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## Root Causes of the Generational Cultural Disconnect Among Marin County Vietnamese-Americans

Sierra Najolia

*Dominican University of California*

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Root Causes of the Generational Cultural Disconnect  
Among Marin County Vietnamese-Americans

A senior thesis submitted to the History Faculty of Dominican  
University of California in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the Bachelor of Arts in History.

By

Sierra Najolia

San Rafael, California

May, 2018

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## Abstract

After the fall of Saigon, Vietnam in 1975, 1.6 million Vietnamese fled the victorious communist regime. Many resettled in the United States, roughly half a million settled in California, creating large communities in Orange County and San Jose. Both larger communities express a deep cultural identity, appreciation and sense of preservation along with a strong tradition of passing down this culture to their children and grandchildren. However, a small group of Vietnamese immigrants in Marin County, CA don't display the same pattern of passing on their culture, religion, and language to their children as other larger Vietnamese communities do. After working with this community closely for two years creating the Marin County Vietnamese American Oral History Project, I observed a huge cultural disconnect between the original immigrants from Vietnam and their American-born children. In most cases, the children of the immigrants were not raised with the Vietnamese culture- they are completely 'Americanized' and many do not speak Vietnamese despite it being their parent's only language. In other cases, the second generation wants to embrace their culture but are unable to do so. This is a fairly new phenomena in Vietnamese-American culture and academic scholarship does not have a definitive term for it simply because it has not been broadly studied yet. However, in my experience with the Marin community, I would describe it as a generational cultural disconnect. There is no singular pattern explaining this phenomena- each explanation is unique to each family. However, the root causes of this problem can be narrowed down to the family's unique diaspora narrative, an internal cultural identity quandary among the second generation, and institutional barriers the community faces in the United States. These root causes impacted the way Vietnamese culture is valued and passed down in the

Marin community even more than they even realize and has led to the cultural quandary they experience today.

## Preface

If you know anything about me, you would know that I seemingly have nothing in common with this topic. It begs the question, “Why is a 22 year-old Latina from Southern California writing about Vietnamese-Americans in Marin County?” This is a valid question. To be honest, I got involved in this community because of a class I was required to take at Dominican University of California located in Marin County, CA. This class required us to choose a community partner in order to connect the class content to the greater community. Immediately one option stood out among the list– The Vietnamese American Oral History Project. Being a self proclaimed history nerd; I learned that this community held the stories of people who had lived in Vietnam during the Vietnam War and I couldn’t wait to get started. When I first got involved with this community, that met regularly at the Pickleweed Community Center in Marin, I had no clue how I could possibly connect with this group- we had nothing in common. I was a Mexican-American young adult who only spoke English and they were elderly Vietnamese immigrants who predominantly spoke Vietnamese. However, I found other ways to communicate and make basic human connections; including mainly body language and facial expressions. On top of that, I interviewed them individually and learned their stories, deepening our connection. Our meetings, were fun as we often played Bingo or did yoga. I also tutored some members in English or for their citizenship tests. After my required semester of service, I truly understood the importance of this Oral History Project and decided to continue my connection with an internship so I could continue hearing the voices of this resilient, culturally rich community– which lasted for two years. I found myself spending my free time going to their community events like mindfulness and meditation classes and their

feeding the homeless events. I even started researching and supporting the social movements they were promoting such as the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative<sup>1</sup>. The issues important to them became important to me. Continual involvement beyond interviews helped build a mutual trust and respect. After the first year of my service, I switched to the Friday Vietnamese “stress management group” which was under the Marin County Health and Human Services. As a requirement for working with clients with sensitive mental health information I had to set up an internship with the Marin County Health and Human Services and was trained in HIPPA compliance. This institution provides information and treatment for those in need in our community. Their main office is in Novato, about four miles north of San Rafael, but they also have a Health and Wellness Campus in the Canal of San Rafael, which is where I met with the community as of 2017. I work with a small group of elderly Vietnamese American immigrants who have mental health illnesses and are getting help from (who we refer to in this essay as) Mai Vo, a Vietnamese-American Licensed Mental Health Practitioner. Mental health in the Vietnamese community is heavily stigmatized and many Vietnamese-American immigrants do not seek help for mental health issues, much less acknowledge that they have a problem in the first place. A major problem the county faced with providing services to the Vietnamese-American community was that the county had the funding and capacity to help them receive treatment, but no one from the community was seeking it. In response, Mai created a weekly Friday “stress management” group in order to get the community

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<sup>1</sup> The California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative is A 20-member statewide coalition representing the nail salon community, environmental and reproductive justice, public health and workers’ rights organizations. The coalition also includes researchers, government agencies and other key stakeholders. The Collaborative’s mission is to improve the health, safety, and rights of the nail and beauty care workforce to achieve a healthier, more sustainable, and just industry.

together so she could identify those in need and teach them about mental health as well as the importance of getting treatment. However, her role has expanded to community leader, because she additionally provided them with a sense of community and encouraged social interaction in a group that often feels isolated. As a bilingual county worker, she also became a valued resource to this group that predominantly only speaks Vietnamese. They go to her for everything from learning how to buy groceries, to helping put them on the road to citizenship. During group meetings, Mai leads a variety of activities from English learning games to meditative drawing and Bingo– the community members love to bring homemade food and snacks to share with everyone. For the past two years I have been recording and editing video interviews of different members of this community as well as setting up an online archive on YouTube to provide a platform for the Marin Vietnamese-American Oral History project in order to share their stories, as well as preserving their history and culture for the generations to come and as a community resource. After conducting and recording around 20 interviews, I've learned countless things about this community and have heard the incredible stories of this strong, resilient group. However, throughout the process, I noticed a pattern among Vietnamese families; a large number of the immigrant's children do not have a strong connection to their culture, with many not speaking Vietnamese at all, while it is their parent's only language. This phenomena tends to occur to immigrant families over multiple generations, but this was happening within one generation. This thesis seeks to explore the changes occurring right now in the Marin Vietnamese-American community.

# Introduction

The Vietnam War was a deeply impactful and transformative event that has a unique significance to everyone. Ask a millennial what the Vietnam War means to them and they might not even know what you are talking about, but, ask a baby boomer and those words could remind them of the worst period of their life. The Vietnam War psychologically and emotionally weighs on people differently. Some people have been able to shed this weight, while others still carry it. The Vietnam War is a subject too large for one undergraduate thesis, but the hope for this paper is to continue the dialogue and contribute to a greater understanding of the impacts of the war and to gain an appreciation for all those involved.

America's place in the "Indochina Imbroglio", as Southeast Asian historian D.R. SarDesai thoughtfully put it, is multifaceted. The U.S. had a large role in the conflict far before troops ever stepped foot in Vietnam. The U.S. government had shifted its gaze to Southeast Asia all the way back in 1947, during President Harry Truman's presidency. This fight to keep the red dominoes of communism from falling lasted until 1975, when the South Vietnamese capital, Saigon, fell to the Việt Cộng. The war was long and brutal, with over 85,000 American lives lost and even more whose lives would never be the same. Eventually, despite U.S. efforts, Vietnam fell to communism and the U.S. was stuck with the wounds of someone else's war. For most Americans, this is where the narrative ends; however, the reality is that this was only one chapter in a much larger story.

The South Vietnamese see the conflict much differently. Nearly four times more South Vietnamese soldiers were killed than American soldiers.<sup>2</sup> To the United States it was the Vietnam War, to the Vietnamese it was a violent, bloody, civil war that they had been fighting for decades. For the South Vietnamese, it was a period of time marked by great suffering and loss, and not just because of the death toll of over 200,000. Many lost everything. This included money, businesses, and land that had been in their families for generations.<sup>3</sup> After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Vietnam was left in physical, economic, and political shambles while 120,000<sup>4</sup> people immediately fled out of fear of the new communist regime— those who stayed were subjected to a severely retributive new government. The Southern Vietnamese migrant story and perspective is often considered in American scholarship. The population that is especially overlooked is the mass diaspora of South Vietnamese after the fall of Saigon, a crisis so significant it changed century old immigration policies.

The South Vietnamese diasporization is a complex event because the Vietnam War didn't exclusively affect Vietnam and the United States, it affected the entirety of Southeast Asia. When South Vietnam fell to the National Liberation Front, also known as the Việt Cộng, the entire region became unstable. This opened the door for other political threats, like the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, ultimately leading to a Southeast Asian mass migration crisis. The United States immigration policy up until 1965 was based off of a nationality

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<sup>2</sup> Spector Ronald H., "Vietnam War," Encyclopedia Britannica, inc. January 11, 2018 <https://www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War>.

<sup>3</sup> Nghia M. Vo, *The Vietnamese boat people, 1954 and 1975-1992* (Jefferson, N.C. : McFarland & Co, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Batalova, Jeanne, Zong, Jie. "Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States." Migration Policy Institute, June 8, 2016, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/vietnamese-immigrants-united-states#Distribution>.

quota system, in which only a specific number of people of certain nationalities were granted entrance into the U.S.<sup>5</sup> These quotas favored Western European countries, because during this era in American history “Americans equated nationality and ethnicity with one’s value system. It was believed that immigrants from countries sharing a similar culture would share American Democratic values. Thus, the future life of the nation would experience less political disruption”.<sup>6</sup> Quotas for Asian countries were extremely low (if not non-existent) and immigration policy towards them was unforgiving.

Influenced by the Cold War and the growing communist threat, the U.S. relaxed their immigration policy slightly in hopes that other Asian countries would not turn to communism like China did in 1949. This change was enacted with the Nationality Act of 1952, better known as the McCarran-Walter Act. Half of the visas of each nationality quota went to highly skilled or advance degree holding immigrants. The other half were divided up for family members of US citizens and permanent resident aliens. This law exempted the husbands, wives and children of U.S. citizens from their home nation’s quota and also relaxed policies excluding Asians leftover from the Chinese Exclusion Act. This was the status quo up until 1965. The 1960s are often associated with social and political change in American society, this included immigration reform. As Ciment argues, “policy makers in Washington predominantly shared liberal views and a strong belief in the capacity of government to right wrongs and deliver services effectively. Their faith in government activism led to enactment of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ciment James, *Encyclopedia of American Immigration* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 181.

<sup>6</sup> Ciment James, *Encyclopedia of American Immigration* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 181.

<sup>7</sup> Ciment James, *Encyclopedia of American Immigration* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 182.

Also called the Hart-Cellar Act, this new policy first and foremost abolished the nationality quota system based on race, religion and ancestry. It also shifted the immigration standard from further away from people with valuable job skills. Now only 10% of immigrants were granted visas based on occupation and 10% on education achievements rather than 50%.<sup>8</sup> The previous system only allowed husbands, wives, and unmarried children under the age of 21 to immigrate to the U.S. outside of the national quota, this new law allowed parents as well. Familial immigration reached 90,000 on average per year. By 1990, Asian immigrants consisted of 29% of immigrants in America while Europeans only made up 15%.<sup>9</sup>

The United States had been involved with South Vietnam since the 1950s<sup>10</sup> and was deeply invested in the efforts of Army of the Republic of Vietnam for the next nineteen years. However, due to the impact<sup>11</sup> of the Tet Offensive in 1968 and escalating U.S. public backlash<sup>12</sup> over the war, in 1969 President Nixon began withdrawing American Troops and aid and began transferring powers to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam in a process called Vietnamization.<sup>13</sup> Seven years later in 1976, Saigon, the Southern Capital, ultimately fell to the Việt Cộng. After the capture of the capital, the war was officially over and those who were pro-Republic of Vietnam faced a highly retributive new government and were in immense danger both during the war and after it. The fall of Saigon was swift and

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<sup>8</sup> Ciment James, *Encyclopedia of American Immigration* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 183.

<sup>9</sup> Ciment James, *Encyclopedia of American Immigration* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 183.

<sup>10</sup> Spector Ronald H., "Vietnam War," Encyclopedia Britannica, inc. January 11, 2018.

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War/French-rule-ended-Vietnam-divided>

<sup>11</sup> Impact, specifically referring to the public realization that the U.S. wasn't close to victory like the government had advertised. After the Tet Offensive the U.S. government and public realized that this would be a much longer and bloodier war than anticipated.

<sup>12</sup> Backlash, specifically referring to the march on the Pentagon in October of 1967 consisting of over 35,000 protestors, but not excluding all other acts of protest against the Vietnam war that occurred in the U.S.

<sup>13</sup> Spector Ronald H., "Vietnam War," Encyclopedia Britannica, inc. January 11, 2018.

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War/Tet-brings-the-war-home>.

dangerous leading to multiple waves of immigration that can be separated into three categories; “those who could”, “those who had no choice”, and “finally the families”.

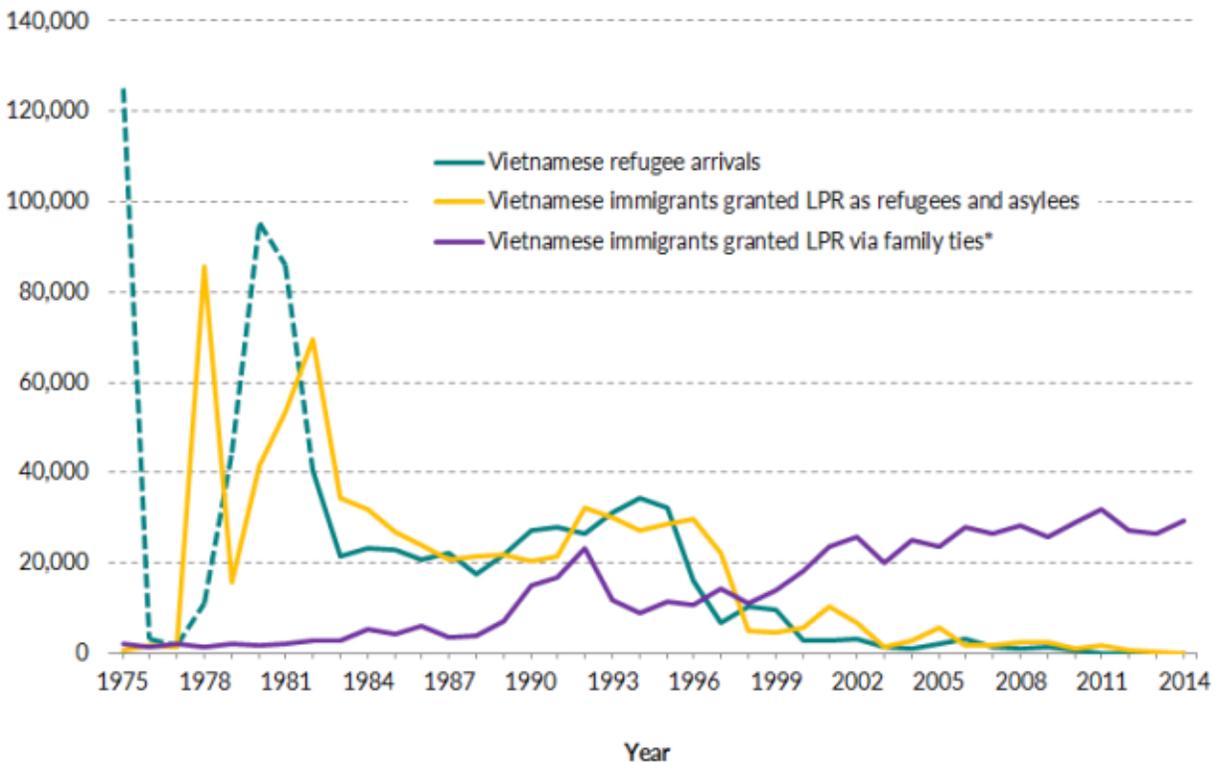


Figure 1. Batalova, Jeanne, Zong, Jie. “Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States”. Migration Policy Institute, June 8, 2016, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/vietnamese-immigrants-united-states#Distribution>

Southeast Asia fell to chaos quickly, as over 120,000 people fleeing caused an immediate crisis- the first wave of immigration, “those who could”. In response to the fall of Saigon, the United States military enacted a couple of airlift operations to immediately transport refugees. Operation Babylift<sup>14</sup>, which transported 2,600 Orphans and abandoned children

<sup>14</sup> Robert V. Kane, Jasper C, Horne, “Support Plan for Vietnamese Orphans (SPOVO)” (Department of the Army After Action Report, Presidio of San Francisco CA, 30 June 1975).

to the United States to be put up for adoption. There were also multiple airlifts out of Vietnam, according to federal records, “during the first part of April, USAF C-141 Starlifters landed in Saigon with increased frequency to deliver military cargo to the South Vietnamese.... to evacuate U.S. citizens, third country nationals, and selected Vietnamese...,between April 5 and 29, these aircraft had airlifted more than 45,000 people from Saigon, including more than 5,600 U.S. citizens.”<sup>15</sup> These airlifts were mainly for high profile South Vietnamese officials and affluent public figures. Essentially, anyone who would immediately be persecuted and punished under the new political regime. This wave of refugees are called “those who could.” Because they were likely from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, were more educated, or had direct ties to the U.S. government, they were granted immediate access to transportation out of the country. The second wave of immigrants, “those who had no choice,” consisted of the middle and lower-class citizens whose lives were directly affected by the new regime and escaped by any means possible. This group is also commonly called The Boat People by the Vietnamese community and most modern scholarship on the southeast immigration crisis. Because of their socioeconomic status, many couldn’t afford safe passage out of the country and had to leave by any means necessary. Nghia M. Vo describes these conditions best in her book, *The Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992* “The sheer number of people (796,310) willing to risk everything, including death, to try and escape the brutality of the communist

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<sup>15</sup> U.S. Government, U.S. Military, Department of Defense, U.S. Air Force, Daniel L. Haulman, *Short of War: Major USAF Contingency Operations 1947-1997 - Berlin Airlift, Lebanon, Cuban Missile Crisis, Israel Airlift, Vietnam Evacuation, Iranian Hostages, Grenada, Panama, Iraq, Bosnia, Haiti* (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: Air Force Museums and Programs in association with Air University Press, 2000) 88-9.0

regime. Those who had little money bought their way out unofficially and risked encountering pirates or sinking in the depths of the ocean, while rich people were allowed to leave officially after paying a hefty sum of gold”.<sup>16</sup> The third group, “finally the families” is unique, they’re the ones who stayed in Vietnam after the war and were eventually sponsored over by their families who had already become U.S. citizens.

