

Phuong Do is a self-described daughter, wife, mother, and social worker. Her job allows her to be involved with the Vietnamese/American Community as a mental health counselor, using her bilingualism to extend healthcare to Vietnamese/Americans in the area. Her immigration to the U.S. was marked by difficulty, especially with the language barrier and cultural assimilation, which are struggles that persist today for her. Do came to Western Massachusetts when she attended Smith College for a social work degree and eventually stayed in the area. This oral history touches on themes of discrimination, religion as community, and the hardships of being an immigrant as well as raising second-generation American children. Throughout, Do weaves in her fears, her hopes and dreams, and her appreciation of her community. By combining her own experiences and past stories with her future aspirations for her children, Do synthesizes her past and future in a conversation about being Vietnamese/American in Western Massachusetts. This oral history attempts to preserve and serve the stories of Vietnamese/Americans by bringing them into the limelight.

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[Li:] Thank you so much Mrs. Phuong Do for coming here today for this interview.

[Phuong:] It's my pleasure to be here with you guys; it's an exciting project. So I guess again my name is Phuong Do. I'm a daughter, a wife, a mother, and a social worker. My son's Nam; he's 8. And my daughter's An; she's turning 4 this December. I came from Vietnam; so, the countryside of Saigon. We came here in 1993; that's when we first arrived here. Most of my family is still in Vietnam.

[Li:] Has your family been living in the same place in the US since you guys got here?

[Phuong:] Mostly. When we first came here we were in Albany, New York for about five years or so and then I came back to Massachusetts for school and I went to Smith College there and I got my masters degree so I stayed here to work for the community and eventually my family joined me here so we're all here now in Springfield, Mass; just except for one sister who is still in Albany, NY.

(What has school in the U.S. like?)

[Phuong:] School... I came here when I was 15 years old so starting out ninth grade high school was scary, so, I didn't have any English at all — no formal classes back in Vietnam. I went to Schenectady High School in New York so the first four years in high school was pretty scary; that's the term I can remember. Just a much bigger school compared to the village I was in in Vietnam which is like each class is like 30 students max; here we're talking about a thousand students plus in the same in the class. So yeah, first four years was pretty bad. I went to Siena College for psychology major for school and then I think college was the point in my life where I can start to take more... not just English but just kind of living, assimilating, I guess at the time. So four years of college; struggle, and I still struggle a lot with the language and kind of fitting in, too, at that age. Smith was actually better and you know, I came here by myself. I was on my own in Springfield, so you know it was tough to kind of again — you know, different chapter, different part of my life, different kind of difficulties that we go through, but English is steadily — is something I kind of acquire as I go. And I guess in term of difficulty — many different area

I guess, not just English — but understanding the culture, the mainstream, the culture, and socializing with peers and then connecting with professors with people outside of school, so many layers. But being an immigrant is just like, I'm still adjusting now. I still feel like I'm here. I know what I'm doing. my life is here, but it's still an area that I still find myself needing to adjust, to assimilate to still.

[Li:] What were the circumstances that led to your immigration to the U.S.?

[Phuong:] Yes, that's the question. My father was in the army with the Vietnam War, so we was allied with the Americans coming over to help with the Vietnam War. So after all of that, the government — he had a program, a card, HO is what we used to know, humanitarian operation? Something like that, I'm not sure the that's formal name of that. But that's how we got sponsored to come here so that, my parents, myself, and my sister came here. The language was probably being the most difficult thing that I imagine anyone would face but for me at least I was very shy — still shy now — but going to school was dreadful and again it took me some time to get to the point where I can speak, I can understand people, and could communicate and go from there but I think, scary... was the language, English. Isolation was the big part too because without the language without the connection to people, peers especially in high school, was also a big thing. I would just basically go to school, go home, go to work, school, home, and just basically that and then it take a while to have a friend or have a group of friends in class that accept and embrace you as an individual and not just you know that's one girl who doesn't speak English or can't communicate or you know just like yeah. I think that was what standout and the first, you know, initial first five years or so living here and after that I kinda understand more about the bigger pictures of that, you know, like the being immigrant, not able to fit in, not be accepted by larger group — not just you know high school friends at the time — but more, you know, again bigger issue like discrimination, just kind of being stereotyped in many different ways.

[Li:] Is there any advice that you would give to yourself back then?

