Hung Đức Phùng Narrator

Simon-Hòa Phan Interviewer

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Hưng Đức Phùng - **HP** Simon-Hòa Phan - **SHP**

SHP: My name is Simon-Hòa Phan. I am conducting the interview with Mr. Hung Đức Phùng. This is the 22nd of October, 2010. We are conducting the interview at Kennedy High School in Bloomington, Minnesota. Thank you Mr. Hung for joining us.

HP: You're welcome. My pleasure.

SHP: Can you spell your name, please?

HP: My full name, if I spell it in Vietnamese is going to be P-H-U-N-G. It's my last name. D-U-C is my middle, and H-U-N-G is my first. But when I came to the U.S. it got to be the other way around, H-U-N-G D-U-C P-H-U-N-G.

SHP: So it's reversed.

HP: It's reversed.

SHP: First name first, and last name last. Good. Thank you.

Let's talk about your childhood first. Where were you born? Your family. A little bit about your life in Vietnam.

HP: You know that life in Vietnam was very peaceful for me. I had a very wonderful childhood. You know that my name has been reversed, so everything seemed to be reversed when I first came here. Anyway, back then I was born in south central Vietnam. This was in the city called Quy Nhon. The reason each of us was born in a different city is because my father was enlisted as a ranger. So he traveled to many, many parts of the country when he was engaged in the battlefield. So each of us had our birth place, each of us had a different city, and I was born in Quy Nhon. I don't know much about the city because I hadn't been there long. I was beginning my elementary school in a city called Pleiku. That's another highland part of Vietnam where we had the most war happening. Due to the weather, due to the war I started school late there. I was six when I started kindergarten due to the situation at that time. My family frequently had to hide in, we had

to dig a tunnel beneath my house, I remember at that time. And every time we heard the gun shots, the attacks, we had to stop everything and go down to the tunnel, the secret place. I was only six, but my father and the people around me trained me how to detect whether it was an ally attack or the Việt Cộng coming over. So whenever I heard the gun shots I could detect whether I should go down into the safe place or I should go on with my daily living.

SHP: What's the difference?

HP: You could detect the gunshot. The gun shot was that tic. I mean certain sound. You could tell there was going to be an attack so you better go down. And with certain gun shots you'd say that it's normal, that it's the ally fighting the enemy. At that time, at the age of six you were able to detect whether you should stay and carry on with your daily living or go down to the safe place. At six I was growing up with that war mentality already.

Luckily when I turned eight my family moved to a city called Nha Trang, a little further south from where I was born. My father was discharged from the Ranger, and he worked in the city of Nha Trang. So we bought the house in Nha Trang. We lived there from 1970 when I was about eight years old.

It's a very beautiful city. It's totally different from Pleiku where I frequently had to hide in a safe place. Nha Trang now is a very popular tourist destination. It is very peaceful. We had some attacks during the war, but not that much because Nha Trang was more secure. Three sides were protected by mountains or jungles, so Nha Trang was a hard place for the enemy to come in, because when they came in the only way out was the sea. So it was easy to come in but really hard to get out. The communists knew that so they rarely, they just tried to destroy certain things at Nha Trang, like the airport, but they rarely they tried to attack the city.

Nha Trang was a beautiful place for me. I enjoyed my childhood very much because every day I would go down to the beach for swimming and then go home, played soccer, went to school. Fortunately at that time I was attending the biggest high school in Nha Trang called Võ Tánh. It was all free. Luckily I was just a year there before the war ended in 1975. And then everything reversed. Everything was hard.

I was born in a family of five other brothers. We have six boys and one older sister. We had another sister but she died when she was really young. I have a very incredible mom, and the reason why I am here is, I think maybe later I will talk about her more. But my mom is a very incredible woman. She was raising six boys and a girl without much help from my father because my father frequently was out of the picture at that time. He was engaging in the battlefield.

SHP: Was it Army Ranger?

HP: Army Ranger, yes.

SHP: So in 1975 what grade were you in?

HP: I was in sixth grade.

SHP: So what happened in 1975?

