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R.50 Southern Mix: Asian and Asian American Voices in the South

Interview R-0956

Ngoc Nguyen

17 April 2017

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ABSTRACT – Ngoc Nguyen

Interviewer: Katy Clune

Interviewee: Ngoc Nguyen

Date: April 17, 2017

Length: 00:44:21

Ngoc Nguyen was born in Vietnam in 1972, just after her father immigrated to the United States on a scholarship to Duke University. The impending fall of Saigon temporarily pushed the Nguyen family to a Thai refugee camp before they followed Ngoc's father to Durham. His teaching position later moved the family to Greensboro, North Carolina. She discusses her father's perspective as a South Vietnamese on a college campus during the Vietnam War. She talks about her parents going back to Vietnam twenty-five years after leaving and being disheartened at the state of their home country. Discussing early childhood, she remembers interacting with more Vietnamese families after moving to Greensboro. During this time, her father founded the Greensboro Vietnamese Temple and was active in the local Vietnamese community. Ngoc describes attending events at the temple, speaking Vietnamese and eating Vietnamese food when at home. Preserving Vietnamese culture was important to her father, and she similarly immerses her own children. She is on the executive board at the Vietnamese Association of Raleigh and organizes events which she believes serve an important role in conserving the traditions of the older generations of Vietnamese. She attended University of North Carolina from 1990 to 1994, where she was president of the Vietnamese Student Association and studied public policy. Her father eventually moved the rest of the extended family to Greensboro. She talks about going back to Vietnam in 2000 with her parents and reuniting with her childhood nanny. Ngoc discusses her participation in the Southern Mix project and what impact she hopes it will have.

TRANSCRIPT – Ngoc Nguyen

Interviewer: Katy Clune

Interviewee: Ngoc Nguyen

Date: April 17, 2017

Length: 00:44:21

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Katy Clune: This is Katy Clune with Ngoc Bui—how do you pronounce your name?

Ngoc Nguyen: I'm sorry, my last name is Nguyen—I don't know why they have that on my correspondence from UNC. It's N-G-U-Y-E-N.

KC: Okay. And we're doing an interview for the launch of Southern Mix, which is an oral history collaboration between the Carolina Asia Center, the Alumni Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity, and the SOHP at UNC and it is April 17, 2017. Thank you so much for taking time out of a work day on a Monday to do this with me, Ngoc.

NN: You're welcome.

KC: To start, this is an oral history interview format, so it's very much open, but I'd love to hear about your childhood and how you came to North Carolina, and you can start with your parents' story if you like, wherever you feel like jumping in, and I'll be sure to ask questions to have a full vision.

NN: Okay.

KC: Maybe start with when and where you were born?

NN: I was born in (Nui Den?) in 1972, shortly after my Dad went to the US to study on a scholarship. He had attended the National School of Administration and was given a scholarship to study abroad in the United States. And then we were fortunate enough to be able to leave the country one day, or shortly before, the fall of Saigon. So we joined my father in Durham where he was studying at Duke. And then he got his first teaching position in Greensboro, so I spent most of my years in Greensboro.

KC: What did he study at Duke?

NN: He studied political science and economics.

KC: How unusual was it at that time to receive a foreign fellowship to study abroad like that at that time in Vietnam?

NN: I think it was very prestigious for him to do as well as he did in school and get that scholarship. It's funny, because he told me he wanted to go to Princeton, until he found out how cold it was, so he chose Duke with its more temperate weather. And then I ended up going to school at [the University of North Carolina] Chapel Hill and just staying in North Carolina.

KC: Do you have siblings?

NN: I have one sister who is one year younger and a brother who is ten years younger.

KC: So were you the only child when your family moved here?

NN: I'm sorry, I should have—no, I came when I was three and my sister was two, and my brother was born here.

KC: And you moved directly to Durham?

NN: Correct. We spent some time in a Thai refugee camp, I'm not sure how long—

KC: Was that part of the process with leaving the fellowship?

NN: No, no that was just the process with the refugees who were leaving at that time. I'm not really sure the details actually, because my parents actually don't like to talk about it. They do not talk about it much.

KC: So your family was able to—got out before the fall of Saigon and came to Durham after a time in the refugee camp, was your Dad already accepted to Duke? I'm confused about—

NN: I'm sorry. Do you want to start over? He was doing his master's at Duke. He was supposed to return to the country in '72, I'm sorry, in '75. But since we had to come over, he stayed and ended up getting his PhD from Duke.