[Phuong:] I think I would want me to be more bold — like bolder — just to, kind of, because it took me quite some time to get that the point where I was like, you know what? I can do this. I'm gonna make it... and just kind of push it out there into, you know, so that come with years. So I guess the the level of confidence in me — I don't know if it can be given or not — maybe that's something that you have to go through with experience and you can't just have the confidence, being so new. I had a lot of help though, a lot of support. But I guess back to the question: advice... I probably would would want to just put myself out there more, push to speak up more, to make more friends, or maybe then it wouldn't take me that like, ten years let's say, to get to where I'm at now, but maybe I could maybe shorten the time a little bit and I can do more. Another thing I would say just to what I did like, I did, was I was quite determined. I pushed through but feel that I needed to. So I remember the first day of high school; somehow I make it through the day but at lunch time I didn't even know how to get in a line to get food because I was just — it was a strange concept so I end up got some french fries, manage to do that, and that was that was the moment I broke down and cried — first day, I like I don't know why I'm here or what I'm doing so that was that was the day that most memorable.

(What were your support systems when you first arrived in the U.S.?)

[Phuong:] Back then we were still in Albany so the more... not so much about community... when we had community support, family in general, like people would come and kind of welcome us and take us to the market because no car obviously at the time. But then for me the most support I get is from my high school teacher. She was my ESL teacher — and she's now my god mom — so that was the person that, kind of my idol, my, you know, person that kind of get me through. There's something about her that we connect quite well and so I just kind of lean on her through the high school years and the relationship building quite close and then she became for me the reason to keep going, you know, beside the background motivation: I need to make it, I need to, you know, finished school, get my degree, make it out of there for my for my parents too — who, you know, being Asian with the pressure “you got to be a doctor, you got to be an engineer, some sort of known career” so that that was the background — that was the pressure too — but this, of course, the push is truly from my god mom to say: “you can do it, just take the next step, you got it” and that kind of encouragement my parents couldn't give me at the time because they struggle themselves and, you know, the role reversal that I was the one helping take care of the family rather than in Vietnam the parent would then support a child to go to school, to go to college in high school, so that that was some of the dynamic that I went through, which, you know, normal. So speaking about my god mom — she was the one that kinda make it happen.

(How did you find a community in Albany and, later, in college?)

[Phuong:] There was a community there; I remember going to the New Year celebration; we have the Vietnamese New Year and different gatherings at the time. Small, though — I didn't feel that I had a community back in Albany. What I had was just the friend — the college friend, I had the Vietnamese college friend in college that, you know, like less than 10 of us — that was my community at the time. Family wise, it's just more scattered back there but when I moved down here for school, I accidently stumbled across Springfield just exploring the area and I discovered, you know, because I was again new to the community at the time in Springfield so I didn't know anyone and no one know me obviously so, you know, I came to the — I walk into a Vietnamese market that's when I discover like “wow, there is a community here” so that's why I decided to stay at this school and work with this community here.

[Li:] Do you participate in any community activities or organizations right now?

[Phuong:] Yes. I'm in the social work field so I'm a counselor. When I lived here in 2003 — that's when I kind of start involve — we used to get involved with the VACA, the Vietnamese Association in Springfield, which now close out and change a different name but we were quite active with that, sometimes, since I was going to school and volunteer and I worked in a community clinic for mental health counseling so naturally with my job I am quite involved in community and I attend events and kind of workshops and things like that kind of put me out there to be the providers for the community. And at some point before I get married I was quite active with temple; I'm Buddhist but when I get married to — my husband is Catholic so I converted — so now we quite active with a church because my son is at the age where we like for him to stay connected with the church and youth group so it's a natural push for us to kind of be out there at this time.

[Li:] How would you describe the difference between the community here in the US and in Vietnam?