HP: When the war ended I had to go to their local school, a much smaller school. Võ Tánh used to be grades 6 through 12, so it was a big school, the biggest school in Nha Trang. In 1975 I had to go back to the local school, just an elementary school converted into a secondary school. It was not equipped like it used to be at Võ Tánh. I attended school in the morning and in the afternoon I had to go to do some what we called "honored manual labor". You had to do a lot of labor so you could be given good credit. Good things for the students to do in the afternoon. Mostly I did not learn much, except doing a lot of political, learned about history, which I learned later was not totally true. So we'd been brainwashed. I had been brainwashed for many years. They tried to pass it on to the students.

SHP: Can you name -- say one thing that they taught you that's not true?

HP: They always tried to bring out very fictional stories like a person who uses his body to cover a big canon shot. That's impossible. At that time I'd already knew that it was a lie -- it's not true. They just tried to brainwash you so you would be hyped to serve the communists.

SHP: Heroic stories that promote heroic deeds for the government.

HP: Umhum. That's well put, yeah.

SHP: You mentioned manual labor. What kind of manual labor?

HP: Well. In order to elaborate on that point, after 1975 they forced my family to go to what they called "kinh tế mới", new economic zone. It's not a zone; it's just a jungle. They forced my family to register so they can take our house. But thank God my mom was so tough. She would try to put it off, put it off and then found a way so we were able to escape from it.

Two of my older brothers had turned eighteen already. Even at sixteen, once a year, you have to go to do something for the country, kind of like manual labor. I remember at that time my brother was able to go to the market to ship things or be a merchandiser so he would be able to earn money for my family. So he was on the list for doing manual labor in the remote area where the minority people lived, about a day traveling by car. At that time my mom suggested to me that I go in place of my brother because he was the one

who brought food to our family. If he went there we would go hungry. I took his place. At that time I remember I was only 14 or 15 years old and I had to go with others at least 18 or older. So I was doing the same work that older people did. Mostly we had to harvest corn, harvest whatever the government building the dam. It was hard manual labor. They said that this was an honor for the citizen to do manual labor, "Lao động là vinh quang."

SHP: What happened to your father?

HP: Not much happened because he was discharged in 1970. He was no longer a soldier five years before the war ended. Luckily he didn't have to go to the concentration camp. But he had to do work for our family. He had to go to different area where he could do some farming so he could bring some additional things for our, so he could feed the family, but it was not that much.

SHP: So from 1975 to when you left Vietnam?

HP: I left Vietnam in June 1981. I tried to escape Vietnam the first time when I turned eighteen. At that time Vietnam was engaged in the war against Cambodia. If you go to Cambodia to fight you would get killed by the Khmer Rouge or you would step on the mine. Either way you would get killed. Ten people that I knew went to Cambodia but only a few got back safely. So my mom decided you're going to get killed anyway, but if you escaped from Vietnam you got a chance. The chance was pretty slim, 9 to 1 [chuckle]; nine times you're going to die in the open sea and maybe one chance you would live. But you are going to live freely. You're going to get much better life. That's how she looked at it.

And after many attempts to escape from Vietnam, finally I think after 18, 19, 20 times. I tried to escape from Vietnam so many times. The last time I eventually saw the boat. The previous times they just said that the plan was either canceled or postponed or some people got captured. Never saw the boat. Because I lived in the city, and even though some parts of the city were fishing village, I was not familiar with it because I did not get exposed much to the fishing life. So I did not know what kind of boat, I mean is it a big boat? I was not able to identify which boat was able to go a further distance or which boat was used in local areas. Finally I saw the boat, and that was the boat that we used to escape from Vietnam.

SHP: How many people on that boat?

HP: It was about twelve people. Seven males and five ladies. I was one of the youngest people on that boat.

SHP: Were you alone from your family?

HP: Luckily my older brother was with me. Two of us.

SHP: Tell us about the journey. You left Vietnam and where did you go?

