza, Pizza Hut, or hotdog. It's not easy because in our culture, we like rice. Any rice that you put on makes it good. But to compare the two cultures, we always make our own dish regardless of what kind of dish we make. During the holiday we would normally—sometimes in Thanksgiving we follow the same culture, which is having a turkey on the table, stuffing, other stuff. We kept the same tradition as what Thanksgiving does. We do things a little bit different during Christmas where we transition over to more Vietnamese-style food when we gather. We're making our own food. We make eggrolls and fried rice, just other Asians dishes that we make. But to say when it comes down to a dish where my family really likes to look forward is my lobster-style dish that I make. Every time when I make that dish that dish is always gone. I don't know how I came across making a lobster-style dish. This is not like a dish where I just boil the lobster and then take it out and dip it with butter. Basically, this is a process almost like a restaurant Chinese-style lobster that I make at home. They like it for some reason and that dish is always gone. But basically, yes, during the holidays, most of the time Christmastime is where we cook up more of an Asian-style dish. We eat more of those dishes compared to the Thanksgiving holidays. Turkey, we can only eat so much, a slice here and a slice there and that's basically it. But there are two different dishes that we do on two different holidays.

Have you seen a change in discrimination against Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders since the pandemic began?

Oh. Oh man. I have to tell you this story at the pharmacy, basically what I do at the pharmacy. I'm always there over the last eighteen years, which is to open the pharmacy and close the pharmacy. Ever since the pandemic or even before the pandemic there was stuff going on, racist. "Go back to your country," and other stuff; I've seen that happen that goes through my

pharmacy. It's not actually patients. It's someone that happens to walk by into our place and come out and say bad things like that. But the previous year, the one that just recently happened on the COVID-19, at least three times that happened to me, three times that a person comes in and tells me to go back to my country, three times. One just recently happened not too long ago, probably a couple of weeks ago. They are actually not my patient. He probably came from somewhere in the valley that came to the pharmacy. Not only using those harsh words, profanity language, things like that, we all grew up as human beings. We are not different than anybody. At that time, I have a patient that witnessed the whole thing. He was bothered enough that it's stuff that you do not want to actually hear that comes out from that person's mouth. It was so bad I almost picked up the phone to call security, but he left before that happened. But that person actually witnessed what that person said. Two couples that said, "I seen it. It happened."

There was another occasion a few months ago. Another person came in from the hospital. I called security to come over. I knew it was going to happen. That person came out and said very bad words. Security witnessed what that person actually said. I understand where they come from, but I'm not there to listen to all this going on. I didn't cause any trouble. They came in and caused trouble; I did not.

Basically, I just let them get that frustration out. I just let them get it out and then they can walk out. Violence is not something I condone in the pharmacy. I don't want that to happen here, where they can come in and cause a lot of trouble in the building. I don't want that to happen. I don't report it either. How many cases out there that are not reported? It has happened to me at least three times. Basically if four thousand happened that is reported, you can probably multiply that by a hundred times to a thousand times out there that people did not report. Asian people, we are not people that really fight back a lot and say, "What you're saying to us is

wrong.” Our Asian community, we are very quiet, low, lay-down kind of people. We do our own thing. We never really stand out and say, “We want to fight back.” Based on my position education-wise, I did not put myself down that road to say that to them because I’ve seen a lot in my time already and I don’t need to confront them and say they are wrong. Even if you do, they’re never wrong because whatever they say they believe they are right. Maybe my position is wrong. I may accept that. But to me, I don’t encourage violence, even myself. I don’t want to fight back. To prove what at the end of the day? If you prove only one person wrong, what happens to the other thousand people, a hundred thousand people? It doesn’t work.

To me, our Asian community, we shouldn’t belong in that situation where we are right now because we were never violent to begin with; we never were. For us, to where we are, I don’t think that was fair for us. Are there any cases out there that you’ve seen any Asian people actually cause any violence? I don’t see. Even on TV I don’t see it. We are a very quiet community, Asian people. We never wanted to fight back. I never really wanted to say, “You got it all wrong.” We never even say that. But for us, we say, “You know what? If you think we are wrong, let your mind think that way.” Even myself, do I need to report a person that really causes trouble to the pharmacy? I would not either because depending on how that person is raised, I let them decide how they think and how they provide that to you. For me, I’m not raised to be like that; I don’t see it that way. I’m educated enough to say, “I came from so far away. I didn’t just come here to fight back the harsh words that you say,” because we don’t accept that. We most likely just walk away and say, “There is no win-win situation here.” Even if you fight back, somebody is going to get injured and you don’t want that either. It’s not going to solve anything to begin with. We just hope that everything dies down a little bit. We shouldn’t even be part of this at all to begin with. To blame on COVID-19 that we caused it? It may be somewhere

else. It may not be from China. We haven't drawn a conclusion and say where it comes from. What happened to other viruses that happen all over the world? Why don't you put that into perspective? What happened to the Spanish flu or what happened to HIV stuff? What happened to all this stuff around the world? Where did it come from? Flu, virus, all that stuff, where did it come from? You cannot just blame one virus and cause an issue to this community. I don't see a reason to blame it on the Asian community, I don't see why. We all had to contain it, yes. Who to blame? You can't blame anybody. It's a virus. It can happen anywhere. It may even happen in North America or somewhere in Antarctica. You don't even know. Where nobody lives there, it might be floating somewhere in the air. We don't know. It's kind of hard. It's just playing a name game and we were collateral damage and that's what happened.