This was one of the most significant humanitarian crisis of the modern era, yet not many Americans know about it. It is also still in progress, the Vietnam War was not that long ago in relative terms, and there are still people fleeing from the same regime today. American scholarship on the Vietnamese diaspora and culture is nearly non-existent, likely due to our controversial and complicated role in the war. Americans have complex sentiments about the Vietnam War because of our complicated involvement in it, and this in turn creates complex perceptions of Vietnam as a nation and its people. American scholarship on Vietnam particularly is highly influenced by these perceptions. When Americans think about Vietnam, if they ever do, its rich culture and history isn’t usually the first thing that comes to mind. Due to the controversy of America’s involvement in the Vietnam War, and the fact that the war is still fresh in many minds today, historians are still trying to figure out exactly what happened and why. As a result, American scholarship on Vietnam, expectedly so, is primarily focused on the war and America’s role in it rather than Vietnam as a complex and culturally rich nation. The wounds inflicted by the Vietnam War on the U.S. have not completely healed, and consequently created a deficit of scholarship on the culture, history and diaspora of the Vietnamese. However, as time passes, historians of

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<sup>16</sup> Nghia M. Vo, *The Vietnamese boat people, 1954 and 1975-1992* (Jefferson, N.C. : McFarland & Co, 2006).

Southeast Asia are realizing the war was a relatively small factor in the overall narrative of Vietnam; and emphasis on the war in American scholarship is prioritized less and the Vietnamese experience and voice are being represented more.

American scholarship on Vietnam is plentiful and relatively recent with nearly all books on it published within the past 60 years, and as America's role in the Vietnam War changed, our priorities as a nation understandably changed; and consequently, the scholarship on Vietnam mirrored that change as well. It can be divided into three distinct categories due to America's interest and involvement in the country; pre-war when Vietnam was a small dot on America's communist radar, during-war where Americans were left with more questions than answers, and post 2000s which addresses the post war refugee crisis, immigration influx and the Vietnamese identity within America.

Pre-war scholarship was mostly ethnography with imperialist sentiments simply because America only had an interest in the war and was not yet involved. Pre-war books that weren't ethnographies outlined the potential for Southeast Asian countries to fall to communism. One example of this era of scholarship is *The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam* by Joseph Buttinger.<sup>17</sup> War-era scholarship was focused all around the war and sought out answers to why our nation was doing what it was doing and nearly all scholarship on the history and culture of Vietnam was extremely biased. An example of this is *Vietnam: A Country Study* by Ronald J. Cima.<sup>18</sup> Post 2000's literature still tries to answer

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<sup>17</sup> Pre-war work: *The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam* was published in 1958, eleven years after the Truman Doctrine but seven years before troops had set foot in Vietnam. The United States monetarily supported the French occupation and had emissaries in Vietnam- America was involved, but not actively fighting. His book, unlike later books, discusses the history of Vietnam- although a little racist- but it is still a history of the nation.

<sup>18</sup> During war work: *Vietnam: A Country Study* is outwardly a country study, but upon closer reading, this book is just one installation out of a whole series of country studies that were

the basic question of why, but in a more inclusive, accurate and objective way. It also discusses the refugee crisis that is hardly addressed in any books. As America's role in the Vietnam War changed, our priorities as a nation understandably changed; and consequently, the scholarship on Vietnam mirrored that change as well. This is exemplified by *Vietnam: Past and Present* by D.R. SarDesai <sup>19</sup>

While each Vietnamese immigrant in Marin County has a unique immigrant experience, after the Vietnam War, for many Vietnamese immigrants in general, the fight was still not over. The fall of Saigon was a swift, traumatic event that forced many to abandon their entire lives within months, days and even hours after the fall of their hometown. The actual process of immigrating to the U.S. in itself was highly traumatic as well with only a percentage of people surviving the long journey. Even after they got to the U.S., many felt that they fled persecution in one country to face resentment in another. Due to this pushback in the U.S., many Vietnamese immigrants, adults and children alike, had to fight to find a place in this country with little help from the government. Because of the language barrier, many struggled to find work outside labor intensive, low wage, jobs with long hours. While most eventually found their place in America over time and even started a family, many didn't have time to fully raise their kids in the Vietnamese culture or even

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published by the U.S. Army. This book contains five chapters, and only two of them focus on the history and culture of the Vietnamese. One chapter focuses on other aspects like its economy- but economy in relation to America like foreign trade relations and economic systems. This book was ultimately an attempt to figure out what had happened by analyzing Vietnam as a country. The creators of this book's perceptions of Vietnam as a country were heavily biased by their own experiences in the war.

<sup>19</sup> Post war work: *Vietnam: Past and Present* is a genuine quest to answer the age old question of why what happened, happened. However, the questions are backed by true history and cultural studies unbiased by our nation's involvement in the Vietnam War. The author even included the new topic of the Southeast Asian refugee crisis and immigration influx. This book addresses the Vietnamese experience as a whole from its history to its foreign relations.

fully address what had happened to them physically and psychologically in Vietnam. Some also believed that expressing and teaching their children the Vietnamese culture and language would put them at a disadvantage. The Vietnam War and the subsequent mass exodus was abrupt and traumatic- which left many Vietnamese immigrants with severe mental health illnesses like PTSD and no way to treat or even acknowledge that they had one. All while their children were increasingly distancing themselves from their parents and their culture. In Marin County, CA there is a great disconnect between first generation Vietnamese immigrant parents and their second generation born children: This stems from the family's individual diaspora narrative, an internal cultural identity quandary among the second generation, and structural barriers the community faces in the United States.

# Methodology

## Oral History in Theory

For the past two years I have been recording video interviews of different members of the Vietnamese-American community to help contribute to an Oral History Archive for the community to have as a way of preserving and sharing their history and culture. Oral history is also a way to truly understand the experiences and lives of a community because like Donald A Ritchie expressed in his book *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, “Not all human activity is coherent and purposeful... it is more often a complex of choices producing unpredictable effects”<sup>20</sup>. There’s no single book outlining every single reason this community has done what they have done, or any community for that matter. Oral history is important because it captures the emotions, experiences and memories of a particular person at a particular time, and to a historian and especially a community, that is invaluable. Raw experiences simply cannot be captured in a book. In his work, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, Irving Seidman quoted author Lev Vygotsky who explained the importance of oral history best,

“Every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness. Individuals’ consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people”.<sup>21</sup>

While conducting oral histories are important, what is also as equally as important in interviewing is conducting the interview well.

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<sup>20</sup> Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 45.

<sup>21</sup> Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* (New York, New York: Teachers College Press, 2006) 7.

## Oral History in Practice

The simplest and most significant piece of advice I have learned from these texts and have implemented in my interviews is explained by Ritchie; interviewers should interact with the interviewee like they were "engaging in conversation, having a cup of coffee."<sup>22</sup> Many people in the Vietnamese-American community are very hesitant or nervous to be interviewed and share their story; but the best way to conduct an interview is to have simple, engaging conversation. By breaking down the mentally constructed barrier between interviewer and interviewee, you are eliminating any preconceived expectations and potential stressors. If the interviewee feels as if they are just talking with a friend, they would be far more open and forthcoming. I always like to begin my interviews by just learning about my interviewee as a person and talking about their interests. Many of the older women love to cook so I begin the interview with asking about their favorite dishes. When I interviewed the youth, we vented about all the assignments we still had to do in school, etc. However, there are guidelines that must be followed when conducting an interview in order for it to be successful. These guidelines are concisely outlined in chapter six of Seidman's book; specifically, the chapter advises the interviewer to "Listen More, Talk Less", "Follow Up on What the Participant Says", "Listen More, Talk Less, and Ask Real Questions" "Follow Up, but Don't Interrupt", "Ask Participants to Reconstruct, not to Remember" and "Keep Participants Focused and Ask for Concrete Details"<sup>23</sup> Active listening, interviewer participation, and critical engagement are very important factors in

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<sup>22</sup> Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 84.

<sup>23</sup> Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* (New York, New York: Teachers College Press, 2006) vi.

conducting oral history interviews successfully. Creating an oral history archive is one thing, using the histories as evidence in a research paper is another thing altogether.

## **Oral History as Evidence**

Oral histories as evidence is simultaneously the most reliable and unreliable source you can use in a paper. Richie explains this dichotomy “A good oral history can present and preserve convincing evidence and put it in quotable, first-person prose that enlivens historical narratives. But oral history should not stand alone as a single source.

Researchers need to seek out available material to substantiate both written and oral evidence”.<sup>24</sup> It is crucial to understand oral histories as one tool in the historian’s toolbox, not the only tool. You can’t fix a broken sink with only a wrench, you need multiple tools to successfully fix it. Another aspect one must consider when using oral histories as evidence is the factor of anonymity. The interviewer has the right to remain anonymous, however, it is not preferable; the specific identity of a person is integral to understanding the full narrative.<sup>25</sup> However, as a courtesy and a thank you to my interviewees, I will use pseudonyms in place of their real identities. One last piece of advice for using Oral History from Seidman is to “stud[y] the categories for thematic connections within and among them.”<sup>26</sup> It is important in your use of oral history as evidence to reference multiple interviews and find a common theme among them to derive truth and evidence.

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<sup>24</sup> Donald A. Richie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 119.

<sup>25</sup> Donald A. Richie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 126-127.

<sup>26</sup> Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* (New York, New York: Teachers College Press, 2006), 119.

## Second Generation Voices

Using Seidman's advice, a common theme among the interviews emerged. Many of my first generation interviewees expressed that they had difficulty communicating with their children. The original immigrant parents exclusively speak Vietnamese while the children exclusively speak English. This seemed impossible to me; how can parents not be able to speak to their children? It's common for an immigrant family to lose their original language over the span of a couple generations, but for the child of an immigrant to not speak the same language as their parent when it is the parent's only language baffled me. Upon closer questioning, I realized the second generation not only didn't *speak* Vietnamese, but they hadn't seemingly embraced the Vietnamese culture at all. Within one generation kids had become completely Americanized. In order to understand this phenomenon better, I started interviewing second generation Marin Vietnamese-Americans. I interviewed three second-generation community members who, either lived in Marin or worked closely with the Marin community, specifically on why they think their generation isn't as connected to the Vietnamese culture, as well as their own experiences within the culture. Again, the following names are pseudonyms. The interviewees included Mai Vo, a Bilingual Marin County Mental Health practitioner and second-generation Vietnamese-American, referred to as Thi Pham who serves as the Community Educator of the Marin Asian Advocacy Program and is part of the 1.5 generation, and Daniel Nguyen, a post undergraduate student and second generation. I created approximately six general questions that I asked each of the participants in their interviews, and depending on their responses, I would adjust the rest of the questions to fit that person. I didn't always ask these questions in the same order, and sometimes they answered a question before I even asked it, while some

couldn't even answer certain questions because they had no experiences with what I was asking.

My general questions included:

1. What does the Vietnamese Culture mean to you?
2. Did your parents raise you with the culture, what was your experience within the culture?
3. Can you describe a time where you felt connected to your culture?  
Distant?
4. In the time I've spent in the community I've noticed that parents don't pass down their culture to their kids. Have you heard of this?
5. (If yes), Why do you think this is so? What factors do you think led you to think this?
6. If you could give advice to the first generation on how to connect better to the second generation, what would you say?

To my surprise, each interview came to different conclusions due to the diversity of experiences among my subject group. Each person was a different age, came from a different background and had their own explanations for why the second generation seemingly hasn't embraced their culture. However, despite the diversity of the explanations, there were three emergent root causes among the interviews; these include the family's diaspora narrative, an internal cultural identity disconnect among the second generation, and structural barriers the community faces in the United States.

## Barriers, Disconnect and Diaspora

### The Vietnamese Culture according to the Second Generation

The phrase “the Vietnamese Culture” is used a lot in this thesis– but what exactly is the Vietnamese culture and what does being close to one’s culture mean. Brought to attention by Thi,

I think that's a tricky question because how close is close to the culture you know, like do you celebrate the New Year Lunar Festival, or do you actually do all the traditional stuff- put food on the altar for the ancestors or reciting poems? Or something, like how close is it? <sup>27</sup>

When referring to the historical, religious, and linguistic practices and traditions of the Vietnamese population it is referred to as the Vietnamese Culture. How a person specifically expresses and celebrates these aspects is varied. Understanding what the Vietnamese culture means is especially important when you take into consideration Vietnam’s history– it never had a well rooted, established culture to begin with. Mai explained,

Vietnam has been colonized for like hundreds of years and they haven’t had periods of time when they weren’t colonized, or someone was in their country doing something. So I think in some ways Vietnamese culture is very heavily inspired by whoever colonized them at the time, by the French, the Chinese, so I think in some ways the Vietnamese culture itself isn’t that well defined either just because they’ve gone through so many periods of change and power and war.<sup>28</sup>

Mai explained that the culture in Vietnam as it exists today isn’t the same as it was thirty to forty years ago;

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<sup>27</sup> My Trong, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 14, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>28</sup> Tran Nyguen, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 6, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

It's very interesting, because when Saigon fell in 75, the communist party actually took away a lot of certain Vietnamese practices, so maybe what the Boat people celebrated might not necessarily be relevant now....So, I think what the first generation grew up with is not necessarily reflected now. So, I think it's more of like that population trying to hold on to it here and that it might not necessarily reflect what the youth in Vietnam were growing up with.<sup>29</sup>

The Vietnamese culture is a dynamic, ever-changing identity that never had strong established roots in the first place and is difficult to describe. The Vietnamese culture one generation identifies is not necessarily the same Vietnamese culture another generation identifies with. How the Vietnamese culture is expressed and valued is different according to who you talk to. Mai Vo grew up in one of the largest Vietnamese communities in the country, went to Vietnamese school for most of her childhood, and even had a Vietnamese wedding in a Buddhist Temple. Thi Pham feels most connected to her culture while practicing meditation, mindfulness and reading poetic Buddhist texts. Daniel understand his culture as an amalgamation of multiple generations and cultures together in a new nation. Despite their different experiences within the culture, they all expressed a feeling of not completely belonging.