HP: First of all I did not know where we were going when we stepped on that boat. It was a tiny boat. I think it was about seven meters. It was not that big. It was just a tiny boat with twelve people on it. Initially we came up with a plan because the government always had eyes on you, and the local people always helped to try to see who was trying to escape from Vietnam or who was trying to overthrow the government. So they always had spies, they always had people around to watch every move you make. At that time my mom had a plan to connect with a person. We had to go through many people to go to the real source because they would try to secretly plan. The boat was called F5, a small boat. When you stepped into the boat water was in the boat already. I really got paranoid and said, "Is this the boat that we're going to use?" And they always said, "No, no. This is the boat that's called a taxi boat". Taxi boats take you to a bigger boat to escape from Vietnam." So I believed them. At first there were so many pick up destinations. We were the first ones on the boat, about four of us. They had two or three destinations to pick up people, so we ended up with twelve people. They tried to hide the diesel and water under the sea, so there were two pick up destinations and several places that we had to go to in order to get the diesel and to get the water under the sea.

SHP: It was under the water?

HP: Yeah, because we had to hide under the sea.

SHP: So you tied a string?

HP: I don't know how they did it, but they managed to get the supplies under the sea to keep it safe, because if you keep everything on the boat people will figure out you're going to go on a trip. Luckily I was, I mentioned, one of the youngest so I didn't have to do that. However I had to keep the boat balanced whenever they told me to move this side or that side because you know it was a tiny boat. My brother, he's two years older than me, had to dive down in the middle of the sea. I guess I don't know how many feet but he told me that it was quite deep. So he pulled the water and the diesel up so we could have enough for the journey.

Two days after we got everybody on board and the supplies onto the boat we left. First it was not that bad because we had the engine and it went very smooth. I felt at that time it was just like a vacation for two days. At the end of the two days I remember that I had to ask the captain, "Where is the bigger boat?" In my mind I was thinking maybe the bigger boat was somewhere in the open sea, that they would come in the bigger boat so we can get a transfer. So I had a conversation with the captain, and he told me, "Are you crazy?

This is the one that we're going to use to escape from Vietnam". And I was shocked, "Oh my god, how can you use this tiny boat for escaping from Vietnam?" He said, "That's the way it is. If you don't like it you can jump down and swim back". Two days? Are you kidding me? I said, "Well, we got eleven other people in the boat too. Me and my brother, now we have to go with the flow". From that time on we were on guard ourselves because we wanted to keep fit when the boat sinks, or if something happens we would have to find a way to survive. Me and my brother talked and came up with a plan but just kept it between two of us. And the boat kept traveling.

The first two days we had enough supply. We got conge and water. They cooked rice conge. Because the sea was calm the first two days they were able to cook for us. But the third day when we rode on to the international border there was a lot of ships. I remember on the third morning this huge merchant ship went by, and we tried to signal so they could help us but they just went by. So we just kept going. The captain, I don't know for whatever reason, he got seasick or something. He was just lying down. He was no longer a captain. We had a mechanic, the guy that was supposed to be fixing our engine, he also was passing out too. Two of the important persons were out. We still had a person who steered the boat, and that person was a local. He had no experience traveling across the ocean. So it was so scary. We had twelve people on board, but just five were awake. Awake, that means five of us got seasick but it was manageable. Seven people just passed out. They just lied down starting on the third day. On the second or third day they passed out. My brother and I tried to pass around water to keep them alive. The third day we were engaging a very, very stormy, I think at that time in June it was the monsoon season. So it was hard for the tiny boat to cut through the waves. On the second or third day we started throwing all the supplies out to the sea to make the boat lighter. My job at that time, I was assigned to bail the water out. We had a block of two hours each. Each of us took turn to do two hours of bailing out the water. Unfortunately nobody took turn after us because they were so seasick. The five of us were able to manage with the situation. My brother and I had to take turn to bail the water. The water just constantly, constantly got into the boat.