[Phuong:] I left the country when I was 15 so my community back then was a lot different than from a child lens. Everybody know everybody else, you know, I am the child for every adult who come across who can basically scold me for anything or, you know, there will be that fear of “oh my dad is gonna hear this if I done something wrong, something wrong if I say something wrong to an adult.” So basically the idea of the children being raised by the village kind of thing where everybody's the parent. The adult is the adult; you don't dare to look at them in the eye and bow to them you kinda do that so that kind of community is what I remember because I come from the countryside, the village, so it's very close. Everybody's grandma grandpa to me back then. Here it is more scattered and certainly if I see another Vietnamese child now on the street I don't dare to scold with them like “no don't do that” and I can't because it just is not the environment to do so. My niece and my nephew I can do so; at church will be another environment where I then as an adult can say “oh no don't do that honey” and talk to that child about that but beyond that, like, in the market let's say, in the street, you can't use the the role of an adult, a Vietnamese adult trying to help out, trying to teach a Vietnamese youngster. That doesn't work here. That's one thing I noticed is different is we are also scattered here. We have a community but a sense, I mean, ideally I would like to see we become a bit more cohesive in terms of a group: doing things together, supporting each other, and have a common cause let's say rather than... but it can't be done I guess because individually we have to each fear that we settle enough, stable enough, then we can focus on a common cause. The community needs, right, but if everybody's struggle to make their own living then of course you have to really focus on your family first. So I think that where we're at now in terms of, you know, the first group of immigrant come here was years ago like after 1975; they are now my aunt and uncle and grandparents and then here I am sort of the middle of it all: came in teenager and then we now the parents. So then my son, my children, are growing up; you know, 20 years later then we've become elders and they become the active adults so I don't know what it'll be like then but I'm afraid that we're losing that kind of connection from one generation to the next. You know, even from my parents down to me now I'm feeling that loss, that I'm not able to meet up with their standard, with their expectations in terms of how they like for me to be, who they want for me to be here in America as a Vietnamese and my involvement in the community. So I can't even see far, what I expect my son to be when he grows up in terms of the community. So I think that's the difference. We don't have that ability or the power to maintain that culture. We'll have to do a lot of work to do that.

(How are your children's struggles in the U.S. different from your own?)

[Phuong:] They'll have more advantages I guess because they don't have to struggle with the language, the lack of language, the mainstream... they are more Americanized now: they are more American than Vietnamese now so they don't have to struggle with that — they don't have to assimilate compared to what I had to go through, but in term of the discrimination, I think in a lot of levels they still have to face that. Because my son will look Vietnamese, right, appearance wise. He still going to be stand out in a group of, like, a class let's say. And people will know him as Asian, Vietnamese, so even he feel like he is an American citizen — he is American — he will be looked at not so much as fully American as any other child would. So that will be the difficulty, still, he still has to face that, and he still needing to be embraced and accept by the mainstream. And again we can't predict — we can only hope that let's say 20 years from now the

society, the people around us here will become more accepting of the fact that there are many different people around, many of us around. So, yeah, he still have to win that battle that I still fight in now.

(Do you think your son understands why you immigrated from Vietnam?)

I don't think he understand; I do take the opportunity to talk to him about it, but conceptually I don't think he understands the full picture of it. Not the "why," not the "why," perhaps some of the "how," how we get here. But it's my plan to tell him more about that. So I know that, going back to one of your questions, that I do foresee the difficulty that he is going to encounter growing up here simply being Vietnamese American so I need to have him know this part of the history piece of where I come from, where his grandparents come from just so he has that, to log it in his character, to go off with his life.

(How does religion play a role in your life?)

I guess it's fair to say that I am bilingual when it comes to religion too, because I am half Buddhist half Catholic. I think it's fair to think that way because both still — the Buddhist part of me is still in me, and then I'm embracing the new philosophy and value but in the end they both teach the same message: the same lesson to be who you are, to be kind, to be good, to do good deeds. I think religion shapes us and who we are. I think I learn how to be, first, kinda humble with what I have and not take things for granted where the opportunity given, presented to me in my life, I need to embrace that, work on it, I need to hang on to it, so I don't take them for granted so I think that's the main thing.

(What challenges do you encounter in practicing your religion? How do you combat these challenges?)

Yes because, you know, life is busy. So you can go a day without even thinking about: do I have a moment to pray, reflect? Can I reflect? So the moment you get up you go go go go go, and then stress out. As a counselor I focus a lot more in being mindfulness so I think that's more of the Buddhist end of it that I kind of naturally lean towards. I think that is what I resort back to on my own as an individual as my way to practice what I believe and what helps me. But when it comes to the family then we have to create moments. We try to have a routine where I try to get my son to be more oriented in the idea of, this is our religion, what we need to do, this is what we sort of must do. Because he question, he challenge us every other Sunday saying "why do we have to go to church?" and we say, because we have to, and shamefully we say, "because we say so; you have to" and we walk away feeling bad to tell him that but we commit to do so, to really bring him to church so he can have that initial understanding. The hope is that he will hang onto it and practice what we hope for him to keep up with. But I guess going back to to the religion question, it's more of — its not the actual prayer that we do, not the actual ceremony that we attend, it's more about what it installs in us and the belief and principle that we grow up with — whether it's Buddhist or whether it's Catholic, the main principle that we have that shape who we are and we go from there. My husband and I both feel kinda proud in terms of where we're at now in our life and how our own belief, how our religion shape us in such way.