Yes. We're almost done. My next question is, why is it valuable for the university to collect interviews such as yours?

I didn't hear the question.

Why do you think that it's valuable for the university to collect interviews such as yours?

Why? During a time like this, Asian community, I guess it just happens to be perfect timing. We all have a voice. I happen to be one of them. I've gone through it. I've seen it firsthand that that happened right now at the current time. My story is very similar to anybody's story of the Asian community. I happen to bring up the fact that I live in Las Vegas. Half of my life was here in Las Vegas. I've seen transitions change. My profession, I do serve the community. I serve day in, day out, help sick people to get them better, provide them the care that they need. I still go to work. I have not shut down my pharmacy ever since I'm here in Las Vegas. I have not called in a sick day. Basically, I contribute a lot to Las Vegas as a pharmacist. I help a lot of people. I've seen a lot of people that come back day in and day out and see what I did. Basically, the

community here, we have a good community here in Las Vegas, Asian community, more than a hundred thousand easily in Las Vegas. They all work in the community. I'm happy to contribute my knowledge, as much as anybody out there, to the valley. Hopefully we share more of the knowledge out there for anybody to contribute. But for myself, I did a pretty good chunk of it that I did in the valley. Whatever way it moves forward, I don't mind helping to make the valley a better city.

People see Las Vegas as a casino, gambling of the world; it's not just that; it's more than that. We grew from having no sports team to a few sports teams. We are more diversified. We can compare to another city. Back in the day we are not, but we can compare now; we can compare to any other sports city where we stand and how many people that really come out and support it. As myself, I do support a hundred percent where Las Vegas is headed to. We have a lot of diversified people that live in the valley, not only the Hispanic Americans, but other ethnicities as well.

Thank you. Is there anything else you feel that we haven't touched on that you would like to talk about?

I touched on a lot. I narrowed down a lot. Actually, I could say more, but I think there is a lot in the front of it that you wanted to know where a human being, a human life moves from where they are to somewhere else, to another place. It's kind of hard to explain how I got to Las Vegas, but I'm still questioning myself up until now. My parents still live in San Jose and most of my family is still there as well. That's still a question of myself up until today, why Las Vegas? So far it's...hard to put into words. Las Vegas been good to me and I can't take that back from what this city provided to me.

SE: May I ask a few questions?

Yes.

SE: Are you finished, Cecilia?

You talked about how you were so young still in Vietnam, but do you have some childhood memories of that wartime in Vietnam? You said every day was different. Can you tell us what some of your days were like?

Yes. By different, I meant it's different because my dad fought with the U.S. soldiers during that time. He was fighting against the communists. Every day that happens, of course you're afraid of what will happen to your dad and things like that. Every day is different. You wake up and say, "I hope my dad's okay going home." Of course, every day is not the same. I just have some faint memory about it. My dad tells me the story about it. At five and six years of age, you tend not to remember a lot. But to me I do remember some part of it. Anything dramatic when things happen, you remember things. You remember it for life when it's dramatic stuff and that's what happened during that time. Of course, you've seen people that survived during those boat rides. I've seen people right across from me that didn't survive during that boat ride. There's been a lot of them. Of course, that impresses upon your life a lot. Who would expect that anybody would ever leave their country? Of course not. A place where you were born, a place where you were raised up. But I was too young at that time. It's kind of hard. People had to leave when they had to leave. But the best thing is that my mom and dad made that choice to leave the country. That was the right thing. But my dad was there with the U.S. soldiers at that time to fight against the communists.

Then you went to the refugee camp. Can you tell us what a day might be like in that refugee camp in Hong Kong?