At one point, I think on the third day, in the afternoon we turned off the engine because the current was so strong. When we had the engine on it was hard to steer with the current, with the waves, so we stopped the engine. We went through the turbulence. After that we tried to turn the engine on, and it didn't start. We tried and tried so many things. Finally it started, and one of the persons, he was seasick but got up and fixed the engine. The F5 engine needed a crank. When you started the engine you had to crank it. He put the crank in the place where the water came in, where we had to bail the water out. He put the crank there. Accidentally some guy taking his turn bailing the water, bailed the crank off into the sea. We were no longer able to start the engine. Oh my god! What can we do? They were able to make one to crank the engine up. But the engine, somehow some guy put water instead of diesel into the engine. The engine broke down on the third day. The third day was very memorable because the engine broke. From that point on we tried to make sails. Initially we made two, one in the middle and one on the top. The monsoon season was stormy at that time. So it kept the boat flowing. So we survived without the engine. Actually the tiny boat could not keep up with the two sails so we had

to take one down, the one on top, and still kept the one in the middle.

We kept on sailing from day three to day ten. With those days, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, and ten we lived in constant fear. We didn't know where to go because we were no longer able to steer to where we wanted to go even though we had the navigator, I don't know what. The compass. Yeah, we had a compass but we were no longer able to go where we wanted to go. So we just went in the direction of the wind.

I remember we were so hungry. We had some rice left over but the water kept coming in and the rice got rotten. So at that time what could we do? Luckily on day five or six we got a huge rain so we got the water and mixed it with the rotten rice and took off the first water. The second water we just mixed in, something that we could drink from. We had to survive.

So many boats passed by. I don't know if they saw us or not. None of them stopped. I remember there was a helicopter at the eighth day or so. They were circling around our boat. We hoped that they come back to rescue us, but they never did. Whenever we saw a boat we used every. We burned clothes, made a white flag to show that we needed desperate help, but none of them. It was hard. Those nights were very hard. I never dared to look back because it was so dark. Even the person who steered the boat cried. He cried because he was so scared. Twelve of us on board, but only five of us were awake at that time, and we tried to keep the boat from sinking. So it was hard.

I remember one night lying down I suddenly saw one area full of light. "Oh my god!", I shouted in joy, "There's a city, there's a city nearby!" Everybody was so hopeful. From that night it took us almost a day to get to where the light was. Later on I learned that that light was one of the cities of the Philippines.

We never imagined that with that tiny boat with twelve people on it, with the distance we had traveled, I didn't think we had gotten to the Philippines. I thought we went back to Vietnam or something. But luckily on the tenth day, about ten or eleven in the morning, the boat finally sat still because it touched land. You could see the water changing. At first it was blue and it got dark, and even got green. I don't know if you have seen green sea. We saw it. So when we saw blue water again we knew we had been saved. The boat stopped so each of us jumped down and tried to pull the boat in. The other people on the boat tried to paddle so the boat could move because we had no engine. Luckily the Filipino fishermen saw us and took us in. They could not imagine. They thought that we escaped from another island in the Philippines. The Philippines have seven thousand islands, and we might have been from one of them. They did not know that we were from Vietnam. Later on I learned that we traveled about a thousand miles.

SHP: With just the sails.

HP: Just the sails. It was just incredible. I am missing a lot of details. That journey, I think it was a miracle, really a miracle. Can you imagine traveling a thousand miles with

a tiny boat? We live in Minnesota. We have ten thousand lakes. I don't dare to take one of my boats to go on a lake here.

SHP: You are a Catholic?

HP: Yes I am.

SHP: Did you pray? Did you trust in god? Did you have hope during that time?

HP: Initially you had hope. We are human. We lose faith. I prayed. We prayed. At that time you were young. You didn't have much experience with life, but you were engaged in a very dangerous situation. I did pray, but I'd tried at that time, me and my brother had a plan that if the boat sank we would grab one of the plastic containers, like a water container, and we could float. So we tried everything to live, to survive. To be honest with you, I did pray but I should have prayed more. I did not have time for it because I was so busy bailing water. I was busy keeping things around had to be alert all the time. You never knew. The boat was going to sink at any moment. So at that time my mind was occupied with all things.

[Switching to Vietnamese to better express the above thoughts on faith] Là một tín hữu Công Giáo mình cảm thấy là mình phải nên tin vào Thiên Chúa. Nhưng mà lúc đó tâm tư mình bận rộn với nhiều tư tưởng để sống, sinh tồn. Nên mình không có tập trung được, lúc nào cũng đang đối đầu với cái chết và cái sống.

