

The following interview was conducted with Hien Dang for the Star City Treasures AmeriCorps Oral History Project. It took place on May 25, 2006 at Eiseley Library. The interviewer is Katherine Lamie.

KL: Hien, when and where were you born?

HD: I was born in South Vietnam. It's called Saigon. But now, it is named Ho Chi Minh City. It is the name of the Communist leader in Vietnam War.

KL: And what year was that?

HD: What year, what year... was I born? April 1, 1976.

KL: So that was after the Vietnam War?

HD: After the Vietnam War, yeah.

KL: Could you describe your family as you were growing up?

HD: Um, before I answer this question, let me tell you a little bit about my country's history.

KL: Oh, okay.

HD: Does it work for you?

KL: Yes.

HD: Vietnam was occupied by some countries like China, France, and Japan. And, uh, one of Vietnamese folk song depicts the history of the one thousand years of Chinese domination, one hundred years of French domination and twenty years of internal civil war... I mean the Vietnamese War. But, the language we use is, of course, Vietnamese, but before that, during the Chinese domination, we used Chinese. Now, we use the light Latin alphabet system...thanks to the Portuguese missionary, his name is Alexander Rhodes. He created my mother language and we use until now. Weather... we have different seasons in South/North... like, in South, we have two seasons, like uh, the cold season and the hot season, but in the North we have four distinct seasons... like in the U.S. But, we do not have snow, yeah. And, uh, you said to explain about my family?

KL: Yeah, about your family and your childhood.

HD: Okay, ah, I have parents, 6 brothers, and 2 sisters. And most of them have their good family now. Um, my childhood was, let's see... my childhood, we have, I mean, I was born in the suburban areas, so I spent a lot of time in my childhood in that area, communities. I played hide and sneak, played with planes, kite flying in the rice fields. And, we, I mean I, can make the kite with the bamboo tree and old magazines. But, now

kids study very hard. They study the whole day. They are kind of busy at school. In the morning they go to school... back home to take a nap, and, of course, lunch. And, in the afternoon they went to grammar school, yeah. Assignments keep them very busy.

KL: So you had many more recreation opportunities when you were little?

HD: Yeah.

KL: What kinds of subjects did you study in school when you were young?

HD: Oh, like in the U.S., I study math... mathematics, biology, a lot of things... but, there the program require of students learn by heart a lot of things, but after school they always forget everything. Yeah, I don't like that... but they have to.

KL: Now, by the suburbs do you mean you lived pretty close to the city, but the outside of the city? And, was the area more wealthy than the rural farmland?

HD: Yeah, because we often have fresh air, quiet life... not noisy like the big city.

KL: When you were little did you see a lot of poverty where you were growing up?

HD: A lot of what?

KL: Poverty?

HD: Poverty.

KL: Poverty, or poor conditions.

HD: Yeah, and now because of the grow of population, a lot of buildings and there no more ... rivers and rice fields like before, yeah.

KL: So, it's more urban.

HD: Yeah, more urban.

KL: Interesting. And did Vietnam change as you were growing up? Um, you talked about before this interview about how, when you were little, there was no electricity. And then...

HD: Yeah, we have three or four days with electricity then two or three days off. We live with the oi...

KL: Oil?

HD: Yeah, oil lamps, light, oil lamps. Yeah, the government do not have enough electricity for people so sometimes they turn it off, yeah. Go to bed early (chuckle).

KL: And, what did your parent's do as you were growing up?

HD: Um, my father worked for the government but now he is retired. My mother is a housewife and she, she do things around the house and kitchen... to support my brothers and sisters.

KL: All eight of them (chuckle)?

HD: Yeah, a lot.

KL: And, um, with so many brothers and sisters, what was life like in your house? Were you all going to school?

HD: We, ah, we in the family, we have, I mean, generally in Vietnam, students go to school by themselves. We, in my family, we have seven boys, so every morning we run out of the house with the boys to go to school. And, after school we back home to have lunch and again go to school in the afternoon.

KL: Did any of your siblings or you make it to college in Vietnam?

HD: Uh, two of them graduated from business school, including me, two graduate from technology school, one from law school and one from medical school.

KL: So, in your opinion, was your family very successful compared to other families?

HD: Yeah, because my parents always said we have nothing for you in the future, the only thing we can give you guys now is go to school to try your best. So that is why we try our best.

KL: Very, very good work ethic.

HD: Yeah, like the old people say, I can give you fishing rod, I can't give you the fish everyday.

KL: And what holidays or cultural traditions did you celebrate with your family?