## **Diaspora Experiences**

One of biggest factors in understanding the generational cultural transmittance patterns in Marin County Vietnamese-Americans is understanding the diaspora story of the first-generation immigrants and the circumstances in which these immigrant parents came to the U.S, Mai in her interview explained:

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

I think it's dependent on their experiences before they immigrated. I think people who were more educated in Vietnam tend to have more cultural ties or have a better understanding of the importance of passing down language and culture, and things like that. I think back in Vietnam if they were already struggling with SES [socio-economic status] and they barely went to school and their children barely went to school in Vietnam, then there's not much of a push to keep that when they get to the US, right, because it's more about survival.... I think in some ways that shapes what they bring to the US. Also, you know the waves were all so different. My parents left because they felt like they were losing a lot. When the communists took over, my parents had everything to lose because their families were wealthy, they were educated, so for them, there was nothing to gain, so for them it's like the only way was to leave and to find a better life. But I think in hearing some of the perspectives of other immigrants in our population for them was that they didn't have anything to begin with, so when communists came, nothing really changed for them because they didn't have anything to begin with. So I think it really depends on the SES of before they became immigrants that shapes their perspective and also shapes their relationship with the Vietnamese culture now as well.<sup>30</sup>

Expectations, standards and beliefs the first generation held before immigrating greatly influenced if they passed their culture down to their children or not. For example, as outlined in Mai's interview, her family was part of the second wave of immigration and although her family lost everything, they still held an expectation for their children to be educated and still learn Vietnamese even though they weren't in Vietnam anymore-

I think it might depend on what way the first generations came from. Like my family were the second wave of refugees, so they came by boat to the US, but they also came from very educated families. All my aunts and uncles went to school, my grandpa was a pharmacist- highly educated people. So when they came here to the US they had the same high expectations for all their children... it was expected we learn about our culture.<sup>31</sup>

There are also certain customs and expectations held by the first generation here in America that they brought from Vietnam that influence how they raise the second

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

generation. This is exemplified best by Mai who had an ironic situation arise between her young son and her parents and be read more in depth in the attached interview;

The style of parenting in Vietnam is very different from parenting here in the US and I think a lot of the immigrants brought that type of that style, very authoritative, 'I tell you, you listen' there's no opinion or back talk, things like that. I think that makes it harder for the new generations to pick up on things because the parenting style is different. .... when I watch my parents interact with my son they will say things like- culturally we bow or we greet every senior we meet, so they will force him to stand at the door and bow before he comes in, but you know toddlers are on their own schedule, and my parents are not flexible, that's just how they do it. You do not enter the house until you greet everyone. So, the kids just like ok, I'll just go outside. There's like no negotiation, my parents are like this is how we do it and my sons just like oh ok, I'm just not going to go in. It's really interesting to see the two styles.<sup>32</sup>

Daniel's parents also held a high expectation for him to learn Vietnamese and the culture while his friends parents did not;

I've also noticed when those individuals [friends] were seeing their parents and their parents were trying to communicate to them in Vietnamese they would respond it back in English, whereas for me I would get in trouble if I didn't speak Vietnamese back to them.<sup>33</sup>

When I asked Mai if there was an overarching reason why the children of the senior stress management class subcommunity specifically didn't speak Vietnamese she responded.

A lot of people in our community also came a little later, their children went by boat to the US and they were sponsored here, so they came in the early 2000's or the late 2000's so a lot of them haven't been there that long. For them I think they're even less acculturated, than their children that came here in the 70s... by the time they got to the US their grandchildren already do not speak Vietnamese. So they come in and it's almost a little bit too late for them to really bring in their culture.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Frank Cao, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 31, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>34</sup> Tran Nyguen, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 6, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project

For the senior stress management class subcommunity specifically, because they are predominantly third wave immigrants, they came to America because their kids were able to sponsor them over once they established themselves in America. Because these kids were sent to America as children or teenagers, they had no other option but to learn English, and as a result, they forgot Vietnamese and didn't have their parents around to help reinforce it. Peggy Levitt and Mary C. Walters in their book *The changing face of home: the Transnational lives of the second generation* understood this concept and agreed that "the specificities of the Vietnamese experience also encourage the development of symbolic transnationalism."<sup>35</sup>

Trauma also plays a huge role in a diaspora narrative and can also be a factor that inhibits the first generation from appreciating some parts of their heritage and culture which in turn, leads to them not teaching it to their kids. Mai stated that this disconnect is

...based off of abrupt trauma of the first generation. I don't think it would have been as abrupt if it was voluntary immigration, but they didn't have a choice. Other cultures had voluntary immigration, you choose when you immigrate, you chose why you want to immigrate, then it's not rushed. You have options, you can go back to your country, it's not like everything falls apart in one day. I think it was because it was forced immigration that there's this culture disconnect because the first generation has only been here 30-40 years, that's not that long.<sup>36</sup>

Trauma due to experiences in the Vietnam War and is an unfortunate commonality among the first-generation immigrants and has led to a multitude of unforeseen consequences, including how parents interact with their kids. An example of this trauma was expressed to Mai one day

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<sup>35</sup> Levitt, Peggy, Mary C. Waters *The Changing Face of Home : The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Tran Nyguen, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 6, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

I was just talking to one of the seniors about this, she sent two of her kids first, she had six kids, and that when they chose to send the two they chose to also say goodbye not knowing if they would ever see the two again, so she said when you sent your kids, you also have to be committed that they might not return. Its hard, that's why they have to really pick which kids and that's why they were only sending two at a time instead of six.<sup>37</sup>

Understanding the diaspora story, expectations, standards and beliefs the first generation held before immigrating as well as the subsequent trauma they endured gives great insight into Vietnamese-American generational cultural transmittance patterns.

### **Disconnect in Cultural Identity**

Another emergent theme in my interviews was a disconnect in cultural identity. All three interviewees expressed a feeling of not truly belonging to either the American or Vietnamese culture. This disconnect in identity was partly due to the second generation growing up multiculturally. Vu Hong Pham in his book *Cultural Crossroads: The Formation of Vietnamese American Consciousness for the 1.5 Generation* asserted that “the parents of the 1.5 generation spent the majority of their lives in Vietnam and primarily developed their identities there.”<sup>38</sup> Levitt and Walters also noticed this disconnect in second generation Vietnamese-Americans, they questioned “How do young Vietnamese who have never been “home” imagine the “homeland”? And how do they recall that which is somewhere else, and that which was perhaps never known?”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Vu Hong Pham, *Cultural Crossroads: The Formation of Vietnamese American Consciousness for the 1.5 Generation* (Irvine, CA: The Regents of the University of California, 1994) 58.

<sup>39</sup> Levitt, Peggy, Mary C. Waters *The Changing Face of Home : The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002) 69.

Daniel explained his multiculturalism dilemma and the diverse community in which he was raised;

When I was younger I grew up in a mainly Hispanic neighborhood and people were kinda confused of what I am, you know, and I always get asked my ethnicity or “what am I?” .... So that's what it was like for me growing up and also just, I guess, finding an identity in the American culture since I didn't grow up with too many Asian people, I hung out with a lot of, you know, I had a lot of Hispanic friends or white friends, black friends.... it was definitely interesting for me, it wasn't just the American culture that I experienced... there was some difficulty just finding my own culture, and finding others like me was.... I guess being here I was always having a hard time with who I am as a person, what it means to be a part of the Asian culture.<sup>40</sup>

Mai had similar feelings growing up,

It's like were trying to learn about a culture we're *not* living in, while trying to learn about the culture we *are* living in. It's like you're learning about something, but it's pretty abstract. I see what my parents show me, things like that, but I don't really know.... It's kinda like an outsider learning about a culture that you hear about, but don't really know.... I think that's the key piece, is that realizing were not just trying to learn the Vietnamese culture, were trying to be bicultural. We're trying to learn about this new culture that were in and were trying to navigate that and trying to figure out this other culture we actually didn't grow up in.<sup>41</sup>

Daniel is reminded of his multiculturalism every day and describes it as,

It definitely feels like two different worlds when I'm coming back home and going out, I feel like I'm two different Daniels. There's the Vietnamese-American Daniel in the streets and the Vietnamese, Vietnamese-American Daniel at home.<sup>42</sup>

Even the Vietnamese-American youth in Levitt and Walter's study who were from San Diego reported strikingly similar sentiments of being bullied for their race, growing up

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<sup>40</sup> Frank Cao, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 31, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>41</sup> My Trong, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 14, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>42</sup> Frank Cao, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 31, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

multiculturally and having a general sense of not belonging.<sup>43</sup> After growing up and continuing working with first generation Vietnamese parents, Mai understood that

It's because the first generation grew up only needing to really learn one culture, like they grew up in Vietnam for most of their life, so they never had to balance anything, it wasn't until they came to the US that they had to try and pick up a second culture, but at that point their Vietnamese culture is already embedded, like they know what it is, they grew up seeing weddings, they grew up seeing funerals, they know how it all works.<sup>44</sup>

Another reason for this disconnect in cultural identity is due to the parent's inability to share the family's history due to trauma. Because of the abrupt traumatic experiences of many families, it is often too painful for first generation immigrant parents to talk about their lives before they came to America. In most cases there was a lot of loss and parents don't want to relive these painful memories, not even to share with their children. This unfortunately leads to second generation children not having firm roots in the Vietnamese culture simply because they don't know anything about their family history. When I asked Thi about her sibling's diaspora story she responded,

I only hear some stories from here and there. They were boat people, so I think my sister was 12 and the oldest was probably 17 or 18, there was five of them on a boat and they almost died- they were starving or something- but I think they were saved by an American ship, so they were lucky.<sup>45</sup>

For most American families that went through this kind of trauma, the family knows about it and are very understanding and informed about that period of their loved one's life. However, the fact that the sister in family wasn't exactly sure if her siblings almost starved

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<sup>43</sup> Levitt, Peggy, Mary C. Waters *The Changing Face of Home : The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002) 379.

<sup>44</sup> Tran Nyguen, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 6, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>45</sup> My Trong, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 14, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

to death on a refugee boat is the perfect example of larger disconnect in communication and understanding of family roots. Unfortunately, this is a common occurrence, Mai related to this experience,

There's a lot of trauma in the community, and a lot of wanting to distance from a lot of things that remind the clients of you know, all the traumas and loss they went through.... there's a part of I think the immigrant experiences where they don't really want to tell us the full story about Vietnam, I mean like they tell certain things and then they say certain things they say we don't want to talk about because it's... so it's really too hard to fully understand the cultural experience. If I ask my parents about the Vietnam War, they'll tell me bits of it, but they don't actually talk about the history of it, like what actually happened. I think because it's too traumatizing, like for us then how do we learn about the culture when we were only getting snapshots of what actually happened. Or even if I was interested in my parent's childhood, a lot of it they don't want to talk about because there was many periods of time where they didn't feel very supported or they had a lot of loss.<sup>46</sup>

When I asked Mai if parents opening up about their experiences would help bridge this gap she responded,

I think so, I think a lot of the second generations don't understand [what their parents went through] and I think maybe their parents or grandparents have this assumption that they understand, but there's really not, you're really removed from that culture when you're born in the US. There's some intergenerational traumas that you might feel, but you don't really know what actually happened. So there might be a lack of empathy from the younger generation because they just don't know, or it just takes too long for them to figure out.<sup>47</sup>

Another factor for this cultural identity disconnect is the difference in expectations and experiences between the two generations. Mai believes,

I think it's that piece, that we grew up being bicultural. Maybe they don't understand the difficulties, and I think that's something very unique to second generations, we grew up trying to juggle two cultures. And that's something first generations and third generations will not experience... My parents kind of assumed that I would just know, like 'why don't you know

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<sup>46</sup> Tran Nyguen, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 6, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

this?' I think they forget that because I was never born or lived in Vietnam I actually don't know... I know what you've taught me, but it's not like I grew up in the culture where everyone was doing this all the time.<sup>48</sup>

Thi Pham works closely with Vietnamese youth and has observed that parents *expect* their kids to embrace the culture but sometimes they just don't want to—

I think it could be rebellion against parents, against something that you, you know, just... They nag me, they want me to do this and this, put me in a box, I don't want to be part of that anymore there's that kind of divorcing from that culture.<sup>49</sup>

Talking about the same youth group, Mai explained her experiences with the expectations of parents versus the reality of the second generation,

We ran a Vietnamese youth group here four years ago, it was run by me and Lamson, our approach was 75% English and maybe a little bit of Vietnamese, right, because you don't want to go in full Vietnamese and scare off youth and the parents complained they were like 'it should be 100% Vietnamese, don't even use English' but were like 'that approach might not work, I think it's a population that might feel distant from their culture already' If we go in 100% Vietnamese, how would that connect with them?... I think it's the expectation to connect with your culture, but them also not realizing that were trying to connect to two different cultures at the same time, and that our experiences are going to be a little bit different.<sup>50</sup>

The family diaspora narrative and multiculturalism are important factors to consider when trying to understand the generational cultural transmittance pattern of Vietnamese-Americans in Marin, however, the most important factor to consider are the institutional barriers Vietnamese-Americans face because they live in Marin.

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<sup>48</sup> Tran Nyguen, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 6, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>49</sup> My Trong, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 14, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>50</sup> Tran Nyguen, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 6, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

## Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers are very real obstacles that many Marin Vietnamese-Americans don't even understand they are facing. In Levitt and Water's community of Vietnamese-Americans in San Diego, a much larger population than Marin, they still recognized that "transnationalism is in part an outcome of class resources, more of which are available to affluent refugees than to poor refugees and migrants."<sup>51</sup> One barrier the Marin community constantly faces is a lack of basic resources for social services like bilingual county staff for healthcare, housing, and general community information. There are also no bilingual school counselors, Vietnamese schools, or Vietnamese daycares for the community's youth. Funding for cultural events and services are nearly non-existent and legislation for basic health information to be listed (in English) on nail salon beauty products was not passed in California until 2017<sup>52</sup>. The lack of resources for this community is not due to a deficit of need; allocation of county resources to a community is based off population, and because Marin County has a low population, they receive very little to no resources despite a desperate need. Another consequence of a low population is a lack of social support and sense of community. The best model for understand this disparity is looking at the city of San Jose, only an hour and half away from Marin and home to of one of the largest Vietnamese populations in the United States. It perfectly exemplifies how a larger community leads to more institutional funding and communal support which results in a stronger cultural bond and a better chance of parents passing their culture down to their

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<sup>51</sup> Levitt, Peggy, Mary C. Waters *The Changing Face of Home : The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002) 387.

<sup>52</sup> Assembly Member Chiu, Senator Jackson, "AB-1575 Professional cosmetics: labeling requirements," California Legislative Information, 2017-2018, [http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=201720180AB1575](http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180AB1575).

children. Mai grew up in San Jose and when asked what the biggest cause of the generational cultural disparity in Marin is, she responded,

I think in communities like Marin- we have a tiny Vietnamese community here- it's the lack of social support, like there's no Vietnamese school here in Marin, in San Jose there is a lot of schools. But here in Marin there's none of that, I think they tried to start a Vietnamese school in the past, but there was very little interest, so of course, if you only have two students, its not going to motivate other students to come. So I think it's the lack of social support, lack of community centers, activities. New years in San Jose is huge, it goes on for a whole week, it's really fun, there's festivals everywhere, you go out, it's fun, and here in Marin we didn't have any of that.... for the Vietnamese community we didn't really have anything. Vinh did one Lunar New Year, and the county did one, but it's nowhere near the grand celebrations other cities had. So I think its lack of connectivity too, like how do you teach the youth about the language if there's no schools? Or how do you teach them about these traditions if there's no fun event for them to go to or see.<sup>53</sup>

Mai was correct in remembering that there was a Vietnamese school in Marin at one point. In the Marin Civic Center California room archives there is an article in the collection that was published in 2000<sup>54</sup> about Vietnamese-American Man Minh Phan who started and was the instructor for a Vietnamese school in Marin in 1997 in an attempt to provide a way for the youth of the community to learn about their culture and history. It was run by community volunteers, the classroom space and time slot was donated by the community center, and the books were donated by a Vietnamese school in San Francisco. Even though there was a need for a Vietnamese school the only way the community was able to get one was through volunteers and donations. When I asked about other institutional factors Mai reiterated;

Population, it doesn't reach the percentage needed to be a threshold language or population for them to actually get funding designated to hiring

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<sup>53</sup> Tran Nyguen, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 6, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>54</sup> John Nickerson, "Teaching Vietnamese Kids their Culture," Marin Independent Journal, November 13, 2000.

bilingual staff. Spanish is the only threshold language in this county (Marin). Like in San Jose, they're actually building their first Vietnamese American community center right now. They're going through this big process to build a center and I think it comes from population.<sup>55</sup>

Daniel supported this claim when I asked him when he feels closest to his culture;

So the one time I felt particularly close to my culture is during Vietnamese New Years.... the Vietnamese Culture would definitely be strong because there's a lot of presence of Vietnamese people there and I've never seen so many Vietnamese people and there are places we go to such as San Jose which has a very large Vietnamese population, or Sacramento.... that was definitely something I felt like wow, there are other people that are like me, they speak the same language as I do. They've experienced some of the same experiences that I had. So that's one example of when I feel close to my culture.<sup>56</sup>

