

Mary Hong
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
February 18, 2020
Transcribed by Daniela C. Armas '20

ARMAS: Hi, this is Daniela Carolina Armas ['20], performing an oral history interview with the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. It is currently Tuesday, February 18th in the year 2020 and it is currently 8:53 a.m. I am located in Baker Library on the campus of Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire and today I am joined by Mary Hong. Mary, how are you today?

HONG: I'm doing good.

ARMAS: Ok, good. Before we start, I just wanted to thank you so much for taking the time to be here and for contributing your time and your story to our archive. I think it's going to be really great. So, I'm just going to go ahead and jump into the questions if that's okay. Alright?

HONG: Right.

ARMAS: Sweet. So, first of all, can you tell me where and when you were born?

HONG: I born in Gò Vấp[, Ho Chi Minh City, Socialist Republic of Vietnam] district in Vietnam in 1988.

ARMAS: Awesome, and what were the month and day of your birthday as well?

HONG: My birthday September 12, 1988.

ARMAS: Okay, fantastic. Can you me a little bit about that area and what it was like when you were growing up from your memories?

HONG: My hometown, at that time, very quiet. Not too much people. Very...slow. But after year by year, right now, because a lot of people came from the south and because, that is very cheap, very slow rent, very cheap. That easy for if that's why many people come to my hometown.

ARMAS: Okay.

HONG: Yeah. And right now, so busy. Very busy. In the center, my hometown, easy live, you know, because rent cheap, everything more cheaper. And right now have, everything they have right now. But that easy, for to live in there.

ARMAS: Awesome, and that's in Gò Vấp?

HONG: Yeah, Gò Vấp.

ARMAS: Okay and is that where you were raised and you spent the majority of your childhood? Is that where you grew up as well?

HONG: Yes.

ARMAS: That's where you grew up. And can you tell me a little bit about your family life growing up? Where and when were your parents born, for instance?

HONG: My parents born – my father, he born in Vũng Tàu[,Bà Rịa–Vũng Tàu Province, Socialist Republic of Vietnam]. Vũng Tàu that, from my hometown, maybe two hour and a half. That nearby the beach.

ARMAS: Okay.

HONG: Yeah. And my mom, she born there too. My mom born in my hometown. She grow up too, in same place.

ARMAS: Would you mind spelling the province where your parents were from for me?

HONG: Yes.

ARMAS: Thank you so much [pause]. Awesome. So, just for the record, I'm going to read that out. That's Vũng Tàu City V-U-N-G T-A-U, City C-I-T-Y. And Gò Vấp is spelled G-O V-A-P. Thank you for that.

HONG: You're welcome.

ARMAS: What made your parents decide to move to Gò Vấp from Vũng Tàu?

HONG: My father, he met my mom in Gò Vấp and my mom live in hometown where she born and she grow up. That's why my father, he come with her.

ARMAS: Awesome. Do you know around what year they moved to Gò Vấp?

HONG: They move, I think around maybe 1984? '85?

ARMAS: [Cross-talk; 00:04:50] Okay. Nice. So, do you have any siblings?

HONG: I have one more sister and one more brother.

ARMAS: Okay. And you mentioned earlier to me that you're the middle child. Is that correct?

HONG: Yes.

ARMAS: So, who is the older sibling and who is the younger sibling?

HONG: My sister older and my brother younger.

ARMAS: Awesome, and what are their names?

HONG: My sister her name for the English name Amy. My younger brother he in Vietnam right now.

ARMAS: Okay.

HONG: His name [Chung? 00:05:29].

ARMAS: What was it like growing up and Gò Vấp? You mentioned it was quiet. Were there other kids that you guys would play with? How far away was your school? What did you like to do in your free time?

HONG: I live in near – [pause].

ARMAS: You can keep going.

HONG: Yeah. I live in the - My neighborhood a lot of kids, same my age. When I small we always played together and go to school together. School is maybe 10 - 15 minutes from my house to school.

ARMAS: Mm-hm.

HONG: Yeah. When I small, my father always dropped me off and picked me up. But until when I six year old and he passed away and after that I just go by bicycle. I took bicycle go to school.

ARMAS: Nice. What did your parents do for a living?

HONG: Before, my father he driver.

ARMAS: Mm-hm.

HONG: Yeah. He driver by [CITLO? 00:06:49]. You know, that's not for the - not motorbike but not bicycle. They have three wheels.

ARMAS: Okay.

HONG: Yeah, very popular right now for and easy for a lot of people. A lot of people from overseas come to Vietnam and have a [CITLO? 00:07:07] and walk around and travel around in the city.

ARMAS: Okay, cool. And would he work throughout the entirety of Saigon or would he mainly stay and Gò Vấp as well?

HONG: In the Saigon. Yeah, his customer a lot of people from overseas.

ARMAS: Awesome.

HONG: And my mom just when he left his. My mom just stay home and take care of kids and take care at home. But after that, when he passed away and my mom, she open small restaurant.

ARMAS: Mm-hm.

HONG: Yeah. And after school then I stay home and help her restaurant.