HD: Oh, holidays, like, we celebrate Christmas, like in the U.S., but New Year's Day, we call Tet... T-E-T... Holiday. We have our, kind of different from the U.S... you just have New Year's Eve, but we have ten days to celebrate holiday. A lot of parties and lucky money. We also celebrate Women's Day, it's on August 8, no, in March 8 every year and we celebrate Teacher's Day. It's on November 21, yeah, a day to honor and value teachers. I love that day. We have one day off and teachers have flowers and free gift.

KL: What is lucky money on New Year's?

HD: On New Year's Day.

KL: And what is it?

HD: It's money. A small money and they put the money in a small red envelope... and they give you, when you've written them, to give you good luck for the whole year.

KL: Now, do the older family members give it to the younger?

HD: Yeah, the older supposed to give the lucky money for the younger.

KL: Interesting.

HD: Yeah, and we also keep that traditional in the U.S.

KL: Oh. Are there any other holidays or traditions you like to celebrate in the United States that you've brought with you from Vietnam.

HD: Like, yeah, Christmas and New Year's Day.

KL: So, you still celebrate Christmas here.

HD: Yeah, because the Vietnamese community in the U.S. is a small group of people so we celebrate together at church.

KL: So, you said you went to business school in Vietnam?

HD: Uh huh, my first major in accounting, two years accounting, and then B.S. degree in foreign trade but I would like to study further, so that is why I came here.

KL: What was the name of your university in Vietnam?

HD: Um, Ho Chi Minh City Economic College.

KL: And that was in Ho Chi Minh City, South Vietnam?

HD: Yeah, in South, in Ho Chi Minh City.

KL: And Ho Chi Minh City is the name of the college, but you refer to the city as Saigon?

HD: Yeah.

KL: Why is that?

HD: Most of the Vietnamese Americans who live in the U.S. like to use Saigon because Ho Chi Minh is the name of the Communist leader in the Vietnam War. His idea to combine, or to unite, South and North Vietnam... he is right, but the way he act and his followers, is different, quite different, so... to be honest, Vietnamese have suffered a lot from the Communists. So, that is the reason why they have to move from Saigon to the U.S. Yeah, as a refugee.

KL: But, you didn't come here that way?

HD: No.

KL: You came here to study?

HD: Yeah, I came here to study.

KL: Who do you live with here in Lincoln?

HD: I live with my uncle and my cousin.

KL: Your uncle and your cousin. And why did they come here?

HD: Um, they came here in the H.O. Program. Like, Humanitarian Operation.

KL: Humanitarian Operation?

HD: Yeah, that's right.

KL: And do you know what that is?

HD: Um, let's see. There were Vietnamese soldiers who worked for U.S. Army in Vietnam War have the chance to go to the U.S. if they spend more than three years in the jail. So, after three years they can...they do some paperwork and have the chance to go to the U.S. to have a new life.

KL: Interesting, so your uncle was in the army that fought against the Communists?

HD: Yeah, uh huh.

KL: What was his role in the army?

HD: Uh, I, actually I don't know.

KL: Does he not talk very much about it?

HD: He talk to me, he told me sometime but I, uh, I don't remember exactly what section he worked in.

KL: Does he ever describe the reeducation camps, or how long he was in one?

HD: He spent, more than three years in the camp. He got out of jail, he went out of jail in 1981. Um, he worked very hard to support his family, wife and four kids, and he moved to the U.S. in 1994. Yeah.

KL: Does he ever talk about what happened in the reeducation camps, any of the experiences?

HD: Oh, they have to work very hard, whole day, from the beginning, to when the sun set has come... and all they have two rice rolls per day. They hungry whole day, but they work very hard. They have to eat everything that they can survive, yeah, in the camp.

KL: So, do you think your uncle was a lot luckier than other people who didn't survive the camp?

HD: Yes, sure, every single Vietnamese American in the U.S. feel very lucky because a lot of Vietnamese pass away on the way to the U.S. in the ocean. They left their brothers, parents, grandparents, yeah a lot. But, we, I mean, Vietnamese Americans, very lucky to be here.

KL: Does your family, who still lives in Vietnam, are they interested in ever moving to the United States, or anywhere else?

HD: Yeah, of course, they would like to have that chance... but, I'm afraid they can't because, I don't know what kind program the U.S. government can put them in, so I don't know, but I am so lucky to be here to study.

KL: And what college do you go to here?

HD: I went to, I am studying at Doane College.

KL: And you said business?

HD: Yeah, international business is my major.

KL: How is college here different than in Vietnam?