(How do you engage with Vietnamese/American communities through your job?)

I'm a mental health counselor; I work with a few of the Vietnamese providers, speaking the language and the culture. I see everyone, basically, who's in need of service so that includes children, individual adults, couples, family work, and group as well.

[Hannah:] So most of your patients or clients are Vietnamese?

[Phuong:] A big number, yes. I claim myself as a social worker, a counselor, but right now I'm only working part-time as a counselor in a community, locally. But I work full-time with an employee program, where I work full time. I've been there 10 years now, so I started out as a clinician, a counselor talking to members or clients over the phone. So, right now, I'm actually, I just moved up to a supervisor role two years now managing a team of clinicians that talking to members. So that's my full-time job and the in-person counselor is more passion area for me, but I only get to do that part-time now.

[Hannah:] Do you think conditions in the U.S. are improving for immigrants and for minorities in general? Like do you believe that your children will grow up in a more accepting world and that their children will?

[Phuong:] That's the hope. I think we can't really predict what's ahead of us but I can see the change in good way, positive way. But again, more work need to be done, more advocating, more fighting. That will always be a battle for us, for minority groups. Not just immigrant, not just refugee, but all minorities. There's always that battle to fight, so if we stop fighting, it's not going to continue. With the yin and the yang when you think about the way you see that — it's like, right now, its not equal. The half of the yin and yang, the black and the white, is not equal. So, ideally, we want to get to the point where we can have that half interconnect. But we're not there yet, but I think we have moved quite a bit, done amazing work I guess. We as a group, as a minority group, have moved quite a bit. For my son, I think he first need to learn how to fight, first understand what he's about to get himself into first. Speaking just my own experience again I guess we can't speak bigger than that, but just looking at my son, he need to understand what's the problem first, and then learn how to prepare, to fight. And not to fight to win but to fight to fit in, and fight to have equal change of things.

[Li:] What do you think are the major issues that the Vietnamese community is trying to face right now?

I guess I touched on that a little bit being mom, being a mom. I'm concerned about the community in terms of when I become the elder, my children become the adult, will there be a community then? What would that community be like? So that's kinda one thing that come up for me. But, as a social worker, I see that the similar disconnection between the next generation to their parents and then to grandparents. So I get the same kinda idea there, but we are seeing a trend of need for counseling service for family work where the children who mainly born here and then the parents who came here maybe at my age or later where communication now becomes a problem in the house — English and Vietnamese. So I can see that as a growing pain, growing problem where the younger generation — like, my parent doesn't understand me, they can't meet my needs. And the parent says that the children doesn't listen; I'm trying to provide, I work, I have the money, I give them all that they need, but there's a breakdown of communication. The parents and the children can't bond the way that, let's say, a standard American family would be able to bond — speaking the same language, not having to deal with

that breakdown. Because, when I think about my son, an example comes up where he doesn't understand that he's Vietnamese American. He's just an American boy who goes to school but it's like "honey, but you look different, you are Vietnamese," and he's too young to understand that but at some point he will need to recognize that, you know, folks kinda look at me differently and I need to know I am different so that I can be prepared to deal with the wave that's going to come hit him in terms of the reality of discrimination, of not being accepted. He's in the bliss right now, he doesn't understand that, which I worry. I worry, I guess, both as a social worker and also as a mom. I worry about my son, you know, when he turns 13, 12, 15, when he's out there, and then how's his peers going to accept him? How's society or the community or whatever he ends up doing — how are they going to accept him? And is there any difficulty, any battle he has to fight? I think to educate them, before it hit them.

(What are your hopes for your community?)

[Phuong:] Within the community, within the Vietnamese community itself, I hope to see more collaboration, more group work, more cohesiveness. We need to accept yourself first, I guess, because right now sometimes I see that we have different pockets within the community; different pockets divided by religion, or health, or wealth, or many different reason that we are ourselves divided. So, and then we talk about the bigger war we fight out there, right, so I hope to see that we can be more accepting of each other, just ideally. But, again, that's a big challenge.

[Li:] This is the end of our interview. Thank you so much for coming all the way here for our interview.

[Hamza:] Thank you so much.

[Hannah:] Thank you so much for coming; we really appreciate your time and your, you know, effort in answering all of our questions.

[Phuong:] You're welcome. I'm glad that I get invited and be part of this, you know, this is exciting.