KC: So while he was studying, he could see the political climate changing, and encouraged his family, you all to come to the US if you could?

NN: I don't think we had a choice, I think everyone at that time felt fearful of the change that was about to come with the communist regime. But here in the States he witnessed a lot of anti-war protests, even on the Duke campus itself. He was in a really tough position being a South Vietnamese.

KC: I can image being a Vietnamese student on Duke's campus on that time—

NN: Sure, during the heavy anti-war sentiment.

KC: Do you have any memories of living in Vietnam?

NN: No, not at all. I don't know whether the pictures I have are as a result of the details that my mom did share. But no, I have no memory.

KC: Have your parents traveled back to Vietnam?

NN: They have, they actually waited about twenty-five years before they went back.

[00:05:45]

KC: And did they talk about—I can imagine that is an incredible thing to have to leave your country at that moment and then go back so many years later. Do you remember them talking about the changes they saw, or reflecting on it, or is it again a more difficult thing to talk about, to dig that deep?

NN: I think they were mostly dismayed about how little progress had been made in the country compared to the surrounding neighbors that were not so heavily affected by the war. Still a lot of poverty.

KC: They are from southern Vietnam?

NN: Central.

KC: What are some of your earliest memories of living in North Carolina?

NN: I remember the apartment complex we lived in in Durham and riding my tricycle down the big grassy hill.

KC: Were other Vietnamese families in the neighborhood?

NN: Not at the time. I think since we were the very first wave of refugees who came over. I think living close to campus, too, we were somewhat isolated from the surrounding community. It wasn't until we moved to Greensboro that we found and interacted with other Vietnamese.

KC: What was your dad's teaching position when he got there?

NN: He eventually became a tenured professor at A&T State University. But he also founded the Buddhist temple in Greensboro.

KC: Oh really? Wow!

NN: He was actively involved with that and then he served as the president of the Vietnamese Association of Greensboro and helped organize cultural events and functions.

KC: Could you tell me his name and spell it?

NN: Okay, first name is Phung, P-H-U-N-G. Last name is N-G-U-Y-E-N.

KC: I've heard about the Buddhist temple in Greensboro, I've heard that Cambodians visit.

NN: I think there's several.

KC: So tell me about this one.

NN: The Vietnamese one has grown over the years. I think they initially bought some private property with a small residence and was using the house itself as a temple and eventually gained enough members and funding to increase the size of the temple.

KC: Where is it located now? Downtown Greensboro or outside of it?

NN: It's in the Guilford College area.

KC: What's the name of it, of the temple?

NN: I get the names confused, I'm sorry. I can look it up for you. But we still have relatives in Greensboro, so we visit them and the temple frequently.

KC: Do you live in Raleigh?

NN: Yes, North Raleigh.

KC: Is there a temple in Raleigh?

NN: There is, mm-hmm.

KC: Do your parents still live in Greensboro?

NN: No, they moved here about ten years ago, after he retired. [NN searches for name of temple on her phone] Greensboro Vietnamese Temple.

KC: I've been to the Laos—

NN: You've been to the Laotian one?

KC: Yeah. So it makes sense that the Vietnamese would be separate—

NN: Different language.

KC: And a different type of Buddhism. Do you remember the rough time frame of when that temple was being established?

NN: I don't remember, Katy. It's on a plaque in there, and I read it, and I couldn't remember.

KC: Do you remember how old you were? [10:53]

[Pause]

KC: You can ask your Dad later...

NN: And I'm going to encourage him to participate in this.

KC: Absolutely! Do you remember going to that temple growing up?

NN: I do, we spent quite a bit of time there.

KC: Would it be regular weekly services on the weekends?

NN: They do have regular weekly services, but we only attended for the most part for special events during the year.

KC: What are some of the larger special events?

NN: There is Phật Đản which they consider Buddha's birthday, and there's another event which is considered a family day, or Mother's Day type of celebration, both in the summer time. And then Vietnamese New Year.

KC: Can you talk to me about what the community of Vietnamese in Greensboro is like? From my own experience it seems like one of the bigger populations in the state of North Carolina. For you growing up, did you have non-Vietnamese friends that you knew from public

school? Or did you stick to your community? Just talk about what it was like to grow up in Greensboro.