Translation: As a Catholic I felt that I was supposed to believe in God. But at that time my mind was preoccupied with different ways to survive. So I was not able to focus while faced with issues of death and life.

At that time my mind was debating what plans I should take. I believed in the survival skills. I was trying to live so all of my mind was filled with all plans: what happens if this boat sinks? What are we going to do? I knew that I was selfish at that time, but in order for us to live we had to do that. No way was I able to help other people because in the open sea if we sink, what could I do? I knew that was hard. I knew at that time my family was first. That was my mom's initial thinking; if we lived we had to support our family. So I kept in my mind that I had to be alive to help myself and help my family.

SHP: Let's stop the story for a moment there. Let's go back to your mother. You want to talk about your mother? Tell us about your mother. She was incredible, you said. Say more.

HP: Yeh. It's hard to begin [sobs]. My mom is an incredible woman [sobs]. I intend to write a memoir for her, but I haven't been able to do that yet.

She raised seven of us without help from my father. She told me that when she married my father, he went to the battle every day. Sometimes for months he left her with the

kids, to raise us without our father. So she was being both mom and dad throughout that time, before the war ended. She tried to find ways so she could raise us. The reason that we lived in Nha Trang was because of her. At that time soldiers could not do anything, and she would do anything to feed the family. She was able to do small things, small businesses, so she was able to raise us before the war ended. After the war ended our life was even more miserable. She was trying to keep up with the living costs as well as help us to escape from Vietnam. I don't know how she did it, but she did it.

I am here because of her. That's why when I came here I dedicated my life to her. So whenever I got money I sent it back to her so she could send it to my younger brother. You know that my younger brother also escaped from Vietnam by boat? She takes things to herself. She is incredible woman. Because of her we did not lose our house in the city. We didn't go to the new economic zone because of her. I don't know how in just a few minutes to describe how incredible Vietnamese mothers are, especially her. She's incredible. I wish I had time to write something to dedicate to my mom.

SHP: Is she still alive?

HP: Yes, she is. She is the reason that after I came here in 1982 I dedicated myself to work hard, to go to school, and do whatever I can to support my family. That's the reason I am the person I am today, it's because of that. I wrote the final paper and sponsored her to come to the U.S. in 1994. She came with my two younger brothers. I know that she went through a lot of hardships. I would like to do something for her so she can enjoy life, but it is her personality to keep doing things all the time. Still worries about me. That's how the Vietnamese mothers are, trying to worried, concerned for every single kid even though we are grown up already. That's how incredible she is. She dedicated her life for the better of us living here in America. It is a blessing for me to be here. First she gave birth to me. Second she was able to raise us and give us the opportunity to live a life of freedom here in America.

I am sorry, it's so emotional. I am not that emotional normally, but when it comes to her I cannot control it.

SHP: It sounds like she's selfless and sacrificed herself a lot for her children and family.

HP: Yes.

SHP: So we just talked about your mother, how she influenced your life. And who you are now is because of her. Let's talk about your life here. What kind of things you are doing because of your journey, because of your mother, because of your faith, your belief in humanity. Tell us about what you're doing.

HP: In the camp I was a volunteer with the mental health organization called Children Family Services International. I was a para-professional at that time helping with the

mental health issues with refugees who struggled with mental challenges. I was able to help them communicate. I was more like an interpreter for the social workers at that time.

SHP: Where was this?

HP: I was in the camp in the Philippines.

SHP: So you knew English?

HP: I knew. Even though I had very few years of English, during the fifteen months in Palawan I was taking some English classes as well. So I was able to communicate well with the social workers. I was transferred to another transit center where you took culture orientation before you resettled in the U.S. During the three months there I was working for CFSI as a para-professional. The work helped me as well to know more about helping others. I think that was the starting point for me to go into social service.