ARMAS: Awesome. What kind of food did she cook?

HONG: She cooked for the Vietnamese noodle food. Vietnamese noodle soup – pho.

ARMAS: Ah, delicious!

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: Excuse me. Can I ask, how did your father pass away?

HONG: For the driver - accident?

ARMAS: Oh, okay. I'm sorry to hear that.

HONG: Yeah, no. Thank you.

ARMAS: Did your mother cook a lot at home before she opened her restaurant?

HONG: Yeah, she very good cook. She work very hard. She opened the restaurant in the morning around 3:00 AM. And she in the morning she served for the breakfast for the pho noodle soup for a lot of people they [took their breakfast? 00:08:46] before they go to work. And after that she served for the lunch, white rice and many food. And at nighttime she cook for the [soup? shrimp? stew? 00:09:00]. The different kind of [soup? 00:09:00]. Yeah, we - she work all day in restaurant.

ARMAS: Would you guys be on your own in the evenings after school to take care of yourselves, or would you all go to the restaurant and help her?

HONG: Yeah, I wake up very early and I help her a little bit in the morning before I go school. And after I go – after around maybe noontime, I back from school and I stay in restaurant. I help her until at night we go back to home together.

ARMAS: I'm curious about your relationship with your extended family. You mentioned that- Excuse me. Your parents' siblings also grew up in Saigon. So, did you have aunts and uncles around? Were you close to cousins and did you grow up alongside them as well?

HONG: I grow up nearby for my mom's sister. Yes, she have two daughter and one son like my mom. It's very funny because my mom, when she had my sister, and after one year my aunt she have one sister. And my mom had me and my aunt have one daughter, and my mom have son and she have a son too. Yeah, we just one year. We are one year apart different.

And my father's side more people. My father's side have six brother and sister and they all live in Vũng Tàu. We just met them one time a year, waiting for the Vietnamese New Year. We back to for his hometown and met them and met for my cousin, but not too close like my mom's side.

ARMAS: Okay. Was your family religious at all growing up? [Pause] Religious. Did you go to church? Do you guys pray?

HONG: We go for the temple. Yeah.

ARMAS: Okay.

HONG: Maybe a couple of times a year. But after my dad passed away, we go more.

ARMAS: And that was a Buddhist temple?

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: Okay. And were both your parents Buddhist?

HONG: Yes.

ARMAS: Okay. And how often would he go after he passed away?

HONG: Maybe one time a month.

ARMAS: Okay.

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: Nice. So you grew up, then, with your – Excuse me. You grew up with your aunt and your cousins pretty close by. Did you grow up hearing about the Vietnam War at all? Did they talk about it? Did they have views on it? I know that you're definitely much younger, but I'm curious if you heard anything growing up.

HONG: We just heard about Vietnamese War in the school. They talk a little bit in the school, and outside of school and they don't talk too much. And because, you know, my mom's so busy for life and my dad passed away when me very small - my sister eight years old, and me six year old, my younger brother just four year old – she so busy for [inaudible 00:12:58]. That's why we don't talk too much for the Vietnamese War in outside of school.

ARMAS: What kind of school did you go to? Was it a public school? Was it a private school?

HONG: Public school.

ARMAS: It was a public school. Do you remember the name of it?

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: Yeah, if you could spell it, that would be great. And we can read that out on the recording. [Pause] Awesome. Thank you so much. So, we have Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai for elementary school, Phan Tây Hồ for middle school and Lý Tự Trọng for high school. I can read those out and spell those out later. So, were those all public schools?

HONG: Yes.

ARMAS: Awesome. How big were they, roughly?

HONG: In Vietnam they have for elementary school around first grade to fifth grade. And middle school is six to nine...six to eight? Six to nine. And high school ten to twelve and one class around maybe 40 student.

ARMAS: Okay, so it's small.

HONG: One class 40 student but one grade maybe for have three or four class.

ARMAS: Mm. Okay.

HONG: A lot of students. Not like U.S. Yeah, in my class many. A lot of busy.

ARMAS: Yeah. That is a big classroom. Were these schools mostly located and Gò Vấp as well?

HONG: Yes.

ARMAS: Okay. What was your favorite subject in school? What did you like to learn about?

HONG: I like math. Very fun. They have for the exercise time and it a lot of fun when you small.

ARMAS: Did you enjoy learning mathematics through high school, for the whole time?

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: Awesome. When you were younger were you interested in doing math for a career, in some capacity? Or were you not sure what you wanted to do? What did you want to be when you grew up?

HONG: When I more small, I think before my father passed away, because I like to do I work, I service for the air flights. I like to travel many country, but after my father passed away and very hard. That's why I just got interested with math because I'm fast. I'm called very fast and that's easy for me.

ARMAS: Nice. What kind of things would they teach you about the War in school? How would they describe it to you? What were some of the things you remember learning?

HONG: They have for the book. They just teach me everything in the book and just explain a little bit and after that you have to remember everything in the book. Just very simple, not too anything. It's small.