It was when Daniel was surrounded by the community when he felt most connected; community bolstered his sense of pride in his culture. Thi also expresses that she felt most distant from her culture when she went to school on the east coast and was removed from the community

...Arcadia University in Pennsylvania in the outskirts of Philadelphia, yeah, pretty far. But, I didn't have anyone to speak Vietnamese with so I forgot a lot of Vietnamese, but I picked up English more, so... but yeah, during that time I didn't have family support, so I think I felt really distant from culture, family, and that side of my identity.<sup>57</sup>

The way she eventually reconnected to the culture was when she moved back to California and joined a Vietnamese mediation group called Plum Village led by a Vietnamese monk which changed her life;

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<sup>55</sup> Tran Nyguen, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 6, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>56</sup> Frank Cao, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 31, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>57</sup> My Trong, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 14, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

...Plum Village that's with Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and his Vietnamese- that's really how I connected-cause he's a poet- that's how I really connected to the language that way.... After I went to the Plum Village retreat, I just started meeting other young people and they have groups that meet in the East Bay or around San Francisco- There's a whole community I just discovered, there's so many! But, not that many up in Marin, so that's why I really wanted to create something for young people here. The part I really love about it is it's just so much of a community, it's never-it's not about your own suffering, about transforming your own self, it's about going as a community, helping each other out, and that sharing. The group sharing is always opens people up in so many ways and... we all need a safe space to kinda share with each other, and I really appreciate that..... Yeah I think that's how it really brought me in from someone who was very brand new, not knowing anything and there were so many people who were kind to me, you know, it was really nice... That was my first time feeling so at ease with myself and feeling like there's a space that people listen and there was a space with a lot of love and acceptance. It's very possible that we can create that space together, it's a very different kind of living and it did a lot of healing for me.<sup>58</sup>

Lack of community, deficit of resources, lack of representation and successful role models in the Vietnamese community and immigration backlash<sup>59</sup> in America during the late twentieth century caused a lot of community members to internalized this neglect and it has transformed into internalized oppression to the point where many of these community members have become ashamed of their culture or angry and purposefully try to forget the language and traditions by not teaching their kids. Thi was part of the 1.5 generation and remembers what it was like being a Vietnamese immigrant in America at the time

When you first came to the country and your accents all funny and people always just point it out to you and make fun, it's a very distinct kind of feelings of being really not being accepted and feeling so self conscious. I think that was really hard in High School, that tender age where we're all like trying to find our identity and that identify being like, you know, suppressed kinda even more by- you feel like, um, bound by language. Not being able to kinda, you know, enjoy people and just speaking as you would like to, you

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<sup>58</sup> My Trong, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 14, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>59</sup> Levitt, Peggy, Mary C. Waters *The Changing Face of Home : The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002) 379.

know. I feel when I was a kid in Vietnam I would talk alot, I had a lot of friends I had a lot of fun, but when I came to the US I became more like so introverted, I couldn't talk, I couldn't express myself. That was really hard, I remember, it created a lot of internal anger, a lot of twists and turns in my psyche.<sup>60</sup>

Mai's cousin related to this experience

My cousin is a 1.5 and she said you know, the US wasn't that welcoming to her as a refugee. I think she was 12 when she arrived, and she used to say that was hard because you're already fluent in Vietnamese and you don't know any English and you're trying to establish yourself and your trying to make friends and you had just flee your home, you just left your whole life. I think that 1.5 generation got the bulk of it. I'm sure they had their own struggles that shaped the way they viewed their culture and what they wanted to embrace.<sup>61</sup>

In her work with the local youth and their parents, Thi remembers;

I would always hear the parents say "at home we try not to speak Vietnamese too much because the kids go to school and got put into a lower class or seclusion class or a thing because they don't speak as much English", you know, it's harder for your kids to keep up with two. But, you know, Linguists actually advised them to keep two languages because the more you learn in different ones it's just better for the kids to develop that vocab.<sup>62</sup>

Understanding the institutional barriers the first generation and the 1.5 generation faced after immigrating helps piece together what (or if) they wanted to share their culture with their kids. This anger, shame and internalized oppression over one's culture that's not accepted in a new country you were forced to flee to, often has reverberations that last for generations. Daniel, a Bay Area born and raised second generation still felt some of the reverberations of internalized oppression a generation later.

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<sup>60</sup> My Trong, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 14, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>61</sup> Tran Nyguen, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 6, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>62</sup> My Trong, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 14, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

Growing up I've had a lot of, I guess, frustration and anger with being Asian and identifying who I am and I guess there were times that I was even ashamed of being Asian, or Asian-American because of the negative stereotypes that I was associated with that I didn't identify with....I was just seen as different, you know, I had food brought back from home, it smelled bad, my language sounded funny, I wasn't seen as attractive because I was Vietnamese or Asian, and I guess like I felt no female or girl liked me because I was Asian, not even Asian girls....just thinking about that kinda made me dissuade-or- distance myself from the Vietnamese culture and my identity, because I guess I was ashamed of it.<sup>63</sup>

Despite feeling distant from his culture for a period of time, Daniel eventually reconnected with his culture after college, but he still has many Vietnamese-American friends who haven't, and when I asked him why they haven't he responded,

They were simply ashamed of the Vietnamese culture.... and how it sounds [the language], it sounds funny, it sounds choppy and they feel like it just tarnishes their image. Some of them strive to be American because that's something they've seen in the media and they gotta be this way and that way. Like Brad Pitt or Johnny Depp, for an example, because growing up in Western culture there hasn't really been a positive Asian role model for them to look up to. Therefore they have no other choice than to look up to famous Caucasian celebrities or whoever else, or hip-hop artists, or something like that, you know. Just whatever culture they're interested in they partake in that and use that as a way to identify themselves.<sup>64</sup>

Thi also experienced this when working with the youth

I would say the first [reason] is wanting to be mainstream like other kids who don't speak with accents or anything- like really wanting to be accepted as part as the perceived culture.<sup>65</sup>

To reiterate Daniel's point, having a positive role model within the culture is integral for the second generation to have an example of what a successful Vietnamese-American is like. Mai agrees;

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<sup>63</sup> Frank Cao, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 31, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> My Trong, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 14, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

I think when you go to school and you don't see any other Vietnamese peers, you're also less motivated to learn, or you don't see the importance of learning a language. Like in San Jose I went to a Vietnamese dentist, and a Vietnamese doctor, so I'm like 'oh, I do see the value' you know of learning the language. The doctor always told me, even if you don't work with the Vietnamese population, for you to be bilingual is going to be an asset in the future. I was told that growing up so I think maybe sometimes they're not seeing professionals speak the language either, so then they don't have that reinforcement of that 'it's important to learn the language, like it's a skill you can use later on'.<sup>66</sup>

Due to a multitude of structural barriers like lack of resources, population, and representation as well as internalized oppression, the Vietnamese-Community has not had the support needed to sustain their culture and language.

## Conclusion

The root causes of the generational cultural disconnect among Marin County Vietnamese are immeasurable. There isn't one explanation or a specific set of explanations. The challenges the Vietnamese-Americans of Marin face today are due a multitude of factors starting from the parents lives back in Vietnam. And while funding for more resources would greatly impact the Vietnamese-Americans of Marin, the community can start reconnecting to its youth and culture by starting to work through the traumas and embrace their history and identity. Families should work to cultivate a general understanding between the generations- for the second generation to understand that the first generation has been through a lot and did the best they could and for the first generation to understand that the second generation is growing up multiculturally. Once the second

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<sup>66</sup> Tran Nyguen, interview by Sierra Najolia, March 6, 2018, Marin Vietnamese American Oral History Project.

generation finds their cultural identity, learns their family history and starts tackling the structural barriers their community faces, the Vietnamese culture would be stronger than ever.

# Interview Transcripts

## Mai Vo Interview

**Mai**: My name is Mai Vo, I work with the Marin county behavioral health and human services as a bilingual mental health practitioner.

**Sierra**: A little more about my thesis that I couldn't tell you about in the middle of a crowded room. In my time here I've noticed that the parents who originally immigrated here don't pass their culture, language and knowledge down to their children and I am researching why that is the case. Remind me, were you born here or in Vietnam?

**Mai**: I was born here, I am a second generation, yes

**Sierra**: What has been your experience with your culture? Did your parents raise you in the culture?

**Mai**: I was raised in the Vietnamese culture, I grew up in San Jose, so I think it made it easier in that it has the second largest Vietnamese population in the US. I grew up going to Vietnamese school starting when I was about four or five and I went to Vietnamese school all the way up until I was about 18. That's probably the reason why I'm one of the few second generation who are fluent in Vietnamese, because my parents had me go to Vietnamese school for many many years" "For me, I was immersed in the Vietnamese Culture, but that's not necessarily the case for all second generation. I think some of it has to do with opportunity, how close you are to the Vietnamese community, Vietnamese school, temple, things like that

**Sierra**: Can you describe a time where you felt connected to your culture? Distant?

**Mai**: That's a hard question, even though I grew up in the Vietnamese culture, there was always a sense of not fully belonging, because even though I was in the Vietnamese community, Vietnamese school, I was still considered a second generation even when I interacted with elders from Vietnam, there was still this assumption "Well, you're still American born, your fluent, but your never that fully, like, native fluent" I probably would never get to that level unless I actually lived in Vietnam for a certain amount of time. So, it's kinda like you're learning about a culture, but you're still kinda an outsider, like you have one foot in, but then people still say "your still an American born. The time I felt really connected to my culture was actually when I got married. I think that was the cross roads where I was really forced to pick 'so what culture am I?' are we going to with the full American Tradition, or are we going to go with the Vietnamese tradition that I learned about but I didn't really grow up in? Like all my cousins got married in the US... so what do we do? So I think that was the crossing point where I really had to decide what I wanted to show, like what is my culture? And it was kinda hard, right? Like growing up being educated in the US system, even if I grew up in the Vietnamese culture, I don't really know

it. So, we actually ended up having our wedding ceremony in a temple, a Buddhist temple, umm I've never been to a Buddhist temple wedding, so you know, it was different, so my parents would say 'you know in Vietnam, everyone has these weddings' and I'm like, ok, but I don't even know what that looks like. But I think maybe that was the point in my life where I really felt connected, I was really forced, you know, to learn about these traditions and actually just apply it into my life, not just learn about it. [Her husband] is also second generation, but he is actually not connected to the Vietnamese culture, so the complete opposite. I think it's because he didn't grow up in the Vietnamese community, he grew up in Fremont, which has some Vietnamese people, but not the same concentration as San Jose. So he did not go to Vietnamese school, he went for maybe one or two years when he was young, but is not fluent in Vietnamese, so he has kinda the opposite experience.

**Sierra:** So, you would say there's definitely still a stark difference between the second generation and the first generation, even if the second generation wanted to learn about the culture. How would you describe that 'I'm trying to be a part of this, but we still can't fully accept you'.

**Mai:** I think it's because the first generation grew up only needing to really learn one culture, like they grew up in Vietnam for most of their life, so they never had to balance anything, it wasn't until they came to the US that they had to try and pick up a second culture, but at that point their Vietnamese culture is already embedded, like they know what it is, they grew up seeing weddings, they grew up seeing funerals, they know how it all works, and I think for second generations it's like were trying to learn about a culture were not living in, while trying to learn about the culture we are living in. It's like you're learning about something, but it's pretty abstract. I see what my parents show me, things like that, but I don't really know. I never know how a funeral worked in Vietnam- it's very different from how funerals work here. Things like that. My parents kind of assumed that I would just know, like 'why don't you know this?' I think they forget that because I was never born or lived in Vietnam I actually *don't* know. Even now, sometimes my aunts and uncles- because the New Year's just came around- so we have all these rituals with food and certain days you have to do certain ceremonies, and I missed one of the rituals, because I just didn't know. When I talked on the phone with my uncle- it was like a conference call with my uncles and aunts and mom and they were like 'oh, today we did the ritual' and I was like 'oh, that was today?' and their response was 'oh, why didn't you know'? It's kinda like because I *don't* know, I know what you've taught me, but it's not like I grew up in the culture where everyone was doing this all the time. It's kinda like an outsider learning about a culture that you hear about, but don't really know".

**Sierra:** Would you say your parents and community expected you to learn more about your culture and embrace it, or was it something that you very much had to actively try and do it yourself?

**Mai:** I think it was expected we learn about our culture, and a lot of that fell on Saturday school, Vietnamese school. It was expected that you go and that you enjoyed it, and that you wanted to learn about the culture and the language... But it's really hard, Saturday school is three hours a week and their trying to cram the language, the grammar, culture, you know.

It's a bunch of kids learning English and speaking English at Saturday school, so it didn't really match comparing three hours a week versus how much school we do in a regular week... it just really didn't match."

**Sierra:** Was there a time you felt distant from the culture?

**Mai:** Probably when I was in High school, because there were only two other Vietnamese students in my high school, so there were only three of us total, maybe three or four. I went to a school that was in a very privileged area in San Jose and there was not a lot of diversity. The surrounding neighborhoods were very wealthy families and I think during those four years I felt really disconnected from my community, just because you know I was trying to survive high school, you're trying to do all these things. During those four years I kinda distanced myself- even from Vietnamese school, I thought it was kinda like a chore. It wasn't until college- college had a lot more diversity- where I really felt more connected back into my culture. It was more accepted, just because you saw more people celebrating different cultures that it was like ok to do.

**Sierra:** So it wasn't until college you kinda fully embraced it and decided to personally take it on?"

**Mai:** Yeah, I think because it was in college that I met other second-generation students from different cultures that I realized it wasn't just my own struggles, that other second generation children went through this outsider kinda experience, trying to learn a language, but it's difficult. I think that's when I realized, you know, it's very normal, the experience is really normal.

**Sierra:** It sounds like first generation parents are kinda completely unaware of the pressures their putting on their children. Is that the case for a lot of first generation? Are there other reasons?

**Mai:** I think it might depend on what way the first generations came from. Like my family were the second wave of refugees, so they came by boat to the US, but they also came from very educated families. All my aunts and uncles went to school, my grandpa was a pharmacist- highly educated people. So when they came here to the US they had the same high expectations, for all their children, but they don't know how to go about it in this country. I think the expectation doesn't always match the reality of like my dad always assumed 'our family is very educated so of course you'll go to high school, college, grad school, because that the family history' but they don't know how to get around it in this country. I think it's high expectations without the support, and it's not because they didn't want to give support, it's because they didn't know how, there's a language barrier, you know there's financial reasons. So, its high expectations, but without the aid and the help.

**Sierra:** I've noticed when I went to San Jose, that like you said, it's very much a big cultural deal down there, everyone was part of it, there was a lot of support, but like you said, in Fremont it's not as prevalent. There's some people down there, and I've noticed this in

Marin too. Why do you think that more fringe communities have more difficulty passing their culture down?"

**Mai:** I think in communities like Marin- we have a tiny Vietnamese community here- it's the lack of social support, like there's no Vietnamese school here in Marin, in San Jose there is a lot of schools. If you don't like one school you can transfer to another school, you have options, you get to pick and choose- you can hire a tutor if you don't want to go to a Vietnamese school. But here in Marin there's none of that, I think they tried to start a Vietnamese school in the past, but there was very little interest, so of course, if you only have two students, it's not going to motivate other students to come. So, I think it's the lack of social support, lack of community centers, activities. New years in San Jose is huge, it goes on for a whole week, it's really fun, there's festivals everywhere, you go out, it's fun, and here in Marin we didn't have any of that. The Chinese Association did some things, but for the Vietnamese community we didn't really have anything. Vinh did one Lunar New Year, and the county did one, but it's nowhere near the grand celebrations other cities had. So I think its lack of connectivity too, like how do you teach the youth about the language if there's no schools? Or how do you teach them about these traditions if there's no fun event for them to go to or see"

**Sierra:** Is population the only factor or are there other factors?

**Mai:** I think its population that drives the funding, so because we have a lack of population, then were not a threshold language population, so then there's not enough emphasis of funding put into developing these programs. Like in San Jose they're actually building their first Vietnamese American community center right now. They're going through this big process to build a center and I think it comes from population."

**Sierra:** Focusing on Marin as a whole, then we'll talk about our little group, Vihn said that the majority demographic of the original Marin Vietnamese immigrants were boat people, would you agree? Is that correct? And he said that he thinks that because parents were working so much as soon as they got here they inadvertently neglected their kids culturally. They would send them off to daycare so they can work and they just were raised in the American culture. Essentially, why do you think Marin parents haven't passed down their culture as much?