Yes. I did write a story in my English class. I classified it as a concentration camp. It was a lot more than a refugee camp. I told a story about it. It was a harsh condition. It wasn't easy. I see both views of the side. There were so many of us. There were so many that the camp can only contain at that time. There were kids. There were just so many of us. We were just trying to survive each day, just to have a meal, to have food and water, even to have a shower. That was not easy. Back in the early '80s—or late '70s, '79 and going into the '80s, everybody, it's not up to where they are, and people are just trying to survive each day. It's almost like one day you saw on TV that an officer sprayed water to a person? That's what it looks like when we passed curfew. They use the same hose as a firefighter. They hose you down. People had to go back to the camp to where they're at because they don't want them to pass some point and things get out of hand and stuff like that. But it was rough that some people couldn't get the water because the line is so long each day and we had to wait to be able to get water. If you don't have water that day, you don't have water that day. There is a time limit because there were thousands of us, thousands, and there's only so much water that they give to you each day to bring back to your area. You're living in a camp where you have a couple of beds and then people have to sleep on the ground because there's not enough beds. We had nine people at that time and we had to sleep on there and then people had to squeeze in. They could only give us so many beds because there are a few thousand people; it is just too many at that time. Each day that goes by, we just hope that somebody sponsors us to get us out from where we're at during that time. I'm sure in the United States, news probably came out every day that a lot of people were on the boat trying to get life saved and stuff like that.

The bullying that you experienced in school, have your children experienced anything like that?

To me, I provide them the best there is. Bullying back in the days—of course your parents are not around to support that for you. Especially my parents, they had no choice. They had to make a living, find work to do, and you as yourself had to find a way to go to school. They cannot just drop each kid off at different times. They have hours that they had to meet to go to work. Back then I was bullied a lot throughout my whole life. Not only from outside walking to school, but also inside school. Kids that slapped me, like come up and slap you like nothing happened. Who can you really tell? It is harsh. Maybe you're in a different ethnic background. It was bad. If I compare my kids nowadays, they are a lot more fortunate in that I provide them a lot of care, so they never had to go through that process, what I grew up with. Nowadays I only see bullying more likely on social media. I mean, this is a different kind of bullying. For me, mine was more like physical bullying where they push you around, they scare you. It's completely two different things that I face back in my days.

You said that when you went to San Jose, it was more diverse. Were there other Vietnamese families at your school?

Yes, there are. They have more Vietnamese, they have more Chinese, more Asian community there. But nowadays there's a lot more. Back then there are some, but not compared to today. But back then there were more American people, White American more in that school than Asian at that time. There are a lot more Asians now that grow in that community. There are a lot more Asians that are in the community.

The people who were bullying you, what nationality were they?

They were Hispanic, the White American; those are the two—there were African Americans that were bullying me in school. It was those three groups that did it.

Was it usually the same people?

No. the one when I grew up back in the days when I was back in fourth grade; that one is Hispanic one, Hispanic American. They are more violent compared to the White American back in high school; they were using guns; they were using rifles. That one was more...yes, they threw rocks at our house, in front of our house. They knew where we lived, too. Every time I saw them I had to run so fast.

Did they single out your family, or did they single out all the Vietnamese people?

I think at that time they were just singling out me when they saw me or something. They even flattened my bicycle tires, too. Sometimes when they pick somebody, they target that person. It's just unfortunately at that time it was me that they were picking on.

Did you ever think that there was anyone you could tell or that could—

Even my friends were throwing rocks at stuff. But when a person carries rifles, it's scary. Something like that you don't want to do anything. You just want them to cool down. Sometimes when you stir a little a bit, it causes more violence. That's basically it. That's why sometimes in the early time in my freshman time, sometimes I just want to go out there and throw a basketball, just to go out there and ride a bike or throw a basketball, meet up with a friend, but things like that put in my mind that I couldn't go out there because things like that happened. It's hard.

Just one last question. This last year with the George Floyd murder and then the Black Lives Matter movement, how do you see the Black Lives Matter movement and what's been happening with the Asian community, how do you see those in relation to each other?

Of course, we've seen a lot of violence throughout the whole history of the United States, but recently, the last couple of years, I mean, I can't blame on the BLM either, the Black Lives, because I'm sure they go through a lot themselves, people behind it that they've gotten into trouble with the law and stuff like that. But there is no need for excessive violence, excessive

equipment or whatever that they had to deal with. I think there's a right time for them to step up and say, you know what? If you tell the police that they do their job, I'm sure they do, but sometimes they've gone past that level. That excessive thing that they did, they crossed it. But it happened so many years, I'm sure that Black Americans are sick and tired of it. I'm sure they are. I'm sure there is a lot of stuff that was not reported that they had to face and when they had an opportunity that they wanted to protest, and they want everybody to hear their voices. Sometimes when you don't hear that voice, things get worse and not get any better. Sometimes there's so much power that the police have, but sometimes they cross that line of power and they start to cause a lot of problems. When you compare a normal citizen versus a police, sometimes when you run across the police, you're afraid because they are above you and they have everything there is, and of course you have to respect them, too. But they have to deal with a lot of people out there that are not as normal as we are as a citizen. But excessive power, I mean, to me it's too much.