ARMAS: So was it a lot of exams based on the history? Or was there an opportunity for discussion and for debate? Or were things talked about less and you just had to memorize?

HONG: They will give you for the book and you have to learn everything in there. And after that I have a test and ask you.

ARMAS: Okay. So, it seems like it was relatively straight forward then. What was your favorite part of school? When do you think you had the most fun? And is there a story that sticks out to you from being in school that [cross-talk; 00:17:34] makes you laugh?

HONG: Yeah...I think in elementary school is more fun for me because from to middle school and high school not fun like when you small. Have to pay a lot of money for school and my mom working hard. That why did try to learn through school and go a good thing. And don't play too much when in the middle school and high school.

ARMAS: Can you talk a little bit about how the pricing works in the Vietnamese public school system? I know we talked about this a little bit when we got coffee, but the idea that you still have to pay for public school and what that looks like.

HONG: Yeah. When you go public school or private school and you have to pay, in the public school and you will pay less. But still a lot for the poor people like us. You have to pay for the fee when they start for a year.

ARMAS: Sorry.

HONG: Bless you. And you just pay for maybe just two times a year when they start and after that just small fee. And you have to buy for the uniform and for the book for the everything you spend in the school. But I think before when I go to school in around maybe 200,000 or 300,000 - that Vietnamese dong. In U.S. maybe twenty bucks?

ARMAS: And did those fees increase as you got older?

HONG: Yeah -

ARMAS: Mm-kay.

HONG: They will increase and they have a lot of extra fee like uniform, and book, and when they have a field trip or something. Everything you have to pay.

ARMAS: What kind of field trips would you go on?

HONG: They one time a year they will let me go to for the park. They can play in the park.

ARMAS: Awesome. Excuse me. What kind of things would you do in your free time in middle and high school? As you got older, did you continue to work in the restaurant or? How did you spend your free time?

HONG: Yeah. In high school, and I after school and I go I help my mom. She working and after that I go to for the Japanese language center and learning more Japanese.

ARMAS: That's interesting. Have you been to Japan?

HONG: No, I never been in Japan. I just went to learn it for the second language because before, in Viet - when my I over there, they very popular and very easy get a job when you have for the second language. But in the English, many people know English and when you do in the center, that's more expensive. But in Japanese center, not too much people not popular and more cheaper. That's why I choose for the Japanese.

ARMAS: That's smart. That's definitely smart. It's sort of like my parents telling me to learn Portuguese instead of Spanish. So, I'm curious, since you were so close with your mom and your aunt and your cousins growing up, were your grandparents also a presence in your childhood as well?

HONG: My grandparents don't live with us and they live far and they pass away very early.

ARMAS: Was that on both sides?

HONG: Yeah. On my father's side, they passed away before my father get married. I don't see them when I small. My mom's side when I small.

ARMAS: Were they also from the South as well?

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: Okay.

HONG: From south. Yeah.

ARMAS: Were they born in Saigon?

HONG: They born in Saigon.

ARMAS: Okay. Do you have any idea of what they did for a living?

HONG: My parents, my father's side, I don't know because they pass away so long, long time. And my mom's side, I heard about my grandfather. He just have for the people around and carry something. Help for the people when they need to have, and he help them and they pay the money for him and my grandmother she work like maintenance for the building. Just like that.

ARMAS: Okay. So, as a building manager?

HONG: Not manager just, they have a manager and she work lower.

ARMAS: Awesome. I was curious, since it seems like your mom's side, especially, was so close. What year did you graduate high school?

HONG: I graduate high school?

ARMAS: Mm-hm.

HONG: I don't know. 1996?

ARMAS: 1996?

HONG: No, so long time. I'm 33. Oh, wow. No, 2006? 2007?

ARMAS: Yeah, 2006 [cross-talk; 00:24:46] -

HONG: Yeah, 2006.

ARMAS: - would make sense probably because you were around eighteen.

HONG: Yeah. Yeah, 2006.

ARMAS: Awesome. Yeah, I think it was 2006. What do you remember about the general events happening in Vietnam at the time? Do you think when you were growing up that you were aware of what was happening in the news or what was happening in the city, or were you not tuned into the broader events taking place?

HONG: When I grow up, maybe everything. Not for everything too. Yeah, normal. They just celebrate at my age. They just celebrate for- Oh, what is it called? Because before the south and the north different. And on April 30, 1975? Yeah, 1975. And after that they together.

ARMAS: They unified?

HONG: Yeah. They together and that's why every year, on that day, April 30, they'd always celebrate. Yeah, that's a big one, celebrate. For that time they will have for the bike race. That bike race it will go from north to south.

ARMAS: Wow.

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: The whole way?

HONG: Yeah, from north to south for the bike race. When they arrive in Saigon, that's [unintelligible 00:26:52] on the April 30.

ARMAS: Interesting. That obviously seems like a big national event that would make an impact. I'm trying to think about other events that might've made an impression on you. I think it was around 2000 that the U.S. President Bill Clinton came to Vietnam. Do you remember seeing that? Do you remember that making an impression on you? By that time, were you already curious about moving to the United States, or was it just a random political event?