**Mai:** Of the original immigrants yes, they were majority boat people. I think it depends which population you look at. Specifically in Marin, I think it comes to population, there's no Vietnamese daycare here in Marin, so in San Jose you can just find a Vietnamese daycare, so even if you had to send your kid somewhere you could just pick a school where they could learn the language and culture while you go to work, there's no option here. So I think parents are stuck with sending their children to daycares that are not tied to the culture at all. I think there's that, you know, lack of Vietnamese schools, there's no place to send them, and you know there's no bilingual staff here, Vietnamese, at all, in any of the schools, so that's a big piece too, so there's not a lot of education on the importance of passing down your culture, or things like that. Where in San Jose you would have counselors that were bilingual, or therapists who were bilingual, and people who are doing

cultural programming that would emphasize the importance of passing down culture. I think it's a lot of that, and the Vietnamese community here in Marin has never been that big to begin with, it's like a pocket, and it's never been a huge number like in San Francisco, San Jose or Oakland."

**Sierra:** You would think even with a small population, there would be a couple people who would want to get this started, but there just haven't been. Do you think it's also an age thing? People are just getting older and don't have the time or energy really?

**Mai:** Some of it is that, some of it is just 'how do you connect to the second generation?' because I think in Marin the second generations don't stick around after they graduate high school. What I've heard from the community is many of their kids, once they leave for college they end up staying where they are staying, and they never actually return, so there's lack of that connection as well. A lot of second and third generations now are totally fluent in English and maybe not Vietnamese as much, so it makes it harder for the older generation to communicate. There's the language piece, culturally how to connect with the younger generation is very different. We ran a Vietnamese youth group here four years ago, it was run by me and Lamson, our approach was 75% English and maybe a little bit of Vietnamese, right, because you don't want to go in full Vietnamese and scare off youth and the parents complained they were like 'it should be 100% Vietnamese, don't even use English' but were like 'that approach might not work, I think it's a population that might feel distant from their culture already' If we go in 100% Vietnamese, how would that connect with them? So I think some of it is kinda the approach as well".

**Sierra:** Do you think Vietnamese original immigrant parents- is there something with the culture that keeps them from helping the kids embrace it? I know you talked a little about expectations of 'ok your Vietnamese so your expected to learn Vietnamese and everything' but can you tell me more about that disconnect?"

**Mai:** I think it's the expectation to connect with your culture, but them also not realizing that were trying to connect to two different cultures at the same time, and that our experiences are going to be a little bit different. I think that's the key piece, is that realizing were not just trying to learn the Vietnamese culture, were trying to be bicultural. We're trying to learn about this new culture that were in and were trying to navigate that and trying to figure out this other culture we actually didn't grow up in. I think it's that piece, that we grew up being bicultural. Maybe they don't understand the difficulties, and I think that's something very unique to second generations, we grew up trying to juggle two cultures. And that's something first generations and third generations will not experience.

**Sierra:** Specifically to our group, why do you think they haven't passed down their culture to their kids?

**Mai:** I think in our specific little community, some of it socioeconomic, so a lot of the parents work a lot, so most of the parents aren't home in afterschool hours. Some of that is that they're just working a lot, and there's no place for them to send their kids to learn about that piece. I think also because this population here there's a strong push to learn

English, because there's a strong belief that that is what will get you ahead, is you know, learning the dominant language, and I think there is some truth to that, and by the time they catch on that the child doesn't know any Vietnamese, it's kinda late, and it's a lot harder to get kids to pick up a second language."

**Sierra:** Another thing I've noticed is that the parents will speak fluent Vietnamese but the kids don't speak it at all, how do they live their whole lives not being able to communicate with their parents?

**Mai:** It's a big problem, it just happens, but it happens a lot with the second-generation Vietnamese and it kinda comes down to who's going to pick up the second language? Is it the elderly parents and grandparents that have to pick up English or is it the kids who have to go back to Vietnamese school when they're adults? I think a lot of the times it falls on the parents and the elders to pick up more English. That was the biggest problem that we had with the youth group, they came in telling us their problem was they couldn't talk to their parents, and these were young kids, these were middle school kids, so already losing a lot of their Vietnamese skills, and already identifying that they were trying to tell their parents a story about school and the parents are confused, the kids are confused, and they see it probably as a bigger issue down the road. Even my husband has that problem. His mom doesn't speak very good English, so even now when they're having a conversation, she's speaking Vietnamese, he's speaking English and it's a mess and you need a third part to kinda be in the middle to kinda make sure they both understand

**Sierra:** I guess I'm just trying to understand why that is so, is it just because they went to daycare and didn't spend much time with their parents, is it because their parents didn't want to teach them Vietnamese so they could get ahead?

**Mai:** It could be a combination of everything, then I think when you go to school and you don't see any other Vietnamese peers, your also less motivated to learn, or you don't see the importance of learning a language. Like in San Jose I went to a Vietnamese dentist, and a Vietnamese doctor, so I'm like 'oh, I do see the value' you know of learning the language. The doctor always told me, even if you don't work with the Vietnamese population, for you to be bilingual is going to be an asset in the future. I was told that growing up so I think maybe sometimes they're not seeing professionals speak the language either, so then they don't have that reinforcement of that 'it's important to learn the language, like it's a skill you can use later on'

**Sierra:** Are there any other reasons why the first generation haven't passed down their culture- in our community- to each other?

**Mai:** A lot of people in our community also came a little later, their children went by boat to the US and they were sponsored here, so they came in the early 2000's or the late 2000's so a lot of them haven't been there that long. For them I think they're even less acculturated, than their children that came here in the 70's. So I think that's another barrier that they're trying to figure out how this country works and they're bringing this Vietnamese culture and its not matching, or a lot of the seniors by the time they got to the US their

grandchildren already do not speak Vietnamese. So they come in and it's almost a little bit too late for them to really bring in their culture.

**Sierra:** Does mental health play any factors into this?

**Mai:** Yeah, there's a lot of trauma in the community, and a lot of wanting to distance from a lot of things that remind the clients of you know, all the traumas and loss they went through. So there's some of that, and there's a part of I think the immigrant experiences where they don't really want to tell us the full story about Vietnam, I mean like they tell certain things and then they say certain things they say we don't want to talk about because it's... so it's really too hard to fully understand the cultural experience. If I ask my parents about the Vietnam War, they'll tell me bits of it, but they don't actually talk about the history of it, like what actually happened. I think because it's too traumatizing, like for us then how do we learn about the culture when we were only getting snapshots of what actually happened. Or even if I was interested in my parent's childhood, a lot of it they don't want to talk about because there was many periods of time where they didn't feel very supported or they had a lot of loss.

**Sierra:** That's one major thing you do is you try and tell them that it's ok to talk about these things?

**Mai:** Yeah, that its part of the cultural experience of that generation, and the loss is a part of it, yeah”

**Sierra:** In Vietnam is there a push for cultural appreciation and preservation within Vietnam?

**Mai:** It's very interesting, because when Saigon fell in 75, the communist party actually took away a lot of certain Vietnamese practices, so maybe that the Boat people celebrated might not necessarily be relevant now, so they changed a lot, and picked up a lot of western cultures. So like the school uniforms they're not necessarily worn anymore, they wear more western clothes now, things like that. So I think what the first generation grew up with is not necessarily reflected now. So I think it's more of like that population trying to hold on to it here and that it might not necessarily reflect what the youth in Vietnam were growing up with. So I think it's also confusing too.

**Sierra:** Tell me more about Vietnam's history, it's very tumultuous with a lot of switching of power, do you think all that colonization has played a role into how people value their culture and history

**Mai:** Yeah, definitely, Vietnam has been colonized for like hundreds of years and they haven't had periods of time when they weren't colonized, or someone was in their country doing something. So I think in some ways Vietnamese culture is very heavily inspired by whoever colonized them at the time, by the French, the Chinese, so I think in some ways the Vietnamese culture itself isn't that well defined either just because they've gone through so many periods of change an power and war.

**Sierra:** It seems like a lot of the first generation just don't understand how to preserve their culture and language, could this be a factor or root cause?

**Mai:** I think it contributes to it. There was some research about how fast cultures assimilate into US culture and lose their culture. I think when they compared Vietnamese to other Southeast Asians that immigrated at the same time, like Laotian and Hmong, Vietnamese people are losing their culture much faster than the other cultures. So people are looking into well why is that the case when like the Hmong culture while they're ethnically a smaller group, somehow they've kept their culture a lot more intact and we are losing our language at a much faster rate.

**Sierra:** You said population is a huge factor in cultural preservation, is it because population gets funding from the government, or is it just a form of support for each other?

**Mai:** I think it's both, like infrastructurally, yes, you get more funding, from a community perspective, there is just more people around, you're just exposed to the culture more often, like if you live in San Jose, you actually don't need to learn English in order to live. All the banks have Vietnamese tellers, post office has someone Vietnamese speaking, you can get by without really knowing English. Everywhere you go you hear Vietnamese. Spanish and Vietnamese is very common, you can get help. If you speak those two languages you can get help somewhere, and I think just exposure, you see people, you hear people, people speak the language. Its normalized, and every kid goes to Vietnamese school, so you don't feel your the one kid whose forced to go like everyone has to go, it just matters what school you go to.

**Sierra:** So you'd say the #1 factor is population?

**Mai:** Yeah

**Sierra:** Ok, so in Marin what would you say it is? The #1 and #2 factors?

**Mai:** Lack of resources, like there's no funding to hire bilingual staff, things like that, so that would probably be #1 and probably just population, there's not enough people around.

**Sierra:** Remind me again why we don't have funding for this community, is it population?

**Mai:** Population, it doesn't reach the percentage needed to be a threshold language or population for them to actually get funding designated to hiring bilingual staff. Spanish is the only threshold language in this county.

**Sierra:** Specifically for this community, it's kind of when they immigrated, right? Can you tell me more about the narrative of a typical- everyone's unique, but they seem to have a general overarching pattern of immigration. Tell me more about how in their experiences, and their children immigrating, that could possibly lead to them not passing their culture down.

**Mai**: I think it's dependent on their experiences before they immigrated. I think people who were more educated in Vietnam tend to have more cultural ties, or have a better understanding of the importance of passing down language and culture, and things like that. I think back in Vietnam if they were already struggling with SES and they barely went to school and their children barely went to school in Vietnam, then there's not much of a push to keep that when they get to the US, right, because it's more about survival. With a lot of the boat people, early boat people, were more of the privileged families that had money, education, because they bought themselves onto that boat, you had to have money or resources and I think those were the people who were more invested. You know, they left the country for a reason, they wanted to preserve their culture, they wanted to find a place for their children to grow up. I think in some ways that shapes what they bring to the US. Also, you know the waves were all so different. It was just a lot of trauma, people left the country for different reasons, and I think it affects what pieces of the culture they bring. My parents left because they felt like they were losing a lot, when the communists took over, my parents had everything to lose because their families were wealthy, they were educated, so for them, there was nothing to gain, so for them it's like the only way was to leave and to find a better life. But I think in hearing some of the perspectives of other immigrants in our population for them was that they didn't have anything to begin with, so when communists came, nothing really changed for them because they didn't have anything to begin with. So I think it really depends on the SES of before they became immigrants that shapes their perspective and also shapes their relationship with the Vietnamese culture now as well.

**Sierra**: It's because their children came here first and established themselves here? At what age did their children come over, were they young? Were they older?

**Mai**: A lot of children that came on their own were in their mid-teens, because I think that was the youngest you could send a kid by himself and have them survive, so that's the youngest I think I've heard the seniors talk about, but a lot of them were like late teens, early 20's and then maybe they were taking a younger sibling with them.

**Sierra**: Why didn't the parents go with them?

**Mai**: For some of the seniors, they said it was money, because it cost a lot of money to get their kids on a boat, then you never know if they're going to be successful, so you send one or two at a time, and some of them were sent back, they were caught, it was kinda dependent. Then you had to save more money to see if you could afford to send the next kid, or should we invest in one kid to go. It was money, some of it was age, some of the seniors were already elderly at that time and didn't think they could make the journey so they sent the younger people. Some of them had a lot of land in Vietnam, that they kinda wanted to try and keep, but a lot of them ended up losing their businesses and land"

**Sierra**: Did they think they would ever see their kids again? Did they expect to come over later or was it more of a good bye?

**Mai**: I was just talking to one of the seniors about this, she sent two of her kids first, she had six kids, and that when they chose to send the two they chose to also say goodbye not knowing if they would ever see the two again, so she said when you sent your kids, you also have to be committed that they might not return. It's hard, that's why they have to really pick which kids and that's why they were only sending two at a time instead of six

**Sierra**: I can't imagine how traumatizing it is to send your kids off in a boat over a huge ocean... so once they got here you'd think they'd cling tighter to their families, is that the case, or?

**Mai**: I think the experience of the 1.5 generation is really unique and its very different from the second generation because I think that generation got the bulk of the pressure during that time period. My cousin is a 1.5 and she said you know, the US wasn't that welcoming to her as a refugee. I think she was 12 when she arrived, and she used to say that was hard because you're already fluent in Vietnamese and you don't know any English and you're trying to establish yourself and your trying to make friends and you had just flee your home, you just left your whole life. I think that 1.5 generation got the bulk of it. I'm sure they had their own struggles that shaped the way they viewed their culture and what they wanted to embrace.

**Sierra**: Is there resentment against their parents for sending them or is there an understanding?

**Mai**: I think it depends on if they had loss. My cousin lost everything. She was in private school doing really well, and then she lost everything, so for her that makes sense. She came on the boat with my dad and her dad. For her it makes perfect sense, because they literally lost everything, so they had no choice

**Sierra**: Its so different for everyone and for every family...I was talking to Vinh about how Vietnamese families are extremely strict, bordering on kinda mean, do you think that plays a role in Vietnamese kids not wanting to embrace their culture?

**Mai**: Definitely, the style of parenting in Vietnam is very different from parenting here in the US and I think a lot of the immigrants brought that type of that style, very authoritative, 'I tell you, you listen' there's no opinion or back talk, things like that. I think that makes it harder for the new generations to pick up on things because the parenting style is different. Its really funny, I had a moment with my son because he was collecting rocks for some reason and i threw away his rock and he got really upset and I'm like 'it's a rock, right?' I grew up with my parents throwing away rocks because rocks are dirty, you don't bring them in the house, you don't collect rocks, and that was it, my parents just threw away rocks and I didn't get to be upset. That was just the rule. Now my son goes to daycare here and they're very understanding, they help him find a new rock and I'm like 'what if we just throw them away, what if we just told him we don't collect rocks' is that bad? That's what my parents did to me, and I turned out ok, or do we foster this... I don't know. It's like night and day, and he brought a rock to his grandparent's house this past weekend and they threw it away and when he cried they were like 'what happened? Here's a toy, we don't

play with rocks'. Just very... that's how it is and it's kinda hard to balance. What if you know, my son is going to this school where they're very supportive and talk about his feelings about his rock, blah blah blah then you meet the style of 'it's a rock, it's gone, play with something else'. The style is very different.

**Sierra:** That has to cause turmoil within the generations, just a stricter zero tolerance policy

**Mai:** Its really apparent when I watch my parents interact with my son, because they will say things like- culturally we bow or we greet every senior we meet, so they will force them to stand at the door and bow before he comes in, but you know toddlers are on their own schedule, and my parents are not flexible, that's just how they do it. You do not enter the house until you greet everyone. So the kids just like ok, I'll just go outside. There's like no negotiation, my parents are like this is how we do it and my sons just like oh ok, I'm just not going to go in. It's really interesting to see the two styles. It's different because he's educated in a system where they coach him to do it, slowly, they reinforce the behavior slowly, but they don't just force children to do things, it's very different.

**Sierra:** Speaking of, do you plan to raise your son in the culture as well, or are you going to let him choose? Are you going to implement some elements, but not others?

**Mai:** It's going to be tricky with him, because my husband doesn't really speak Vietnamese, so even though I'm fluent, it's not enough Vietnamese, even if I speak it full time to him. We are going to send him to Vietnamese school there's no schools around here though, we have to go to Oakland or SF. Definitely Vietnamese school, were definitely going to teach him about the history and why it's important for us to keep our culture, but it's going to be hard, right? Because he's going to be like well my parents are fluent in English, but I need to learn this other language. Already were seeing him pick up more English than Vietnamese at a much faster rate, so it's going to be an uphill battle, but I think even if he doesn't have the language piece, I feel like the cultural piece is really important. Then maybe this generation can I don't know, do more to serve their culture.