So when I came here in 1982 I was able to pursue human relationship major, another bachelor degree for social work. The first two years I worked for the Wilder Foundation's Social Adjustment Program for refugees as a caseworker to help refugees who suffered social adjustment issues, such as depression. And when I graduated from the university I went to work for the Lutheran Social Service for resettlement of immigrants. We settled at that time the first hundred Amerasians at the time of the Amerasian Homecoming Act in 1988 or 1989, during the first wave of Amerasians.

After that I did one of the transitional housing for unaccompanied minors -- those who came here alone. Traditionally they did not fit in with the regular foster families. These kids needed just some transitional skills so they can be on their own because they were young adults already. I lived with two of them initially. Then the opportunity came up to work oversea in Hong Kong. I myself was a refugee who lived in the refugee camp, so I went back and worked for the refugees in Hong Kong. At that time they were closing the camp, meaning they no longer called you a refugee until you were screened. The screening was very crucial. Ten people came in and maybe one or two got admitted as refugee. They could say you are an asylum seeker, and you have to go back. So they forced you to go back to Vietnam.

I worked there for three years initially with the same organization back in 1982, Children Family Services International. And then a year later I worked for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees with vocational training. I helped them to develop vocational classes, short courses for refugees so that when they went back to Vietnam or settled in a third country they would have some skills to get a job and hopefully pursue a career.

At that time my family came to America in 1994, my mom and two younger brothers. They came and I was thinking: I owed my mother my life. So I said I had to give up

everything and came back to help my mom and my two younger brothers to adjust to the new life.

SHP: So you've been in Minnesota all this time since you first came?

HP: Yeah. Since 1982, except the three years in Hong Kong, from 1991 to 1994. Not by choice though. You know when refugees came here, they either had relatives here or they had sponsors. So depending on where your sponsor was that is where you ended up. But if I knew how cold Minnesota was, [chuckles] I might have changed my mind at that time. Too late now. [chuckles]

SHP: Why do you stay?

HP: The thing is I like Minnesota. At that time the weather was cruel. We had very tough winters, a lot of snow, but I saw a lot of good opportunities here for me to grow in terms of education. So that was what made me stay. And one thing lead to another. I've been working with people here and I really like what I do. So I stayed. And when my family came here all of us were here. So why move? We were settled in one place and it's hard to move.

SHP: Tell us what you're doing now.

HP: When I got back it was hard. In 1991 when I was established with my career I left for Hong Kong. When I came back I had to start over again from scratch. Can you imagine when I came back I took a janitorial work? I cleaned toilets. Even though I had a bachelor's degree I couldn't find a job at that time. I worked there for a few months, at least 6 months.

SHP: What year was this?

HP: 1994. So from mid June 1994 to February 1995 I just worked wherever I found a job. I worked for a cleaning company. I worked a couple of jobs to have some income so I could help my family. That was one of the down times for me.

Luckily something came up in February 1995. They had an opening here in Bloomington and I applied. I have worked in Bloomington ever since, and even though the job changed and the title changed most of what I do is the same. I work as a student advocate. Within this job I am able to work with teachers and students, advocating for students, advocating for families. I like education so much since my time in Hong Kong and here in the U.S. that I decided to pursue a Masters in Guidance Counseling. It was hard for me at that time working and going to school but I was able to finish it in 2001 with a Master's in Education with the focus in Guidance. With my skills I am able to work really well with students, get to know the family and get to know the community.

Since then I have been able to work not just in school but also to do outreach to the communities here in Bloomington as well as the Twin Cities. One project grew into another. Luckily I am able to connect with more and more people here, community workers -- people that are active in our communities. My work grew and grew, and it has grown beyond the school. I am so glad that we are able to reach out to so many in the Twin Cities.

SHP: Do you work exclusively with the Vietnamese community or with other Asian or minority groups as well?

HP: Initially I was hired to work with the Asians. But here the Vietnamese population is one of the highest among the Asian population. We have a significant number of Vietnamese. It fits well and that's the reason they saw my background and my being able to communicate well with the students. But I work with all Asian students. Now I am based here at Kennedy so I basically work with all the kids. And at times I might have to concentrate on advocating for kids of color.