HONG: Because where I live a little bit far from Saigon, around maybe 45 minutes. And at that time just go to school and then go back home from work, I don't heard too much. But when I grow up, I heard about a lot of thing like that. And Bill Clinton, president, he came to Saigon and he sign for the - something they open?

ARMAS: Yeah.

HONG: That's why from that time Vietnamese a lot [hope? 00:28:25] for the Vietnamese people. Because more job. [Their lives? 00:28:30] more go up.

And I just saw one picture when Bill Clinton, president, came to [unintelligible 00:29:17]. Because I went to for the pho, the restaurant where he came, and they still took the picture and I saw that and they just heard about for him he help a lot of the people. He bring more job. He have more job for Vietnamese. And after for the Vietnamese opened it. That's why right now Vietnamese more go up.

ARMAS: So, you noticed a big difference? I believe that was 1994 when the U.S. lifted their embargo against Vietnam.

HONG: Yeah, I did. Before, I didn't know how to different, but right now I know because if all in Vietnam very poor and don't have anything. But right now, they so different.

ARMAS: Interesting.

HONG: And my mom and my husband, he taught me after Vietnamese open, the life be better.

ARMAS I have two questions. When did you first start thinking about life outside of Vietnam? Also, when did you meet your husband? I'm wondering if it was in high school. Did you go to university at all?

HONG: No. I didn't go to university.

ARMAS: Interesting.

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: So, was he in your class?

HONG: No, we just went to my friend party. At that time, after [unintelligible 00:30:34] high school and I go to work for a part-time. And my worker – they invited me to go to their party. And I met him in the coffee shop. And because that's so interested when I small, when I saw a lot of people came back from overseas and they have more money than for Vietnamese people. And they say in overseas, “when you work you can have money.” And the life be better because in Vietnam even you work, but you have to pay too much.

Even you save a lot of money. But when you save something, you have to pay for hospital, vacation, everything. And pay for the lights and pay for every – [unintelligible 00:31:55] and you don't have money. And I saw a lot of family have kids, even parents working hard, but the kids - still very hard for the kids when they go to school or when they be sick. That's why a lot of people come back from oversea and they say in oversea when you work and you will have a money and your life be better and it obviously be better. A lot of them, they talk a lot.

That's why I think, *if I have chance then I overseas for work and for live.* Until I met my husband. The first time I met my husband just around nine-nineteen or twenty year old. And I talked with him and I just with him around maybe year and half. After that we got a married.

ARMAS: So, you probably met him, then, around 2006-2007 and got married in 2008-2009?

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: Awesome. Can you tell me his name and where he's from?

HONG: He original, he from Nha Trang[, Khánh Hòa Province, Socialist Republic of Vietnam]. That nearby the beach and very far from my hometown around maybe eight hour. And his name's Stephen [Hong]. Yeah, he moved to U.S. maybe 1992, around that, and he have an English name.

ARMAS: Okay. He moved to the U.S. around 1992, you said?

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: He was already living there when he met you?

HONG: Yeah, he all live in U.S.

ARMAS: Okay.

HONG: Yeah, he just back to Vietnam when he met me. He just back to Vietnam visit for a family member. For auntie and cousin.

ARMAS: Excuse me. What motivated him to move to the U.S.? Was it a similar economic desire? Or was there something else bringing him there? And did he go with family or did he go alone?

HONG: He go with family. He go with his mom and his mom have a daughter. She have a father American when he go for military in Vietnam, Vietnamese War. That's why she go with her and my husband go with my mother-in-law and she moved to U.S. with one younger sister and two younger brother.

ARMAS: Okay. The relative with an American father and Vietnamese mother was that Stephen's cousin?

HONG: Stephen's sister.

ARMAS: Stephen's sister. Okay. Interesting. Does that make it any easier to immigrate to the United States?

HONG: I really don't know that before. But I just heard about when have, the people have a father or mother American. The people they work for military, they go for Vietnamese War, and they back to U.S. and still son and daughter in Vietnam. That's why they will, after that, they will come to U.S. by that.

ARMAS: Interesting. Yes, I think the interviewer who will be interviewing Stephen actually did a little bit of research on this and I believe it's known as the Amerasian [Homecoming] Act. I think that was a law put in place to facilitate immigration for people of mixed American and Asian ancestry. I think there was a little bit of a pathway that could have facilitated his arrival. I'd be interested to hear about your immigration process and what that looked like and if it was difficult or not.

HONG: I think immigration at the difficult, but not difficult, because I got a married with Stephen and he American and he do all the paperwork and I can come to U.S. No processing time around a year, a year and a half. But I, that's not difficult because you got married and I living with my husband and I come to U.S. to live with my husband, [unintelligible 00:37:33]. Right. I think just the time took long.

ARMAS: When you got married, in maybe 2008 or 2009 – do you remember which year that was?

HONG: Yeah, 2009.

ARMAS: 2009.

HONG: Yeah, and 2009.