**Sierra:** What advice do you have for the first-generation immigrant Vietnamese parents who feel like they can't connect to their kids so that they can get them to value, what they value?

**Mai:** My advice would be to keep trying because it's hard both ways. It's hard for the immigrant parents but also equally as hard for their children. I think it's when one of the two parties stop putting in effort is when things stop. I feel like the effort is really important, the language is really important, so really emphasizing that the younger generation *should* learn Vietnamese, and at the same time the first generation should also learn some English to help each other out. I don't think it's fair to expect one of the two parties to be fluent in the other language. It's more of a compromise, and I think for the first-generation immigrants to maybe have a little bit of understanding of the struggle that students go through now and maybe that would help them connect. I think if both sides understood each other's struggles then they'll be more willing to compromise.

**Sierra:** Do you think them opening up with their experiences would also help.

**Mai:** I think so, I think a lot of the second generations don't understand and i think maybe their parents or grandparents have this assumption that they understand, but there's really not, you're really removed from that culture when you're born in the US. There's some intergenerational traumas that you might feel, but you don't really know what actually happened. So there might be a lack of empathy from the younger generation because they just don't know, or it just takes too long for them to figure out. I didn't really start learning about Vietnamese culture on my own, until i was in college that *I* took the initiative and interest to learn. It's like, but maybe that interest could have been sparked at a much younger age and i didn't have to wait to be an adult to be interested.

**Sierra:** I've done a bunch of research on trying to find out what this phenomena is called, it's not assimilation, it's not deculturation, I'm trying to find a term, I think I just thought of one, would you say this phenomena is a cultural disconnect or is that not correct?

**Mai:** I would say it's a culture disconnect, but I think it's based off of abrupt trauma of the first generation. I don't think it would have been as abrupt if it was voluntary immigration, but they didn't have a choice. Other cultures had voluntary immigration, you choose when you immigrate, you chose why you want to immigrate, then it's not rushed. You have options, you can go back to your country, it's not like everything falls apart in one day. I think it was because it was forced immigration that there's this culture disconnect because the first generation has only been here 30-40 years, that's not that long.

**Sierra:** I was reading this book about the Vietnamese generations and they literally said because this phenomena is so new, we don't have a term for this.

**Mai:** No yeah, it's so new. In some ways the first generation is still trying to deal with this trauma and they have more generations and they're trying to figure out how that works. I just think there hasn't been enough time yet. I don't think it's going to be enough time until the third or fourth generation that there will be time for reflecting and building on that culture. It's just too new, and many of our seniors have only been here for 5 to 10 years, brand new. Yeah, it's just not enough time.

## Thi Pham Interview

**Sierra-** I just want to start by saying thank you for showing me what you do with mindfulness and will definitely wear different pants next time! I just wanted to ask if we can talk a little more about yourself and how you got to work with the advocacy project first and then move to the mindfulness part

**Thi-** Yeah, my name is Thi, I grew up in Vietnam, and I came to the U.S. when I was 12. So it's enough time for me to learn English to be better, but it was not easy in the beginning to learn English. I stayed mostly in Southern California and went to school on the East Coast and came here to the Bay Area for an internship to work with nail salon workers on a research project. After that, I just started staying there and I knew Vihn through- because the research project I was helping- we work a lot with community partners, so that's how I know Vihn. After that, I was working as a Vietnamese interpreter and one random appointment I saw Vihn, he was helping someone else at that point- my client- and Vihn asked me if I wanted to work with the Marin Asian Advocacy Project and I was like ok. So that was about two years ago, yeah.

**Sierra-** What area do you work in? What's your official title?

**Thi-** Its Community Educator, but I do a lot of like calling people up, doing paperwork for people, a lot of- so we- I mean besides just giving different kinds of presentations like nutrition or wellness, and working with the elderly a lot, but I also do a lot of outreaching, actually, to different nail salon people for different projects, but also to just let them know what's coming up in the community's events. Like we just had a big Lunar New Years celebration in February, you know that. We also do field trips, so I'm helping out with different things in different capacities. A lot of it is also case management, like whenever people need us, they call us on the cell phone, so we help them do paperwork because a lot of people don't know English, especially the elderly. So, they really need a lot of different help so they come back again and again.

**Sierra-** Yeah, I work with Tran, Tran Nguyen with the county mental health, so that's the capacity I've been working with them and before that I was volunteering here at the Pickleweed community center, so I've been around awhile.... So tell me, did you come here with parents? Or siblings, aunts and uncles?

**Thi-** I came here with my mom, because five of my siblings who went were boat people, they escaped Vietnam after the war, they escaped before I was born, so I never got to see them. Then they sponsored my mom over and since I was under 21I got to go along. So that was when I was 12 I came, and I have five brothers and five sisters, I'm the youngest.

**Sierra-** When were you born? Do you mind me asking?

**Thi**- Yeah, I was born in 1981, even though my official birth record says 1982 a month later, because they wanted to put me into school early or something. Everyone fudges paperwork in Vietnam.

**Sierra**- How did you get into mindfulness and meditation?

**Thi**- I think it's partly a lot of suffering. A lot of grad students before went through a lot of difficulties and depressions and kind've like someone, like a friend I knew kinda planted that seed when and I would start reading a little bit of a priest, what a priest was writing, but it was more a reflective kind of meditation. I didn't know anything about meditation then until I came to the bay area and then when I was doing outreach and someone really liked me and was like 'oh, why don't you just go with us, were doing a carpool to a retreat in southern California, there's this famous monk called ?, he'll be teaching' and I had no idea, so I just came and it was just really amazing. That was my first time feeling so at ease with myself and feeling like there's a space that people listen and there was a space with a lot of love and acceptance. It's very possible that we can create that space together, it's a very different kind of living and it did a lot of healing for me. From then I started hanging out with more young people who do meditations and that tradition and just kinda learning more and more and yeah.

**Sierra**- I heard you got a grant to do this officially now, that must be exciting!

**Thi**- Yeah, I think it really was right conditions, right timing. Last year they had a lot of focus groups for young people to see why they're not accessing mental health services in the county. Through that focus group I was recruiting a lot of young people and parents with that and there was a follow up to see the results of what happened and then after that the county came out with ' Well, ok, now were going to have the next phase of 'what kind of activities, what kind of informal social support networks or organizations that can help kinda bring more people into mental health service, but also provide support for them' so I think our program- because it helped me so much with mindfulness practice so I thought why not do that for young people. I also knew how hard it was for me as a young person before and struggling with many things. So it kinda became something that just the right conditions came together, so yeah.

**Sierra**- From your experience with working with Vietnamese youth and being a Vietnamese youth yourself, what were the biggest things that they were struggling with? What was the need you identified?

**Thi**- I think a lot of it, especially when you first came to the country and your accents all funny and people always just point it out to you and make fun, it's a very distinct kind of feelings of being really not being accepted and feeling so self-conscious. I think that was really hard in High School, that tender age where were all like trying to find our identity and that identify being like, you know, suppressed kinda even more by- you feel like, um, bound by language. Not being able to kinda, you know, enjoy people and just speaking as you would like to, you know. I feel when I was a kid in Vietnam I would talk a lot, I had a lot of friends I had a lot of fun, but when I came to the US I became more like so introverted, I

couldn't talk, I couldn't express myself. That was really hard, I remember, it created a lot of internal anger, a lot of twists and turns in my psyche, so, I could see the effects of it years later "oh, I used to think of myself that way, but not anymore". I can sympathize with a lot, you know, the self image, not only girls look a certain way, guys look a certain way- act a certain way- but also like, you know, growing confidence and gaining values. I think a lot of it is having neutral space we come back to and exploring ourselves and nourishing ourselves so we can really just grow.

**Sierra-** Actually, I've had a bit of the opposite experience where in the people I've talked to, a lot of the children of the original immigrants- they don't speak Vietnamese at all. Have you heard of this? Is it common? Do you know why?

**Thi-** It's actually very very common! It's a common complaint of parents. I think a lot of parents, they- I notice this because I work with autistic kids a lot as well- I would always hear the parents would say "at home we try not to speak Vietnamese too much because the kids go to school and got put into a lower class or seclusion class or a thing because they don't speak as much English", you know, it's harder for your kids to keep up with two. But, you know, Linguists actually advised them to keep two languages because the more you learn in different ones it's just better for the kids to develop that vocab. So, I think it ends up being the kids, once they start school, they forget a lot of the stuff they used to know before. I think many kids would kinda know somewhat what the parents are saying, the easy stuff, food, you know "do your chores, do your dishes", all that, but um, the more expressive kinda language is lost because you're not using it, mainly just using English all the time- and I totally fell into it when I was like- you know, I came from Vietnam I didn't speak English fluently, it took me like ten years to be more fluent, and then I forgot Vietnamese and I started like "Oh, I can't speak to other people now, I understand everything, I can't..." It's just like something you use and you have interest in, you know, finding- learning about the heritage, learning about parents and actually who they are not limited by the language. I think when there's that yearning for connection then the language becomes an easier part, yeah.

**Sierra-** So you're saying it takes, like, a willingness to be part, to engage with your parents, or engage with your culture, that you actually start being able to balance them?

**Thi-** Yeah, I think it's also a willingness... and a patience from both sides, from parents too- for space- you know how when you learn a foreign language you go to school and it's a neutral space and you can really learn and make a ton of mistakes and things- and also that teacher dedicates that time to teach, students dedicate that time to study. So, if you wanted to learn that in the environment at home it might be a little harder because we're not used to that formal... but yeah.

**Sierra-** So, you were born in Vietnam, grew up in Vietnam, but once you got to America did your mom continue raising you in the culture, or did she kinda put that on the back burner?

**Thi-** Raising me in the Vietnamese culture?

**Sierra-** Yeah, did she speak Vietnamese to you, did she try to switch to English?

**Thi-** None of that, because I came here and my mom was pretty old already, so she got a stroke and she went back to Vietnam. She only stayed here a couple years, so I think in some ways I'm not exposed as much to how parents would treat their kids, I had the full freedom of doing, learning what I wanted and at the same time no guidance, so it was all completely brand new.

**Sierra-** Who did you stay with? Your siblings?

**Thi-** With siblings, yeah.

**Sierra-** Where in southern California [did you live]?

**Thi-** It was in Little Saigon in Orange county, yeah.

**Sierra-** Can you describe a time where you were particularly close to your culture? Or could you describe a time where you particularly felt different?

**Thi-** I work a lot with elderly people and maybe because when I feel close is, umm, I think its more recent- because working as an interpreter I'm always learning a lot of new words, but, for me to appreciate the beauty of the language it takes a master poet, you know, so when I was listening to Thich Nhat Hanh cause he's a poet and a really good writer, so when I heard him speak I was like "whoa, there's a bunch of words I don't really know, that's like really events, or old words". And I looked them up- the way he uses them is so beautiful, like the way he composes speech is so natural and it has an opening... it's really moved me, hearing my language being used that way- so beautiful. It inspired me a lot just like reading more and learning more and understanding the concepts... yeah.

**Sierra-** That sounds really beautiful. Is there a time you felt a little distant?

**Thi-** Umm, I think, distant from the culture?

**Sierra-** Yeah

**Thi-** I feel like during the teenage years, up to early college, because I moved to the East Coast, completely far away from home-

**Sierra-** Where did you go to school?

**Thi-** Arcadia University in Pennsylvania in the outskirts of Philadelphia, yeah, pretty far. But, I didn't have anyone to speak Vietnamese with so I forgot a lot of Vietnamese, but I picked up English more, so... but yeah, during that time I didn't have family support, so I think I felt really distant from culture, family, and that side of my identity... so yeah.

**Sierra-** What do you think are the main factors- like top three that why second-generation kids don't, or haven't embraced their culture and language?

**Thi-** I would say the first one is wanting to be mainstream like other kids who don't speak with accents or anything- like really wanting to be accepted as part as the perceived culture.... I think maybe there's also a shift in cultures right now, so it's hard to tell. Earlier it wasn't as cool to be Asian or be Latino or others, but now there's a more openness in the culture- a slight shift- its more ok, seems more ok to express ourselves. I think that's the first reason. Second reason... hmm... I think it could be rebellion against parents, against something that you, you know, just... "They nag me, they want me to do this and this, put me in a box"... "I don't want to be part of that anymore" there's that kind of divorcing from that culture... ummm...

**Sierra-** Yeah, these are really broad, hard questions...

**Thi-** Yeah, I'm trying to relate to experience... umm, third reason, I think, maybe just related to... not growing up around it, maybe, yeah...

**Sierra-** Do you recall how your siblings felt having to come to America on their own?

**Thi-** I only hear some stories from here and there. They were boat people, so I think my sister was 12 and the oldest was probably 17 or 18, there was five of them on a boat and they almost died- they were starving or something- but I think they were saved by an American ship, so they were lucky, but I could just imagine, for me growing up without parents since I was 13 or 14 then I think of my brothers and sisters coming to the US like they're really ?Smart Alecks? They really struggled to put things together, all of them lived in one apartment in Long Beach- five of them, plus, I think, a few cousins, so they really stuffed it in there and go to school, so kinda the more I grew up, the more I kinda understand that more cause as I go through a similar process- not having guidance or any support whatsoever, from anyone, I became more sympathetic to like "oh, life could've been hard for them, not having parents around from such a young age." Yeah.

**Sierra-** Have they decided to hold on to their culture, or have they kinda... let it go?

**Thi-** I think a lot of them really are still close to the culture, because they live in an area where there are a lot of Vietnamese too- so it's easier, but, I think that's a tricky question because how close is close to the culture you know, like do you celebrate the New Year Lunar Festival, or do you actually do all the traditional stuff- put food on the altar for the ancestors or reciting poems? Or something, like how close is it? I think a lot of the time we just- There's a real lack of vitality in the culture here, it's not... I don't if they are really close to the culture, like they still eat the Vietnamese food as part of the culture, but I think in many ways the thinkings are very Americanized, I just don't know if they still... like for me, being close to the culture means  
Enjoying the literature, the songs- you know, the richness of the language- so it's beyond the food- it's the wisdom of your culture. I think in that aspect, I'm not so sure, yeah, I know they always work full time and it's really hard to find time to do that.

**Sierra-** Do they have kids now?

**Thi-** Yeah, they all have kids, so I think they're extra busy being parents as well.

**Sierra-** Do they speak Vietnamese? Or not really?

**Thi-** They kinda speak a mixture of Vietnamese and English to their kids, yeah.

**Sierra-** What would be your advice to immigrant parents and their children to better connect and communicate with one another?

**Thi-** I think a lot of communication comes from the heart, like they really understand each other when we communicate that way. To come from that space is really important, and I think also learning to appreciate each other as individuals and appreciate our difference knowing that the kid is living in a different culture, not the same one as the parents grow up in- understand that, respect that difference. But I think also, I feel that nourishing-giving time to each other to know that we appreciate strength and appreciate beauties in each other- the kind things we do for each other. I think those kinds of things really speak and it's something the other person can really receive and it's something from the heart so I think there's more chance for connection that way.

**Sierra-** Kinda going back a little, you said that you really connect to your culture through literature. What are some literature pieces that really have impacted you and you really enjoy reading?

**Thi-** Lately [I've been reading] Buddhist texts because it's a lot of just really deep philosophical kind've... it's not just ideas, but it's the practicality of it. And also just very interesting words, I really love words.

**Sierra-** Are there any quotes you particularly love?

**Thi-** I remember when I went to France, to Plum Village and I stayed there in the dorms, and one day I just walked out and saw this quote, in this diamond shape, there were two of them- its in Vietnamese- I can say it in Vietnamese first, um, let's see, uhh, I can't remember exactly, sorry, but it's something about "In the morning I bring happiness to people, and joy, in the afternoon I help relieve the suffering of others". It's just so simple, but yet, like, sometimes I forget, you know, I just live in my own head, my own problems, I don't look outside to kinda help other people out. So, I think that was just something so simple, but just stuck with me to see that kind of kindness that we can all be.

**Sierra-** Do you remember what it was in Vietnamese?

**Thi-** \*Translates\*

**Sierra-** Are you Buddhist or do you just read from Buddhist texts?

**Thi-** I think I consider myself Buddhist, yeah

**Sierra-** You said you joined a group, a specific meditation group- could you remind me what that was

**Thi-** Oh, so we keep saying Plum Village that's with Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and his Vietnamese- that's really how I connected-cause he's a poet- that's how I really connected to the language that way. This initiative to really just help open up and modernize Buddhism so that I can bring it into my daily life more easily. It's a really practical way of living that's not really about Buddhism or not, it's just like "how can I help calm and put my body at ease so that my mind can think clearer, you know, can make better decisions that way?" you know. After I went to the Plum Village retreat, I just started meeting other young people and they have groups that meet in the East Bay or around San Francisco- There's a whole community I just discovered, there's so many! But, not that many up in Marin, so that's why I really wanted to create something for young people here. The part I really love about it is it's just so much of a community, it's never-it's not about your own suffering, about transforming your own self, it's about going as a community, helping each other out, and that sharing. The group sharing is always opens people up in so many ways and... we all need a safe space to kinda share with each other, and I really appreciate that..... Yeah I think that's how it really brought me in from someone who was very brand new, not knowing anything and there were so many people who were kind to me, you know, it was really nice.