SHP: Let's talk about the challenges that you face doing what you're doing in Minnesota. Any problem with minority groups? Any problem with the bilingual? With languages? Both with the students you're dealing with and what you find in yourself.

HP: First of all, I have been able to overcome so many challenges in my life and that has made me stronger, that has made me think that I can do it, and that can be translated into the work that I do. I can show students that when I first came here there were not a lot of resources. But now we have more and more resources for them. They have people like me to help them.

There are so many challenges right now. I think that more and more people who came here to this country recently benefit from the resources that the community has been developing. It's getting easier for them. However, I think there are some challenges. Particularly in Minnesota the weather is the most challenging because Vietnam is a country with tropical weather like Florida. Coming here is a big adjustment for them. Not so much the food. Food used to be a challenge for me. Before we lacked a lot of Asian food, but now they're all over the place, even in Cub Food and other big supermarkets.

The challenge I see at school specifically is parents' involvement. Most of the parents are too busy with their work. Some work two or three jobs. They don't have time to go to conferences or to get in touch with a teacher or get in touch with the school to find out how their kids are doing. The second challenge is the language. It's hard for some parents to learn a new language, so communication with the school is very challenging. Sometimes they feel quite ashamed or hesitant to communicate with their broken language. But I really encourage them to come because I am here to help them. But it's hard. There are some who participate in the school, but the majority tends to leave the school to decide for their kids. That's how the system works in Vietnam; parents give the

school the right to make the best decision for their kids. Here we need to have more involvement, more collaboration from the parents. The third thing, the same parent did not go through the process of education here in the U.S., so it's hard for them to guide their kids in terms of choosing their career, how to be successful in school, how to be assertive because most of the Asian students oppose assertiveness. So when it comes to advocating for themselves they sometimes are quite reserved in asking questions.

These are the challenges. It is not because of the system. In a way culture plays a significant role in the way that they are. They think that their kids are doing well, "I don't need to go to the school". But that's not right. Kids need well rounded experience, not just academically but in leadership, in volunteering, in community, and in other areas as well. Those are things that I am still trying to help parents to see. They can encourage students to do well and beyond. Post secondary is so important. Parents need to play a crucial role even though they don't have assurance, but they can always be the support for their kids.

SHP: Let's go back to you. You're married with children. And you have your mother and younger siblings. Right?

HP: Yeah. I got my older brother here too.

SHP: How are you able to do all these volunteer works beside your regular job here in the school? You've organized all kinds of events for the Vietnamese community.

HP: Luckily I am married to, my wife allows me to do a lot of things. Initially she had a tough time with it, but I said, "That's how I am." I was giving back to the community. I owe this life to my mom. I owe this life to the land that gave me opportunities. I feel joy in doing that. I am very supported by my wife too. I guess she doesn't have a choice [chuckles]. She understands, and she's been involved. She would like to be involved as much but she doesn't have a lot of time to do that.

I feel that this is another venue for me to reach out to the community, to the families. The level of participation from the families is so limited that we need to do other things to get them involved. There are so many occasions we organized for the community to which they came. So I see that that's another way for me to reach out to the community, to the families that I work with. Some people know who I am but I had no clue who they were when they called me. They learned about my work. I think that's a good way to reach out to the community. It's not my job but it's a crucial component to reach out to the community.

SHP: And you still take care of your children?

HP: I have two daughters. They are involved in a traditional dance group. I am trying to model my life for them so that later on they can say this is how dad lived. My mom have modeled the way she lives, so I have to model for my kids. You have to set examples for

your kids. Without telling, you have to model so when your kids see you they will hopefully take that as a lesson for them to learn. Whenever I do things I always take them along so they can see what I do. Hopefully some day they will be more involved in the community.

SHP: Say a little bit about the Vietnamese Cultural and Science Association and the Minnesota Chapter.

HP: I don't know if you remember hurricane Katrina. When Katrina hit New Orleans I wanted to go down there and volunteer. Reading a web page I learned that there was an organization that was actively helping Katrina victims in Houston. I learned about them through emails and phone. I talked to one of the board members. I was really impressed with how the association was able to do more deeds for the community.