ARMAS: Awesome. Did you first get married in Vietnam and then transfer that to the United States? Or were you initially married in the U.S.?

HONG: Oh, I got married in Vietnam and then born both my kids in Vietnam.

ARMAS: When you guys decided to move to the United States as a couple, then, was that year and a half long period spent waiting in Vietnam or in the United States?

HONG: Because the processing time maybe year and half, but because I have a two kids and my husband's save when I move here with the two kids. And very hard because my kids very small and send them both to daycare so expensive. Because we working the full time, we have to send kids go to daycare, so expensive. That's why I live with my kid, my older one, until she five year old, four and half, five year old and I move to U.S. because at that time she can go to public kindergarten.

And I just bring one kid, the older one, with me come to U.S. because my youngest at that time, just one year old. And I said to my mom, she help me take care for my younger one until she five year old. And when I move up here and I back there maybe year, year and half, I back there and visit for my young one.

ARMAS: When you were waiting for that year or a year and a half, was that for full citizenship, or for the ability to be an American resident, or for a visa of some sort? What were you waiting on?

HONG: We wait because we have to wait for the interview. Maybe he have to send for all the paperwork for they have to verify where he work and he have enough income for both [core side? 00:40:43] for me when I come to U.S. and he can take care for me and my daughter or no. All that paperwork until for appointment interview. And after they interview, and they think me and my husband that are real married they have to verify everything. If you true, and you can pass and wait for the visa.

ARMAS: Interesting. Can you tell me the names of both of your daughters and when they were born?

HONG: My older one her name Mai M-A-I, and she still keep for her name right now because English have a Mai too. And my younger one, her name,

Ngoc N-G-O-C, but very hard for Americans spell for Ngoc. That's why we change for her name right now, Jessica.

ARMAS: Yeah, that might be easier for people.

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: When was Mai born?

HONG: Mai born 2009 in Vietnam -

ARMAS: Okay.

HONG: - and my younger one 2012.

ARMAS: Okay. She was very, very young when you moved over. Was that hard to leave her behind with your mom?

HONG: Because my mom, she had me take care for her because we [left? 00:42:28] and we move to U.S. and give her for my mom. That's why when she born, she just stay with me at the daytime and in the nighttime we stay with my mom and she very close with my mom. That's why when I move, it very hard time and I miss her, but easy for her Ngoc because she just young.

ARMAS: Nice. What was the situation like for you when you landed in the U.S. and went to live with Stephen? Where did you guys move in the United States and what was the set-up like?

HONG: When I moved to U.S., I moved to Boston [MA] first because I live with my mother-in-law in Boston, in Dorchester. And after just few month, couple month, and I moved to Lebanon [NH]. And because Stephen working here and I move up here and my daughter start to school. You know, everybody move for the new place. And very hard because I don't know any English, and I don't know for the culture, and I don't know. I cannot drive and just stay home.

In the first couple months when I came to U.S. and I so stressful because I kept talking with all the people and just stay home and cleaning and cooking and Stephen go to work for all day and he just back home at nighttime. I think a lot of people same like me because new, you know? And after three or four month and my daughter go to school for the preschool and I start to work and then better.

ARMAS: So, what was Stephen doing in Dorchester? And then, afterwards, when you guys moved, what job was he doing in Lebanon?

HONG: Yeah, he start to work in Lebanon before I move to U.S. - in nail salon. Before I moved to U.S. in Dorchester, we just live with my mother-in-law in the weekend. That's why when I move, and just live with my mother-in-law a little bit - not full-time. Just for the [back up? 00:45:28] in the weekend when I'm back in visit my mother-in-law. And in the weekday and we live in Lebanon.

ARMAS: Okay. And so, what job was Stephen doing in Lebanon?

HONG: He do nails.

ARMAS: Always [cross-talk; 00:45:40]?

HONG: Yeah. He work for Nefertiti Nail maybe start for 2010, [20]11? Yeah. He start to work in Lebanon in nail salon.

ARMAS: Excuse me. [Pause] I'm a little under the weather.

HONG: Yes. Too cold.

ARMAS: Yes. He pretty much started working for Nefertiti immediately. How did he learn how to do nails? What was his job like in Vietnam when you guys met at that party?

HONG: When I met and he doing for the nail already.

ARMAS: Oh, okay.

HONG: Yeah, because he work for the nail maybe 25 year. Yeah, I think he moved to U.S. just after a few years he moved to U.S. and he start for the nail, until right now. He worked for a long, long time.

ARMAS: That is a really long time. That's a whole career! At that point, who owned and ran Nefertiti? Do you know who it was?

HONG: I don't know. Because in the Nefertiti, they have a couple owner already. Until my mother-in-law, she took over, have a two owner already.

ARMAS: Do you know what year that was?

HONG: I think 2010 and 2011.

ARMAS: Okay.

HONG: [And another year? 00:47:40] 2010 and [start? 00:47:41] 2011.

ARMAS: Was she trained in doing nails as well? Or was she more of just a businesswoman in general?