**Sierra-** So walk me through your day from the time you get up to when you go to sleep, what are some meditations or practices you do in the day to help you?

**Thi-** Mmmm... Since I work as an interpreter- I work 3-4 different jobs, so my days are very different day to day. Sometimes it's hard to have a routine, but I really enjoy driving and usually I will sometimes listen to a talk, a blank talk. It really helped me focus on the kinder side of myself, the gentle side. It gives me a lot more energy to do things, but also when I drive I can really just focus on my breathing and I kind've often do this thing when I drive, and it's just really soothing for me. It's like when I'm breathing in, and when I breathe out, I just relieve tensions from the top to the bottom, and it's really nice to just you know do that a little in the car and I feel much better even though at the end of the day I'm tired or something. Having friends I can sit and talk to- my weeks you know, I sit and meditate with different friends on different nights, so it's kinda a really nice community I come back to and kinda help anchor me for the day-too. During the day I also do walking meditations. Especially like-I have this habit just like to run and rush everywhere since I was a kid, so now I do this as a reminder to myself- every time I have the urge to run cause I'm late to somewhere, I just instantly slow myself down and just walk very- I step with a lot of awareness of the whole body and tensions and how it is and as I walk these steps I just release the tensions in my body, with the breathing in and out. Or when I arrive at a place, I just usually feel like "oh, I'm here" and huffing and puffing, and like "I'm really here and composed". So it really creates the right environment to work in, yeah.

**Sierra-** Cool.... Sorry, I just lost my question I just had.... Something along the lines of meditation.... Oh! Your gardening! Tell me how you got into that. Do you have your own garden?

**Thi-** Oh, yes, I've always liked plants as a kid, we had a little garden, so that was really fun, I really loved my avocado tree, it was a really big one. I didn't garden again until I was... I don't know, uhh, a few years ago. Cause you know, students always move around so much, I never really had space or the time to do it and now I'm just- I accidentally took a gardening class at Merritt college and it's like whoa the people there are really nice. It's such a different culture, I never used to go to a class where there's always food available, people bring potluck and they share like a family. They're so easy to talk to, so it's like I was hooked into that and started taking many landscaping classes about trees and things and going on a lot of field trips. I just started propagating things at school and bring it home and plant it around- it soon became a garden! Every time I move it's a big thing because there's so many plants that come with me! It's really fun and I'm enjoying eating fresh vegetables, rice, strawberries! The ones that grow at home are SO good compared to the ones at the store! It's fun... just to see things grow, the beauty of it, but also being able- taught me a lot in being able to let go, because plants would die, so I save a lot of seeds!

**Sierra-** Would you consider that a meditative practice or something you just do for fun?

**Thi-** I think it could be meditative in many ways, if I'm careful, so you know how often I get into the planning mode, the work mode, you know "I'm gonna do this plot and do all this" but the weeding is really nice and easy, cause you just do that and just really be with it, and it's something about being in the soil that's just "ahhh" being dirty with the soil, and around the plants- even if I have headaches I go to the garden and it's like "ah, it's nice". It's just fun poking around to see what's growing, what's crawling there, it's just part of like- helping my curiosity cause you know, it's like there's always something there, somethings new, surprise. I think it really helps bring that lighter joy. But also, not feel so depressed when something dies, like my plants, like it would be my friend that died, that sort of thing. So I think like with anything else- gardening, we can do a lot of stuff with it and make it look like work or we can really enjoy what it is.... I'm taking more time just to be there and smell. Not doing things, but maybe just being there- experiencing the garden.

**Sierra-** What are you growing?

**Thi-** I'm growing so many things!

**Sierra-** Alright, give me the list!

**Thi-** I collect many things and have a lot of carnivorous plants and I also have beehives, so sometimes I feel bad that the bees get in the plants, so I'm trying to move them far away.

**Sierra-** Its good the bees get into the plants.

**Thi-** No, when they get into the carnivorous plants, they die in there

**Sierra-** Ohhh carnivorous plants!

**Thi-** I have a lot of flowers and different things, it kinda nice, my backyard kinda turned into a jungle within a few months

**Sierra-** How many carnivorous plants do you have?

**Thi-** I don't know, I started just learning and growing different things I have a lot of tree crawlers and sunflowers last year. I grew a lot of fava beans and tree Dahlia- just trying different things all the time and I have really cool purple corn that looks like jewels and I grew a lot of amaranth. Then a lot of clementines- just different things I'm trying out each year, things that I propagate, lot of salvia. I saw some monarch butterflies the other day, so its cool.

**Sierra-** When I was little my dad would always grow sunflowers every year, and they would get huge! They would be this big

**Thi-** Wow, that's nice

**Sierra-** I have a picture of me when I was little where the sunflower head was bigger than my body!

**Thi-** Wow

**Sierra-** We'd always plant corn...

**Thi-** Oh, that's cool, I love corn!

**Sierra-** I have fond memories with growing corn too.

**Thi-** Or just like eating sun dried tomatoes off the vine is so yummy! So I have my bunnies and they have a lot of poop, and I put them in the warm compost bin and they make really good compost! And the bunnies will eat the tree crawlers and they love it, it's like fresh from the garden every day! So it's a really good cycle of life, and now I start peeing in the garden- it's really just nitrogen just returning back to the soil, yeah, so it's really fun.

**Sierra-** What's the hardest thing your growing right now?

**Thi-** Hardest things?... I guess maybe... a lot of my plants died because I brought them from here up to Ukiah and they got some really cold weather, so I was sad to say goodbye to a bunch of them. And I have a lot of succulents that kinda die back, but I think we were able to save a bunch still, but I guess it's just hard depending on climate.

**Sierra-** Where do you live right now?

**Thi-** I live in El Sobrante across the bridge like four to five days a week and I am in Ukiah where we have a bigger garden space- it's on 60 something acres, part of the retreat center that were helping taking care of the land. So lots of room for gardening

**Sierra-** Let me see if I have any more questions for you..... yeah no that's it, I think I got everything. Well, thank you so much for doing this and being here with us and starting this group.

**Thi-** Yeah, Maybe you'll be on the other side of the camera next time.

**Sierra-** Yeah, maybe

**Thi-** I think it would be good to add your voice to it

## Daniel Nguyen Interview

**Sierra-** So, just to start, what's your name? Tell me more about you, I've told you about me.

**Daniel-** My name is Daniel, I was born in Oakland California by my mom and father, but I currently live with my mother right now.

**Sierra-** Cool, thank you... I heard you were in graduate school

**Daniel-** I was in graduate school, but then I had a change of heart, so I had to take a different route. I'm currently going to school for respiratory care.

**Sierra-** Oh wow, so when did you switch from graduate school to what you're doing now and what is it now, is it taking classes at a college? Is it a program?

**Daniel-** I've switched programs since last semester, after December of 2017 and I just had a change of heart you know, and had people I knew that were in the respiratory care and, you know, it just really interested me and I wanted to try out a different science, and um yeah.

**Sierra-** Where did you go to undergraduate college and what was your major?

**Daniel-** I went to California State University East Bay, my major was in psychology. Then I went to grad school in San Jose for social work, I wanted to get into counseling. So it was social work with a concentration in mental health.

**Sierra-** Why did you want to get into social work and mental health?

**Daniel-** I wanted to get into social work and- you know my concentration was in mental health because I was working with the Vietnamese population and I noticed there was a bridge and gap between communication between English and Vietnamese and since I am a second-generation Vietnamese I feel like I could have been that gap between them. Just hoping to just bridge those gaps together between first generation and second generation and so forth.

**Sierra-** Yeah, your mom was telling me your always busy with school and work. Where do you work?

**Daniel-** I used to work in the behavioral field, I was a behavioral therapist or also like a behavioral interventionist as they call it. That's how I really got into counseling and working with other individuals who were underserved and just needed an advantage and I thought that counseling was a good idea. You know, I still like it and I just always wanted to do something that could help other people because in doing so that makes me feel more satisfaction in my life.

**Sierra-** So it seems like that was really important to you or still is very important to you and are you still going to do that as well as your medical... remind me again...

**Daniel-** Respiratory care

**Sierra-** Respiratory care! Are you still going to be involved in the Vietnamese community and mental health and language barriers?

**Daniel-** Oh definitely, I feel like I don't only want to limit to the Vietnamese population. I also want to help as many people possible outside just the Vietnamese community. I want to be an equal opportunist. As for counseling, I've always been interested in counseling as in I just wanted to be a mentor and help others out and if it's not in mental health, it's definitely going to be counseling in other fields. I have other ventures in mind for the future such as life coaching and fitness coaching. Those are two of the things I'm most interested in as of now, but, many more to come.

**Sierra-** Where do you see yourself in 10-15 years? What are your goals? Your dreams?

**Daniel-** I see myself on a yacht sipping martinis... Nah I'm kidding, I mean, hopefully that will be true, but in 10-15 years I hope to be getting into the respiratory care field and move my way up, you know, as one of my ventures. I also want to do fitness coaching and life coaching as well- Two other things I want to do on the side of just respiratory care. I believe in variety in life and I like to make myself as versatile as possible.

**Sierra-** That's great! What kind of fitness are you into?

**Daniel-** Mainly body building and other stuff, I mean I want to help other people become more active in their lifestyle because the majority of people, especially people I know, work 9-5 job and their usually just sitting down. I want to promote health and fitness, you know, just a healthy lifestyle- not only for looking better but just to be more active in life and increase mobility and its a great way to meet new people. Especially the gym has been one of the most positive environments that I've been a part of and other people might feel intimidated by it from my experience of what others might say that they were ashamed of working out in front of other people and I... I... would totally disagree against that. I feel like a lot of people that I've met at the gym have been very positive and very encouraging to others surrounding them. As long as you're going there every day and putting in the work that's definitely something that I see as a definite success, so, you know, never give up!

**Sierra-** That's awesome, thank you for sharing. How long is the schooling for the respiratory field?

**Daniel-** Right now I'm pretty much starting all over again. I'm going from a social science field to more of a chemistry, microbiology and physio-anatomy- I've got the majority of it out of the way. I'm just doing prerequisites right now, I have one more semester after this semester before I transfer out to Napa Valley College and that's where I will be attending the program for my respiratory care which should take two years.

**Sierra-** Awesome, and I didn't catch this before- how old are you? When were you born? Whens your birthday?

**Daniel-** Very popular question, well, I'm born on September 10th, 1991

**Sierra-** Cool, another 90's kid like me, I'm 96-

**Daniel-** 96, yeah!

**Sierra-** So my second question gets a little deeper, it's what does the Vietnamese culture mean to you? How do you define that? What's your experience with it?

**Daniel-** Alright, well, what the Vietnamese culture means to me is... just... many generations just bridging over and just trying to adapt into a whole new world in America, especially with immigrant parents. They've had a very hard time adjusting to this new world due to a language barrier. It's definitely very exciting for people with new ethnic backgrounds to come over and share their culture and I feel like I'm very proud to be Vietnamese, proud to be a second-generation Vietnamese and also that were able to have access to this- to be in America- to gain new knowledge to pretty much bridge the gap between Vietnam and America.

**Sierra-** What does that mean to you, how do you plan- or what's your idea of doing that, of bridging the gap?

**Daniel-** My idea of bridging the gap is well, one of my experiences was volunteering at the Marin community mental health clinic where there were a lot of Vietnamese people who had a very difficult time with adjusting to America due to language barriers and you know rules and regulations and policies. I've been fortunate enough to be born here and, you know, have the best of both worlds obtaining the Vietnamese culture and also the American culture, so I was able to have the best of both worlds and really find a way to kinda bridge it together. I'm still Vietnamese, ethnically, but my nationality is American. I'm also bilingual and feel like that's definitely an advantage, you know, something I could use to better the Vietnamese community that just has a hard time adjusting to a new world.

**Sierra-** What was it like for you growing up and trying to juggle two cultures?

**Daniel-** Well, besides bringing home lunch to school and having be told it was smelly... it's been interesting and depending on the time. When I was younger I grew up in a mainly Hispanic neighborhood and people were kinda confused of what I am, you know, and I always get asked my ethnicity or "what am I?". I always get asked what's my ethnicity or what am I. Most commonly what ethnic background I usually get is Chinese... Chinese, Chinese, Chinese and in a way I kinda understand that because Chinese people came here before and there's a vast majority more Chinese people than Vietnamese people. So therefore it seems like we're just a whole new generation of Vietnamese just coming over and, you know, not being well known or mainstream. So that's what it was like for me

growing up and also just, I guess, finding an identity in the American culture since I didn't grown up with too many Asian people, I hung out with a lot of, you know, I had a lot of Hispanic friends or white friends, black friends. I was submerged into their culture and I met their families, saw how they lived- so it was definitely interesting for me, it wasn't just the American culture that I experienced, I have experienced the Hispanic culture and American culture...

**Sierra-** The diversity we have here, especially in the Bay Area....

**Daniel-** Yeah, right, I'm fortunate enough to be in an area where there's so much diversity that, you know, I can meet with other people and learn about them. But again, there was some difficulty just finding my own culture, and finding others like me was.... I guess being here I was always having a hard time with who I am as a person, what it means to be a part of the Asian culture, and, you know, I mean, just growing up there was a lot of negative stereotypes that were associated with being Asian. Over time I feel like it's becoming a lot more accepting.

**Sierra-** ....I'm trying to word this correctly..... Um, what's an example of a negative- you told me a little bit about one, but what's an example of a negative experience you've had with your identity and trying to kinda figure out your identity in this larger culturally diverse area?

**Daniel-** Should I start out with the negative stereotypes?

**Sierra-** Negative or positive-

**Daniel-** I got both

**Sierra-** Ok, whatever you're comfortable with!

**Daniel-** I mean, it's a bit explicit...

**Sierra-** Hey, no rules here

**Daniel-** I'm pretty sure the most famous one of the Asian stereotypes was.... About.... Genitalia.... You know, it's about smaller size genitalia. I mean, I can't speak for everybody, you know, it's just stereotype with being good at math and having very strict parents. Another one is knowing Kung Fu. Other than that, I mean, growing up I've had a lot of, I guess, frustration and anger with being Asian and identifying who I am and I guess there were times that I was even ashamed of being Asian, or Asian-American because of the negative stereotypes that I was associated with that I didn't identify with. I've had people that saw part of me or was just trying to.... instigate- I had a lot of instigators that were trying to escalate situations, I was always trying to stay out of trouble, but it seems like trouble finds its way to me because of these stereotypes and I wanted to kinda break that, you know, I guess that's what kind led me to psychology. To figure out the motivations and how other people would perceive you- just certain biases that one may have.

**Sierra-** Ok, thank you for sharing that and believe me your honesty is very refreshing, a lot of the people I speak to are very reserved, they don't like to go into a lot of realities, and second, could you describe a time where you felt particularly close or distant from your culture, or both?

**Daniel-** So the one time I felt particularly close to my culture is during Vietnamese New Years. Every year me and my family would go to certain temples or places that celebrate Vietnamese New Years and obviously the Vietnamese Culture would definitely be strong because there's a lot of presence of Vietnamese people there and I've never seen so many Vietnamese people and there are places we go to such as San Jose which has a very large Vietnamese population, or Sacramento and that was definitely something I felt like wow, there are other people that are like me, they speak the same language as I do. They've experienced some of the same experiences that I had. So that's one example of when I feel close to my culture.