HD: Um, uh, let's see, we have a lot of chance to talk with our instructors, very open, we can discuss... and sometimes we can have an argument. But, in Vietnam, there is one way of lecture... they have to, I mean, students have to learn by heart everything so they are very frustrated for students, yeah. And uh, we, before to get a seat in the college we

have to pass a very, very difficult exam, exam in Vietnam. This depend on what major you are interested in. Yeah, so they can make the list of subjects you have to study for.

KL: So, you wouldn't feel very comfortable disagreeing with a college professor in Vietnam?

HD: Yeah, sometimes, not often. That there... we have for lots of information about others. Like me, I am studying in business, but it is very difficult to borrow a book or documents in the library. Even though they, they are, the borrower is an instructor. I don't know why they treat other people like that, but completely different in the U.S. In here, the librarian very open. They willing to help you and no charge for anything. You can bring books home, videos, um, VHS, and after that you have to return it. That's it, yeah.

KL: After studying here in the United States, do you plan to stay in the United States? Or go back to Vietnam?

HD: (Chuckle) Oh, not really like that because I, uh, honestly think I have a lot of chance to study more and I can find a good job if I am the best in the college, I can have a job here, but nowadays Vietnam is a developing country. They need a lot of well-educated people to help the government. But, I am not so sure, yeah.

KL: How is business... the study of business... in the United States different than the business that is in Vietnam right now under the Communist government, still?

HD: Uh huh, hmm. Actually, you already know that the Vietnamese government, I mean, uh, let's say there are a lot of corruption and bribery in the Vietnam government. So that is why they do business completely different than in the U.S. In here they do by law, but in my country, money talk, yeah, money can smooth anything. So, completely different.

KL: So, if you bring what you learned here in the United States to Vietnam, do you think there will be some problems? Do you think you'll have different business ideas than a lot of your co-workers?

HD: Yeah, yeah, uh, at first I may have some problems. Like, already mentioned before, but the way U.S., the way you do business is different with others, you can do your own way even though they, you, may have some problems with others, like competitors. But, I hope it change day by day, it is mostly better and better. I hope (chuckle).

KL: In living in the United States, have you adjusted differently than the family members you live with now, depending on you being a younger generation than your uncle? How did he adjust to the United States?

HD: When he came here, he worked very hard to support his family but when I came here I have backups, so it is easy for me to adjust my life. And, luckily I learn a lot, a

little bit, of English in Vietnam, in the college and high school, so that's why. Of course, it's more easier than him before, yeah. He just worked and worked, yeah, and send his children to school.

KL: So he speaks very little English?

HD: Yeah, um, but his children must be better.

KL: And they go to school with you?

HD: Uh, one of them, I mean my cousin, she is studying at Doane with me in the same program so we can discuss and stay together at school.

KL: Are there a lot of other students with international backgrounds at Doane, from other countries?

HD: Uh, I am studying in the evening so I don't know much about it.

KL: But you have seen very many, different groups?

HD: Not yet.

KL: As you moved here, what were some of your first impressions of America?

HD: Oh, I can't forget the time when I came to Chicago Airport. In my country I never see snow. But, when I came to Chicago Airport, I catch a snowstorm. But, I just have a tee shirt when others have sweaters and warm coffee in their hand, but I have a paper fan in my hands because I carry a lot of stuff with me, so that's why. I am very embarrassed when I went there.

KL: What was your first impression of the city of Lincoln?

HD: Uh, a lot of corn and snow. Yeah, I spent one night in Lincoln and the next morning I went to Crete- it's a, it's a county, right?

KL: It's a nearby city.

HD: A nearby city, okay.

KL: So, overall, do you like living in Lincoln?

HD: It's a good place to study, but Vietnamese community have not much entertainment. They, that's why they go straight to casino to try their luck. But I don't think they can get any money over there.

KL: Are there a lot of Vietnamese-run businesses in Lincoln?

HD: Like my cousin, he has a nails shop and some hair shops and not very much, we just have three Vietnamese market to go for groceries every week.

KL: But you said the religious community in Lincoln is strong in the Vietnamese communities, when you celebrate holidays together? Religion is something that ties you all together.

HD: Yeah, um, in Lincoln, we also have Buddhism community, but it is small group when you compare with Catholic communities. And we celebrate everything at church... Vietnamese church.

KL: Is religion very important in Vietnam, too?

HD: Uh, in Vietnam they don't care much about religion. You and me can be friends in any way, we don't care about religion. But, are 55 percent of Vietnamese population belong to Buddhism, 7 percent is Catholic and other percent for other religions.

KL: But there is a lot of religious tolerance there?

HD: Yeah, at least four religions, different religions. Like Taoists, Buddhism, Catholic, and Camfee-something? I don't know.

KL: Do you have any suggestions for new Americans in the Vietnamese community on how they can keep their Vietnamese traditions while living in the United States?