HONG: Because my family-in-law they everybody do nail. Yeah. My brother-in-law, and my sister-in law, and my aunt, my nephew, my niece - everybody do nail. And Stephen before he just [research? 00:48:26] and he have a [beep? 00:48:29] have a friend introduced for Stephen here.

That's why, my mother-in-law, he thinking is good location, good place. That's why she took over the nail salon. And he, and for a lot of family member working. For Stephen, for my brother-in-law, and his wife, and my nephew, my niece. A family member working, have a place to work.

ARMAS: What is it like working in such close proximity with your family? Is it enjoyable? Do you guys maybe butt heads sometimes? What is it like being surrounded all the time?

HONG: Because we work together and after that we live together, but everybody have personality different. That's why when you working and sometimes you not happy, unhappy, but still family. And when we don't, when we have something different, sometimes something not feel comfortable and we will sit down and we will talk.

ARMAS: That's good.

HONG: Yeah. And until now we fine!

ARMAS: Is Stephen's family also Buddhist?

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: They are. Do you guys find that you go to temple in the U.S. very much or not so much?

HONG: Not too much. Just maybe one time or two time a year. When for Vietnamese New Year we go to Buddha temple.

ARMAS: Nice. How long before Stephen and you took over the salon from your mother-in-law?

HONG: We still working for her.

ARMAS: Okay.

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: Okay. Interesting. Do you guys plan to take it over, when she's done running it? Or do you think that will fall, maybe, to one of his siblings? Or you're not sure?

HONG: Because right now [unintelligible 00:50:50] me and Stephen and one my brother-in-law still and my sister. We don't know right now. We don't have a plan right now for that. Just working and because she still give us for the good salary and good bonus and good commission. That's why it's fine.

ARMAS: Absolutely. I'm also curious about if you guys are in touch with other Vietnamese families in the area. I know the Upper Valley is- there's not a lot of diversity up here, I feel like. But, I'm wondering if there are any community centers or organizations that allowed you to keep in contact with Vietnamese culture here outside of your family?

HONG: We just have one best friend. One Stephen best friend and his wife. We just go with one family around here and other family we don't know.

ARMAS: In the Upper Valley, particularly on Main Street, I think a very good amount of the business owners are also immigrants and also Asian immigrants. Are you in contact at all with other business owners on Main Street or do you guys keep to yourselves?

HONG: No, we just work and back home. And in the weekend we meet with my friend and have dinner together on every Saturday.

ARMAS: That's nice.

HONG: Yeah, and we just sit down and talk and just for fun. And after that, just go to work.

ARMAS: So what is Stephen's best friend's name?

HONG: Adam.

ARMAS: Adam? And is he here with his wife and kids as well?

HONG: Yeah, his wife just moved to U.S. after me, year and a half, or two year? Yeah, I think two year. And he and his wife the same way keep the son in Vietnam. And now she just bring for little boy for her son come to U.S. last month.

ARMAS: Oh, wow!

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: So very, very recent. How old is his son?

HONG: His son, my daughter seven and his son only five and a half - five and a half or six.

ARMAS: Okay. So he's sort of between your two daughters then?

HONG: He younger than my youngest one.

ARMAS: Okay, awesome. Now they have the ability to develop this friendship, which is exciting. Do you think they'll put him in the same school where you have your youngest?

HONG: Yeah. Maybe they will go in a same school with my youngest one.

ARMAS: How was the transition from Vietnam to America for your children?

HONG: First for the language. First, very hard for them for the language. In first two year, for my older one, in for two years she very hard and she quiet - more quiet because she can't speak English, cannot talk to the friend or teacher in the first two year. And right now, I see used to it.

But in my youngest one, she move here and I send her go to daycare for a six months. But after six months, she used to it right away. And she, very, very fast and now she used to it. And she know. Not too much different. Not too much hard for my youngest one.

ARMAS: Interesting. I think probably being immersed earlier definitely helps. They say that the young kids are like sponges when it comes to language. But you and your oldest didn't know any English before coming to the states.

How do you think you learned English the fastest way? Was it just a matter of being here or did you study?

HONG: When I live in Vietnam, I learned a little bit English, but I cannot speaking, just read it and write. But when I came to U.S. and I learning more on the online. On the online they teach me a little bit. And after I working in nail salon, I talk with the people. That's why my English be better.

ARMAS: Nice. That's awesome. What is your relationship with the customers? Do you enjoy engaging with the people who live in the area and what is that dynamic like generally?

HONG: Yeah, I so enjoy and I so like it. I love the people around here. Yeah, very enjoy, very love. That's why I so like go to work. Because when I work and

I talk with- Before the first two year when I can't talk and I so boring and it so, yeah. So boring.

But after I can leaning a little bit and I start to practice with my customer, and I learning more from my customer. Yeah, right now I can talk a little bit, not good, but can little bit and I can talk with the people and I learn a lot of things from them and customer around here very nice. I so love it here. I don't want to move!

ARMAS: Your English sounds very good to me, I will say. Would you consider yourself a pretty social person? Was that important to you growing up as well, to do something where you were able to talk to other people throughout the day?