But for the Asian community, we are not part of any of this. We never had to even begin years ago, history ago up until now, we were not even part of any of this stuff, to be part of this demonstration or to see a community that was torn down for not doing anything. Elderly people walking down the street and getting pushed over, it's not necessary. They don't even do anything violent to the community. They did it to help their kids, their grandkids to grow up. That's basically it. They walk the streets to be healthy. That's basically it. They do not cause any crime in the community for you to come up and say, "Hey, I fought for having that advice in the community." If they have an opportunity to take on our community, that's what they do. To blame it on somebody, we happen to be the one, but what can you do? We do have a voice, but we cannot just come up and say, "You know what? This is not right." I'm lucky enough that I'm

in a pharmacy in a medical building where they don't have as much violence as other businesses in the Asian community that have graffiti written all over. I don't think they deserve it. They are real hardworking people that wake up every morning, open the place and do their hours and go home; basically it. They never even cause any violence to the community. Why do they have to come and cause problems. To me that's no different than bullying. That's the same thing. It's no different. If you speak like that you will see that as well. To me that is bullying.

Yes. Thank you so much. Your story is incredible and I so appreciate you sharing it with us.

No problem.

Cecilia, anything else?

CW: No. Thank you so much.

I can share my story all day long. It would never end, but we have two hours. I don't want to take all your time. You have other things to do.

SE: We so appreciate everything you've talked about and everything you've shared. Wow.

To me up until now, I have to admit I've seen a lot up to my age and I've gone through a lot to be where I am. I have to be thankful that Las Vegas provided me that capability of what I am made of.

How many of your siblings live here near you?

Only my brother, my elderly brother, is here in Las Vegas.

Is he still in business with you?

Yes, he is still, eighteen years. We've gone through ups and downs, but we still work things out.

You still speak to each other.

That is correct. We are not that kind of people that come out there and cause a lot of things. We work things out.

Did you have a sister that was here as well?

My sister, no. Actually, three sisters live in San Jose, one up in Sacramento and one up in Hayward or something like that. But one of my sisters is also a pharmacist, the one in Hayward. She has a great story, too. She wasn't a pharmacist; she changed her field in between her time and then she chose pharmacy for some reason. She's been a pharmacist for over ten years.

What about your other siblings, are they still in the San Jose area?

Yes. To tell the story about how the United States, our country, had a system of sponsorship, I believe that is a very good system not only to support families from other countries, but to bring in a family where United States don't know what they're made of, but at the end of the day we will all flourish and be able to contribute back to the state. My elderly sister, she works as an engineer in the tech business. My second sister, she worked for Apple. My older brother owns an alarm company. Basically we are all successful to begin with, with the support of the sponsorship by our government. Now we'll be able to pay back what we need to pay back what we owed that we got into that to the state, so we are grateful to that. Even my brother and sister had an opportunity to be able to do this.

What about your parents, what are they doing now?

My parents are now retired. They live in a house. They just exercise, keep themselves healthy, basically just around the corner. They don't want to go out there and basically get in anything else. They did their time. They are hardworking. To raise that many kids, it is not easy. Not only timeline, based on that timeline, back in the early '80s that was not easy. That was a hard time. To be able to get every one of us out, that was a successful mission that they did.

They made a huge decision when they got on that boat with all their children. That had to be very scary for them.

That was because any one of us could have lost our life during that time because to escape from that country at that time, no one was safe because they were looking behind and see—we had to hide, like two or three o'clock in the morning, to leave. You cannot go during the daytime because they were all roaming around. You have to do it late at night when no one can see you. You had to leave during certain hours. If you didn't leave at certain hours, they're out there roaming and looking for you. There was a timeline at that time as well. You cannot fall back some minutes; it had to be perfect to get out.

And you all had to be quiet.

There were tons of us. We all had to meet certain hours to get there. We had to meet there to be able to get there. That is correct. The time was really important. If you lapse your time, you are not able to complete your mission. You wouldn't get out.

Your parents sound like very hardworking, very heroic people for doing what they did.

I consider that they are.

Yes. They moved to San Jose because...who was there?

My cousin who was just my mom's half-sister, she was there. They came over the same thing as us, but they were transferred to a different place. They were in a camp as well. They got a different sponsor that got them to a different city in the United States.

A warmer city than Raleigh.

That is correct. Up until now I still remember how much snow we went through to go to school each day that our hands would crack. It was tough. We couldn't adapt to that weather.

You went from the Hong Kong weather straight to Raleigh?

That is correct, straight to Raleigh. It was a different transformation. It was cold when we arrived. I was wearing a big old jacket. I was in a stroller still probably at that time. They probably still have that picture, in a stroller and in a big jacket.

I thank you again. I'm really glad we got these extra details. Thank you so much for sharing your story, Brendan. I will email you that draft soon.

Yes, no problem.

Thank you.

You're welcome.

I hope you enjoy the rest of your day.

You do the same. Same thing for you, Cecilia.

CW: Yes. Thank you so much.

Thank you.

[End of recorded interview]