My first involvement was a leadership camp they were hosting in Virginia. I attended that, I believe, in the year 2006 and was so impressed with them, the way they organized training camps for young leaders. They usually hold the leadership camp around Memorial Day. Every year they have the camp either in the U.S. or Canada. So I attended the camp in 2006 in Virginia and was so impressed with how they did it. I talked to the members here, and I and another member, his name is Liêm Vũ, both of us went to Dallas to attend the camp in 2007.

Since then our number is growing. Camp Lên Đường is growing more and more. One year we had seven members attending. So we grew from one to seven. That's a significant number. Seven is not a big number but compared to the national organization down in Houston. Probably most Vietnamese here in Minnesota do not know about the Vietnamese Culture and Science Association. Luckily the association started more and more chapters, and we talked about having a chapter here in Minnesota. Finally in October last year, 2009, a couple of board members came here and we officially opened a chapter here.

Now we have about fifteen active members. We have been very involved in the community. I think this is a good way to connect with many people, not just in the U.S. but around the world as well. We have members from Vietnam, Canada, and European countries as well. This is a big organization with 500 members around the world. We have seven or eight chapters with 500 members. Recently I attended the 20th anniversary of the establishment of Vietnamese Culture and Science Association. It is an honor for us to have a chapter here to work with the young, trying to get the young members. Last year when we attended the camp in Houston we got a total of thirteen members who went. The interest is growing.

This is the organization that's doing a lot of work. As we are speaking now, we are collaborating with the Hennepin County Library to do the ACT preparations for high school students with a total of eight sessions. We help some of them to get scholarship to pay for their ACT fees as well. Another thing we might do is workshops for parents. The

more things that we do for the community the better. Eventually one thing will network with another thing, and it will benefit students, families, as well as the community.

SHP: The members of the association, are they all professionals?

HP: Right now we have some members from college. We have some young professionals. We want to build up the membership so that when they are in college they are involved in the community. And when they graduate from college and have a job they have some way to get involved and help the community. By doing that we'll be building the community, building a base. We are helping the younger generation to feel connected with the community. By doing that I think they're helping themselves to identify themselves because a lot of young adults are struggling with their identity. What culture do I fit in? How do I balance a life in both worlds? I think by doing this we are helping the young adults as well to balance themselves, to give back to the community, and take care of and help the older generation. Giving back is the key. It goes hand in hand with our culture. We always respect the older generation. That's how we're going to do it, we are going to help the younger members so they will help other younger members. We reach out to the younger as well as reaching up to the older generation.

SHP: I think it's good. Anything else you want to say?

HP: I know when your interview me like this my mind just wanders. My mind processes so many things. In order to concretely lay out things is quite challenging. My story of escaping is almost 30 years ago. Sometimes it's limited, but I am trying to depict it as precisely as possible. Things have been changing a lot. I am no longer a teenager. I'm approaching more and more old age. Hopefully this story will help me to write a memoir for my mom. She deserves it.

I don't see this as my accomplishment, but this is the thing that I'm giving back to the community. The things that I do I do because I feel a fire burning inside me that makes me think this is the thing that I need to do to preserve the culture, to help others to understand us more through culture and to help the younger generation. Hopefully this will help them to create a road map to success.

That's why I am really passionate when I see a new comer or any student new to this country or new to the school. I take time to talk to them and guide them. I feel that's a choice in me to be able to do that. When I can see them grow and be successful I feel that's the fruit of my labor. A message I always give to them: when you benefit from help, when you're successful give back to the people who need it, you just keep the thing moving -- you help others and others will help others. It's just like a moving thing. That's why we have a saying in Vietnamese, "When eating the fruit remember who planted the tree", "Ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây". That's my motto for living, giving back to the community because you have been blessed with so many things.

Thanks for the opportunity for me to unveil some of these things. I rarely cry. I do cry

alone, but sometimes in public speaking I find myself crying. It's just hard when I talk about my mom because I think she deserves it. I think this is a good way for me to end by saying "thank you" to mom. And thanks for the land of opportunity for me to live and serve others. Thank you.

SHP: Thank you.