HONG: Yeah. I think that if you can talk and I can understand what customer like me to do, a lot better when you cannot talk, cannot understand. And I when I understand, I don't understand a lot of things, a lot of culture, a lot of things that's going on right now.

ARMAS: Is that also how your family-in-law and your mother-in-law also learned English? Did they just jump in and start working?

HONG: Yeah, my family-in-law a lot better than me because they move here more long time. And before, when I just moved to U.S. and I cannot understand but some, that's why I sometimes they talk and I cannot understand, I so sad. So sad, but after that we been learning and now we can talk together and we understand. That's easy for me. Easy for me, for I live with them.

ARMAS: Nice. How often do you guys go back to Vietnam? Do you visit?

HONG: Maybe, a year and a half. Before when my older one small she don't need to go to school and we go more often and we stay more longer. Right now my daughter go to school and I don't want they miss the school. That's why I go very not, just year and a half or two year, or when we go we go very quick trip around maybe 10 day or two weeks.

ARMAS: And when you go do you stay with your brother?

HONG: I stay with my brother.

ARMAS: Why do you think your brother decided to stay in Vietnam? And does he have any curiosity about coming to United States, if you're here, and I believe you mentioned your sister was also here? But correct me if I'm wrong.

HONG: My brother she got a married and he divorced right now. And right now, he cannot, he like to come here live with us but he cannot, because he have to wait for my mom. She do the paperwork when he move to U.S. Because mother-son maybe take very long time for processing time. If married, the processing time maybe year and a half, but mother-son maybe take five year or six year.

ARMAS: Wow.

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: So, are they both in that process right now? Have they already started?

HONG: Not yet.

ARMAS: Or are they just waiting there?

HONG: Before he got a married and now he divorced. And we just thinking right now for him move to U.S., live with us, be better for him live alone there. That's why maybe my mom will start maybe end of the year, something? Wait for five, six year more.

ARMAS: That makes sense. Then, does Stephen's family also visit every one and a half, two years?

HONG: My family-in-law they just my mother-in-law, she will go there year and a half or two years. And other people have got very busy for work and for kids they don't go to Vietnam often. Just go when they can maybe three, two or three year.

ARMAS: I'm curious about your mother-in-law. Can you tell me her name?

HONG: Her name [Ang? 01:02:53].

ARMAS: Ang?

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: So, I'm curious if she ever talks about her memories of the war? And if she has any political opinions about it that you heard during your relationship with Stephen?

HONG: Because really, in Vietnam, the people very busy for the life. She working because she and my father-in-law not live together and she working and she take care of for kids, for five kids. Five more for her own and two girl for my father-in-law. That's why she have to working and take care for

seven kids. So busy for life. Don't have time for talk about for War something.

ARMAS: Yeah. That makes sense. Seven kids? That would definitely keep you busy!

HONG: Yeah, but in U.S. have a lot of people have when you have a lot of kids, and a lot of people will help you. But in Vietnam, you have to do everything by yourself with a seven kids [unintelligible 01:03:59] go to school, then [unintelligible 01:04:02] and meal and everything. Very hard.

ARMAS: It's interesting that you say that the United States will provide a lot of help for people. Is that something that struck you when you came here? Did you feel like there are a lot more resources here? Not just in terms of finding work, but in terms of public programs and things like that.

HONG: I just heard from my husband in U.S. when for the poor people or the people have a kids but cannot, because when you, for a single mom, [unintelligible 01:04:41] when they have a kids and they cannot go to work for the full-time, they cannot find for the good job they cannot get for a good salary, not enough. And the [booklets? 01:05:00] will have, the woman will help them at least for the food something [Transcriber's note: referring to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, previously known as "food stamps"] and in Vietnam don't have that.

ARMAS: Yeah.

HONG: That's different.

ARMAS: Yeah, that's definitely different.

HONG: And I have a couple of people when they brought a baby and they cannot go to work something and they will send for her for the mail for the food for the kids. Just for the baby, but that's very nice. In Vietnam don't have that.

ARMAS: Yeah. That's certainly a difference. I'm also curious about, in a slightly different vein, thinking again about living and working in the Upper Valley. And thinking about how Dartmouth influences your client base.

What is your relationship to Dartmouth? Do you think it's influential in terms of who comes to your business? And how has that shaped the community you operate in?

HONG: For relationship with Dartmouth, I don't know for about that. But I just know a lot student, a lot of the Dartmouth worker come to my nail salon and that's a lot of helpful. Because in a small town, just only for a college, that

are bigger than many people. If don't have Dartmouth College, very hard for the businesses in Hanover.

ARMAS: Yeah, absolutely. And what was that like going from first Saigon to Boston, another big city, and then coming to Hanover? In terms of just moving through the space? I know it seems like you really like it here. But did you miss how busy it was in the city and was that a shock to you?