**Daniel-** When I feel distant from my culture, that's when I hang out with my friends from other backgrounds. Vietnamese culture is definitely not the main topic that we usually discuss when we, you know, congregate- get together. We don't usually discuss much of the Vietnamese culture or any of that... at least the food has just been.... I guess another example is food, that could be something that brings people together, you know, make us more recognized besides Pho! \*sigh\*

**Sierra-** Say it louder for the people in the back

**Daniel-** That's the first thing people think of when they find out I'm Vietnamese, but hey, we have other great dishes out there guys, there's Bún bò Huế, definitely check it out. I'm not getting sponsored by any restaurants, but you know that would be great. Another time I felt distant from my culture was when I was surrounded by other Vietnamese-Americans who didn't know a lick of Vietnamese and you know it's not for me to judge on them, I mean that's how they were raised, that's who they choose to be. I've also noticed when those individuals were seeing their parents and their parents were trying to communicate to them in Vietnamese they would respond it back in English, whereas for me I would get in trouble if I didn't speak Vietnamese back to them. Vietnamese is essentially my first language just growing up and that's the language I mainly speak at home. Sometimes we speak Venglish which is a combination of Vietnamese and English. It definitely feels like two different worlds when I'm coming back home and going out, I feel like I'm two different Daniels. There's the Vietnamese-American Daniel in the streets and the Vietnamese Vietnamese-American Daniel at home.

**Sierra-** So your friends who don't speak Vietnamese, have they ever talked about why? Their parents speak Vietnamese, but they just haven't [learned] have they talked about it?

**Daniel-** There's actually a multitude of things from what I've heard from them, what they described to me was that their parents didn't want to push that on to them and give them the freedom to choose how they want to communicate. Another reason was that they feel

like they wanted to get rid of the old culture and only learn English to get a step ahead which I feel like completely makes no sense because as opposed to knowing two languages, you know, being bilingual and another reason was they were simply ashamed of the Vietnamese culture- these are not my words, this is from them- and how it sounds [the language], it sounds funny, it sounds choppy and they feel like it just tarnishes their image. Some of them strive to be American because that's something they've seen in the media and they gotta be this way and that way. Like Brad Pitt or Johnny Depp, for an example, because growing up in Western culture there hasn't really been a positive Asian role model for them to look up to. Therefore they have no other choice than to look up to famous Caucasian celebrities or whoever else, or hip-hop artists, or something like that, you know. Just whatever culture they're interested in they partake in that and use that as a way to identify themselves.

**Sierra-** If you could just sit your friends down and address this problem, what would you say to them?

**Daniel-** First off I'll slap them in the back of the head.... nah, I'm kidding....

**Sierra-** \*laughs\* Kick them around?

**Daniel-** Yeah, just say hey guys, there's nothing to be ashamed of being Vietnamese, it's awesome that we get to be bilingual or have the opportunity to be, I mean you have free Vietnamese lessons at home, you know, people would pay hundreds of dollars to get Vietnamese lessons and you have your parents. All you gotta do is just speak to them, I mean, take advantage of that. Plus, there's a growing Vietnamese population, why not take advantage of learning how to communicate with others of your own background, maybe you guys need to go back to Vietnam to be- to be submerged in that culture and just find out for yourself, there's nothing to be ashamed of. But who am I to judge right? I'm just happy that I am who I am and I don't strive to be anyone else besides myself. You can't be any more American other than you just being born here and being a citizen here, you know. Also, being Vietnamese, you can't change that... so uh, work with what you got, I guess, I don't know if I'm wording that right, but.... All I'm saying is that there's nothing to be ashamed of.

**Sierra-** Thank you for those words, and in my two years of working in this community, I've heard that Vietnamese parents are really strict-

**Daniel-** Yeah-

**Sierra-** Is this true for you and do you think this dissuades a lot of second generation- if this this is even true- Do you think it dissuades a lot of second generation from even wanting to even be Vietnamese or speak Vietnamese?

**Daniel-** As far as dissuading, I think every individual has their own experience. There are some parents that are strict, but that can be from any ethnicity, it doesn't particularly have to be from Vietnamese ethnicities or Vietnamese families. As far as dissuading them from

wanting to be Vietnamese- possibly, maybe that's a parenting style that is not as effective as, you know, just encouraging. I believe that just growing up, I felt like my experiences have changed over time. Growing up I had... maybe when I was like 10, 11, 12, I was told that what career path I should go into, you know, I should be an astronaut, I should be an engineer, I should be an accountant, I should be..... some type of mathematician- For me, I guess, there was an instant that I did not want to be associated with the Vietnamese culture because I didn't want to be known as just any of those. I wanted to be more than that and I wanted to be who I chose to be. So I believe in individuality, I don't feel like we should be chained up to what our phenotype is, like our ethnicity. What I would say is just choose your own path, if your parents are strict with you, you know, just wait till you're 18, go to college, and you could pay off and get your own apartment, that's when you're considered quote on quote, air quotes an "adult". So, do what you gotta do when you turn 18 and then college, and prove your parents that you're right about your path. As long as you are successful in your field, and if not, there's always other fields to go and if not you can go back to what they chose but, I'm just sayin, you know, its within their best intentions, there's no malice behind that, I don't think. Every parent just wants to see their children strive.

**Sierra-** Thank you, and I don't know how much time you have left, but- or I think I only have a couple more questions, but uh... I always think of questions too early and I forget them... you mentioned there was a time you were a little more resistant towards the Vietnamese culture, could you talk about that more? Why or when?

**Daniel-** This might make me sound a little hypocritical just talking about the other kids that were growing up who were ashamed of being Vietnamese, but at least this happened a lot earlier in my life, you know, maybe middle school or freshman and sophomore year of high school where I was just seen as different, you know, I had food brought back from home, it smelled bad, my language sounded funny, I wasn't seen as attractive because I was Vietnamese or Asian, and I guess like I felt no female or girl liked me because I was Asian, not even Asian girls... but that was at that time where I didn't know any better. It's so easy just to go and pinpoint on that- because I'm Asian, because I'm Asian, because I'm Asian- you know therefore... just thinking about that kinda made me dissuade-or- distance myself from the Vietnamese culture and my identity, because I guess I was ashamed of it, and I thought to myself, there's nothing I can do about it, and, you know, just make the best out of what I am and I've grown to grow into my own skin and really become more confident in myself and, you know, I am glad that I am who I am, just having the culture back at home, just being Vietnamese and being American as well, being able to be bilingual, and just be more versatile as a person and just have multiple skills. Also, language is something that interests me, so, I'm hoping to pick up more languages along the way, maybe a future polyglot, you never know, right? I'm comin after Spanish next, I've learned a good amount of Spanish, you know, multiple taquerias I've been to.... I think it's awesome, I think you should embrace your culture. It was just for very juvenile stuff that I was- gave me a reason to distance myself which was attracting women, I guess.

**Sierra-** At what age did you kinda grow into your skin?

**Daniel-** Let me see.... I think about when I was turning 23, when I was graduating college from my undergrad program. I've had many great experiences, I've met many different people. Living in Hayward it was considered the heart of the Bay Area, so I've met many different kinds of people- many international students who would come to America, and they were just very proud of their culture and hey embrace it and it's not something I mean to say my cultures better than yours, it's just something they carry with them, kinda like a very proud sports fan waving the Warriors banner on their car- well I can't speak for every fan- but, a lot of the fans I know are just proud of just being Warriors fans, or San Francisco Giants fans, and or San Francisco 49ers fans. It's just representing who you are and I just saw that they were just representing who they were to the fullest, and just not needing to adopt to a different culture to appease them. That's how I felt I've grown into my own self, just a lot of other experiences in my life that I've had, just, oh, I'm graduating from college soon, I need to get my stuff together and really go forth and find a plan about what to do. Since I was in the psychology field, I tried out different things. I've learned that just being bilingual in the workfield is a huge advantage, so me having Vietnamese as my first language, I definitely took that into account, when I was like what can I do about this, I want to take this even further, I don't want to speak Vietnamese just to speak Vietnamese, I want to utilize it, I want to put it in power, I want to help change lives.

**Sierra-** That's great, kinda going off track a bit, have you ever been to Vietnam? If not, do you plan to go?

**Daniel-** Yes, I have been to Vietnam

**Sierra-** Did you go this last time with your mom?

**Daniel-** Oh, no, I did not, I've been to Vietnam about three times. Last time I've been was over ten years ago. I have a friend who just came back from Vietnam like last year and he told me that it's definitely a huge culture shock, you know. He does see a lot of similarities over there to over here. I guess cause he went to Ho Chi Minh City, which was a tourist attraction, and they've definitely adapted. You can find your KFC's and maybe McDonald's, a lot of western foods and style of clothing too. I can't speak for myself because I haven't been there in awhile, but when I was over there, I didn't go to many of the city areas, I went to more of my hometown in Vietnam, it's just more rural and laid back. It was pretty traditional, from the way we have dinner and just some of the technologies seem ancient.

**Sierra-** Could you tell me about that? The rituals, the dinners, the technologies? Like tell me, I have no clue what to picture.

**Daniel-** I guess I am being a little vague, I'm trying to pull out what I can remember from over ten years ago

**Sierra-** Just what you can...

**Daniel-** Well, we- I feel like one of the things we do take for granted is bathrooms. So as for technology, we didn't really have a.... I don't know how to phrase it.... Proper.... Restroom

facility.... So, for instance, there was this toilet that was outside on top of a pond where you're sitting down in public and other people can go by and see you as you're doing your business, and in the bottom of the pond there are fishes who are waiting for dinner... so, that's one of the outdated systems we had there. Showers, you know, there were only cold showers, if you wanted warm showers you had to boil your own water and mix it with the cold water and take a bath. What you do is you just take this big ladle and pour it over yourself. There wasn't a modern water system, we used wells to draw water from the well. Dinner just felt very communal, like, there were many families that we'd live next to. We had many of them come over for dinner, so it would always seem like a hallway of people eating food and we would always- It was like a big potluck every-time, so it was very family oriented, not only within our families but within other families that are joining us.

**Sierra-** So you must've been pretty young when you went, what was it like going so young? Did you enjoy it? Did you kinda feel uncomfortable? What was your thought process being there and being so young and used to American ways of living?

**Daniel-** Well, I definitely lost a lot of weight because where I lived didn't have any fast food, no, but, the lifestyle there was pretty great, at least from my perspective of just being there for a month and a half or so. I was just there and people work in the morning, get off, and there are night markets that people go out to, which is very exciting. There's always something to do, different street food, nice treats, I'd go out with my family and their friends and they would show me around. Just various activities that I wouldn't normally do- roller-skating. The hot song there at the time was Nelly- Its getting hot in here

**Sierra-** Oh man, \*laughs\*

Daniel- Yeah, so you know, it definitely traveled kinda late. In 2007 or so, but hey better late than never. But yeah, that was my experience then, I mean, I was young, I didn't have a smart phone, so I wasn't really attached to my phone, I had a Nokia phone

**Sierra-** Oh one of the original ones? The box ones?

**Daniel-** Yeah, the most exciting thing was Snake (mobile game), I didn't even have texting, but, you know, people nowadays would never know what that's like- but the batteries lasted forever. Anyways, I digress.... You know, I mean, I at that age I didn't really have access to the internet or any social media at the time, it wasn't as big as it is now, so.... That was my experience then, I really didn't miss any of those things back at home in America... maybe just the fast food, I was really craving a Big Mac, but they did not have a Big Mac, we had rice, rice, rice, rice, and more rice, you know, and just food was always fresh, we would catch our food or just go out in the market in the daytime where the fishermen caught all their fish and they're still live. There was a lot of, I guess, healthy eating, just everything was all fresh and I was able to lose weight \*inaudible\* than Subway. Again, I digress. It was very different, I had to speak more in Vietnamese, everywhere I'd go. That's probably the ultimate test of trying to speak your native tongue is to go to your native land and try to see how to traverse around that area. Even when I got back to Vietnam when I was there that time, no matter how hard I tried, I always stood out. I was always seen as a foreigner, you

know, I wore their clothes, I spoke their language, ate their food, I even had their haircut, you know, I mean it was definitely different having all eyes on you. You're seen as this- I don't know what I was seen as, but you know, they were looking at me like I'm weird or something, like I have three eyes or something like that, you know, very bizzare. As to over here, I notice that people are always on the move and they don't have time to slow down and really enjoy anything. We're always just in kinda a hurry or in a rush to get somewhere while over there my experience was we stopped a lot, looked at various different terrains, enjoyed ourselves, went swimming. Just being back here, the only time we stop for something is if we want to take a picture with it- anywhere we go it's a photo opportunity.

**Sierra-** For the Gram? For the Snap?

**Daniel-** For the Gram!

**Sierra-** You kinda touched on this a little bit, but- and this might sound weird, but, have you ever had the feeling of not being Vietnamese enough?

**Daniel-** Well, I did, yeah, just going back home. They didn't see me as Vietnamese, they saw me as American. I tried to describe to them that I was Vietnamese-American, but I guess that's not as Vietnamese as being Vietnamese-Vietnamese. So, I guess that was the feeling of- I did feel like somewhat of an outsider, but not in a negative aspect, more of oh he doesn't know his way around, his Vietnamese is not up to par as ours, but that was maybe just ten years ago. I feel like over time my Vietnamese has gotten a lot better and more proficient, as opposed to when I was like 16. I haven't really thought about all the sentence structures, and certain words, whenever a word that just pops up in my head, I just go to my mom or anyone who speaks Vietnamese very fluently and just ask them, or Google translate.

**Sierra-** Have you ever experienced that here in America?

**Daniel-** Can you please rephrase that question?

**Sierra-** Have you ever experienced not being Vietnamese enough here in America?

**Daniel-** Oh, I see.... I've had. There were several instances where I was with other individuals that were Vietnamese-American and they spoke Vietnamese way better than I did. I mean, it's only because they took classes for it and really put in the time and effort to speak Vietnamese. Also, there was also this one time where I went to church, mainly particularly a Vietnamese church where there was a pastor, he was white but he studied Vietnamese and he spoke Vietnamese really well, like he could've sounded like a native, you know If I closed my eyes and I didn't see what he looked like I would've thought he was Vietnamese, I was like wow, he wasn't even born into a Vietnamese family, I'm assuming that, but he was able to speak Vietnamese better than me, better than a Vietnamese person. Ever since then I was like man, I gotta step my game up.

**Sierra-** I feel like that all the time, I'm Mexican and I don't really speak Spanish very well, so I feel like oh my goodness this white guy speaks better Spanish than me, so I completely get it.... But yeah, I think were wrapping up the questions I have for you, I think I have one last one.

**Daniel-** Sure

**Sierra-** If down the road you have kids, would you raise them with the Vietnamese culture? Would you teach them Vietnamese, or no?

**Daniel-** I would definitely be open to teaching them Vietnamese, but it's not something that I would want to force down their throat, I feel like that's not a very good parenting style, to really force something that they don't like. I feel like people usually, or typically excel a lot better in things they are interested in. So if that's something that they're interested in then I'll definitely be more than happy to help with that or get them Vietnamese tutors, but if they're not interested, I will continuously try to encourage them- nudge them- not force it down their throat. I think that having another language is definitely a huge advantage to them and I feel like it's important to keep some of your roots, and just not to let it go and I'm trying to find a reason to why that is.... I don't think it's something that we need to get rid of its something that is definitely there and part of my family history and I feel like somehow that is my.... Noble duty to pass that along to the next generation, I mean eventually- I know there's just so much diversity out there that depending on where you're raised and or if you're adopted, that's just something you can't help but to not understand your culture. I'm not saying that's something you should glue yourself to, that identity, but I guess maybe raising awareness that you are Vietnamese or that you are Mexican or you are... whatever race you are, you know, it's just something to be noted, but I'm not saying that in a sense where you should be ashamed of yourself if you're not part of that culture or- because I don't want to attach that to in an negative connotation because I just say that there is nothing to be ashamed of and if that's who you are then that's who you are. Unless you want to identify yourself otherwise, then, you know, that's up to you. Another thing is individuality is the key as well. That's something that I also believe in, hopefully it doesn't contradict each other, but....

**Sierra-** It's a complex thing, it's not one thing or another.

**Daniel-** Yeah

**Sierra-** There's a lot of facets

**Daniel-** Right

**Sierra-** Actually, your comment led me to another question if thats ok, do you need to get going?

**Daniel-** No

**Sierra-** Ok, cool. Did you ever feel, growing up, as if your parents forced the culture upon you, or was it usually a positive thing?

**Daniel-** Growing up I don't think my parents forced the culture on me. I just couldn't help it that that's what I've been surrounded by, they never did it intentionally, it was just indirect from the food, the language, the karaoke, all these family get togethers, them not speaking English as much, I mean, I guess that was kinda like the catalyst to me to speaking more Vietnamese. So, it wasn't really forced directly, I feel like it was more indirectly-

**Sierra-** Like exposure?

**Daniel-** Yeah, an exposure, so I was kinda just born into that culture, you know, at home, it feels like Vietnam at home. I feel like that's it.

**Sierra-** Great, I think I got everything I needed.

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