HD: Yes, just suggestion. For young people, because they have difficult life in my home country, so when they have a chance to move here in the U.S. I think the only way to help them out is to study hard. That is the only way to bring them out of poverty, poverty of knowledge and materials, I mean in general. If you can afford it, I mean, go to school. So work hard in the field that you feel interested in.

KL: Do you think there's a way they can balance their American identity with their old life in Vietnam?

HD: Uh huh, I have read somewhere that the naturalist Charles Darwin, he said that the surviving species is not the strongest species or smartest species, they survive because they have the ability to adapt to a new environment. But, I don't remember exactly his quote. Another thing, for a suggestion for all people. Let's try something else instead of trying their luck at the casino because I don't think that they just open a new casino to serve them... they have no chance up there. If you, they, think that it's a kind of entertainment, that's okay, but of course they play.

KL: But you would like more traditional arts celebrated here in Lincoln?

HD: Yeah, and for Vietnamese communities, please keep their traditions, Vietnamese traditions, like holidays, yeah.

KL: And I know as you came over to be a student, here in the United States, it is usually a very hard process- for people from all over the world to study in the United States. Could you share some of those difficulties you faced trying to come over here?

HD: The most important and difficult part of the process is the getting U.S. Visa. You can keep in touch with the college that you apply to go for, but you can (?) get two or four interview. But, no one knows for sure you can get the Visa. The U.S. embassy may not believe that you will be back to Vietnam after you finish your degree in the U.S.

KL: Do you plan on going back to Vietnam?

HD: I don't know.

KL: What do you miss most about Vietnam?

HD: The most, okay? My family, my Vietnamese food. Oh, I love that. But in Lincoln, we don't really have Vietnamese traditional food. Because, I am close to my family. I mean parents and siblings, so sometimes I feel homesick. But thanks to the technology, internet and phone call, I can call them anytime.

KL: Lastly, is there anything you would like to say to the future generations that will be listening to this interview?

HD: Old people say, let me think... um, okay, I can give you an example. People take minutes to name five famous people in the world, but they may take hours... to name the people who changed their life. Who are they? Very close, they are your parents, they are teachers, and instructors. So what I would like to say for the next generation is value and respect the authorities, I mean parents, instructors, teachers. Because, um, let's say our parents, you may complain and feel tired if you have ten pounds backpack, but your mom have to carry you nine months and ten days, it's equal to 280 days and 6,720 hours and take care of you until you grow enough and grow eighteen, sixteen, or eighteen. But, they just receive three written cards, for Christmas, New Year's, and Birthday... it too bad. So, don't forget and spend more time for your parents and family members... personally.

KL: And this is for children all over the world, too. Even in Vietnam, do you think, that there is more commercialization?

HD: If you say so, but it's just my opinion about how to value their authorities.

KL: Interesting. Anything else you would like to add?

HD: Uh, one more thing, because like I have mentioned before, Vietnamese Americans feel very lucky to be here. They have a lot of chance to go to school to study English to communicate with other countries, learn a lot in the U.S., but when we success, please don't forget the poor, unlucky people around you. Like, we can, for example, if you close your eyes in five, ten minutes you cannot do anything as normal, but some people out there have no sight, in their whole life, so they suffer a lot. Another thing is, like if we have a band aid on our fingers, we cannot handle anything, but someone else have no arms and legs, so they suffer a lot, but they around you. So, don't forget them. If you have any chance left over. Once again, it is my opinion about all life.

KL: And growing up in Vietnam after the Vietnam War you did see a lot of suffering in the local communities?

HD: Yeah, sure. Like, we, when I was a child, we did not have enough food for the day. We, my siblings and I, have changed to independent when I was at nine years old. For example, I can wash... we take turns to wash the dishes and wash our clothes after take a shower. We did not have to, we didn't forced to do that, but that the way you can help your parents.

KL: Great, it really sounds like you have a very hardworking family.

HD: Yeah, I try my best. Because until now, I feel I am so lucky to be here. Yes, recently I have heard in the Vietnamese station, I mean on the TV, \$2.50 in the U.S., U.S. dollars, can save an elderly in Vietnam in one month. They can have a lot of things with \$2 and fifty cents. Like my family, like my parents, they now live with two or three brothers and one sister. They have a good job in Vietnam. But my homes, my family, I mean six members, parents and brothers and sisters... they live under \$1.10 per day. Uh, yeah, it's very bad. But, in the U.S. you can buy McDonalds with at least five dollars. But, my family, six members now living under one and fifty cents.

KL: Thank you very much for letting me interview you.

HD: You're welcome. It is my pleasure.

KL: Good luck with your business degree.