HONG: That's very different. That's so different with a city and Hanover. In Saigon, they busy and they not [unintelligible 01:07:43], they not [unintelligible 01:07:45] and because a lot of motorbike, they go with without the rules. So then rush with a traffic. And a lot of poor people and what they [unintelligible 01:07:57] now, but still a lot of poor people need help, especially in a hospital.

Very in hospital in Saigon it's a lot of people came from far city. They don't have too much money for pay for the hospital pay for a fee and the people yesterday they will stay in the hospital but their family don't have for the place to stay. They have to stay in hallway in hospital. They sleep in the hallway.

ARMAS: Wow.

HONG: Very hard. Very sad when they go to back to Vietnam and you go to hospital and saw that. Very sad.

ARMAS: Have you had experiences like that with family members?

HONG: Yeah, I saw my mom. She talked with them few times because she sometimes make the food and she bring to them. Sometimes she make the food and she bring over to for the people. [unintelligible 01:09:25] family. Have them for a food and in Vietnam so sad for that.

And I move to Boston. Boston so busy city. A lot of traffic, but the life of people living here more a lot of better than Vietnam. But I still like here because here quiet and I think they good place for kids grow up. In the city, especially in my where my mother-in-law live, in Dorchester, that's more busy. Kids more busy, and more a lot of in trouble not better, not good for kids grow up there. And here quiet, and people very nice, and teacher very nice, and kids so nice. That's why I like my daughter she have community with the nice people. She will receive a lot of good education.

ARMAS: I'm keeping an eye on the time as well. I know you have to be out of here by 10:30. But I also did want to talk a little bit about the fact that you said your family who's still in Vietnam, so presumably your brother, has moved

from Gò Vấp to Hóc Môn[,Ho Chi Minh City, Socialist Republic of Vietnam] and the differences between those two places.

HONG: Because when I live in Gò Vấp, I live in a little bit small house. But when grow up they more higher and the house will have the value will go higher a little bit. That's why my mom sell that house and moved to Hóc Môn. At that time Hóc Môn more quiet and everything cheaper. That's why my mom will buy for the house a little bit bigger, easy for my family, more people.

ARMAS: Absolutely. It sounds like there was a lot of development both in Gò Vấp and Hóc Môn, after maybe the 90s. Is that similar now? Which place would you say is busier? And what would be the atmosphere of both of them?

HONG: I think Gò Vấp more busy and more full everything they have. They have everything restaurant more and everything they have now but in Hóc Môn they easy but not too much. They still quiet and still cheap and don't have full. Don't have too much sometime like simple like mall. They don't have a mall, they just have small market.

ARMAS: Okay. When you guys go back to Vietnam - and from your memories of growing up there as well - did you mainly stay within the districts you lived? Or did you find yourself kind of venturing out to different parts of Saigon?

HONG: When I back to Vietnam, in Saigon, I live with my brother. I don't want to because I back to Vietnam very short time. I like to stay with my brother more. Just after that, when I back to Stephen hometown, we have to stay in hotel.

ARMAS: Okay. Okay, that makes sense. Are there other places you like to spend time in the city? Or are you only with your family? Are there things that the city that you like to see?

HONG: I just stay with my family and I think in Saigon they busy for work more. Don't have too much what I want to see. And I back to my Vietnam I just visit my family and my relax time, that's why I like to go somewhere quiet. I don't want too busy, that be noise. I just something quiet now and relaxing.

ARMAS: Absolutely, and when you go back are there monuments or reminders of the Vietnam War and that exist either in Gò Vấp or in Hóc Môn that stick out in your memory?

HONG: Yeah...Because, in Gò Vấp and Hóc Môn they don't have any for Vietnamese War. And not anything. That's why not too much people talk about Vietnamese War.

ARMAS: Okay. So there aren't as many public displays in those areas?

HONG: Yeah.

ARMAS: Okay. Interesting. I'm just going to refer to my notes one more time and see if there's anything else that I missed. So, just give me one second.

Awesome. I guess I have one final question for you. And that would just be looking forward. I'm curious about how you see yourself in the Upper Valley. It seems like you plan on staying here long-term. Do you hope that soon to have your mother and brother here?

HONG: My mother here now. My father pass away long time and just my mother here right now.

ARMAS: So has she finally moved or is she just here visiting?

HONG: She finally move. And she move here, but she's still back and forth. Because still my brother in there living alone, and she still back there a few months and she stay here few months.

ARMAS: Okay. Interesting. And what year did she move here, semi-permanently?

HONG: She move here on last December. Last December, 2019. Yeah, 2019.

ARMAS: Great. There's nothing else that really comes to mind that, I think, I would like to discuss with you. Do you have any final thoughts or are there any questions that you wish I would've asked you?

HONG: No.

ARMAS: No? Okay, great. Well thank you so much, Mary, again for taking the time. This was fantastic and I think will be of great use to scholars and listeners in the future.

So once again: we are here, Daniela Armas and Mary Hong for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project in Baker Library on the campus of Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. It is Tuesday, February 18th of 2020 and it is now 10:11 a.m. And with that, I think we can conclude the interview. Thank you so much.

HONG: You're welcome. Thank you.