NN: I went through high school in Greensboro, but most of my friends were from the school because there were no Vietnamese kids in the neighborhood.

KC: I wonder what the development of the Vietnamese community in Greensboro, when it started really becoming central—

NN: I'm not sure, I'll have to research that. but Greensboro also has a large Hmong population that came over in the late [19]80s, early [19]90s, and we helped with that, just getting them acclimated and things like that.

KC: Are there other traditions at home that your family help maintain connection to Vietnam? What was your dad and mom's attitude about being Vietnamese in America? Did you speak Vietnamese at home?

NN: We did. We do speak Vietnamese at home, cooked and ate traditional Vietnamese dishes.

KC: You mentioned that your Dad helped found some cultural programs as well?

NN: Correct, he served as president of the Vietnamese Association of Greensboro. They would hold a New Year's celebration every year with a formal stage program and music and dancing and things like that. Very similar to what we do now in Raleigh.

KC: Why do you think your dad went to such lengths to serve his community in that way?

NN: I think he recognized the importance of maintaining those ties and culture, and preserving that culture for the future generations because he knew that many people of his generation would not go back to Vietnam.

KC: Do you have kids?

NN: I have two boys, eight and ten.

KC: How do you teach them about their heritage?

NN: I try to teach them Vietnamese, it's tough. I speak Vietnamese to them, but they respond in English. [Laughs] I try to let them spend as much time as they can with their grandparents, who like to tell them stories and such of their past.

KC: Do you take them to the temple here?

NN: They do attend. And I'm currently serving on the executive board of the Vietnamese Association of Raleigh. We have several events throughout the year and they attend and participate. Now they are in a musical group where one of the dads is teaching them culture through Vietnamese music. So they are learning the music and hopefully the lyrics and the meaning behind the lyrics.

KC: Is it traditional music?

NN: Mostly traditional Vietnamese songs.

KC: Tell me about the events that the Vietnamese Association of Raleigh put on.

NN: We do the Vietnamese New Year in the winter. We have Vietnam Remembrance Day, the April 30th commemoration. Then this year we did a new event for the Vietnam Heritage

Day where we had a dad present a condensed history of Vietnam with pictures, posters, and skits for the young kids. Then we have a picnic in the summer. And we do the lantern festival in September.

KC: Is it a very mixed group of people that come to the events? My experience with the Lao temple in western North Carolina is that is the older people who go every week, and younger family members go for larger festivals, but then on their Lao New Year festival other members of the community will come. In a way it is a friendship building method, to invite Americans to come to this Lao temple and learn about Laos. Does the association have a mission related to what the drive of its program should be?

NN: We are wanting to preserve the culture and traditions for future generations. We have a variety of events throughout the year, because we know that each one will appeal to a different audience and not everyone will attend all of them. But the April 30 commemoration, for example, is attended mostly by the older generations who recognize and remember the fall of Saigon and its significance.

KC: That would be an incredible place to take some interviews.

NN: That's correct. And that's coming up on the 29th, and that's what spurred me to get along with this project, because I see these older family members who attend and when they pass, then that's going to be a great loss of knowledge and stories.

KC: Absolutely, the first-hand experience that they are able to share. I remember I did a little micro-oral history project with people who lived through the Great Depression, and just hearing those stories was incredible. If not this year, let's hope by next year that you can have

some support from other interviewers in this project to help make that happen, because it would be really valuable. Is the association a membership?

NN: No, you mean in terms of membership dues? No, it's open to everyone. Our events are open to everyone, and most of them have free admission. Except for the big Tet celebration, which has been held at the Kerr Scott Building for the past several years. We've had a couple thousand people in attendance throughout the day, and have been looking for a bigger facility.

KC: That's incredible. [19:48] So you did high school in Greensboro, where did you go to high school?

NN: I went to Ben L. Smith for ninth grade, and then finished at Western Guilford High School and played on the tennis team all four years.

KC: And you went to UNC undergrad. And I think you told me the years off tape, when were you at UNC?

NN: [19]90-[19]94.

KC: Did you play tennis in college?

NN: No, I did not. And then I went to NC State for my master's in public administration, and then I got my law degree from Central [North Carolina Central University].

KC: So you've been to so many different Triangle institutions. And your dad was tenured at A&T. That's interesting that A&T and NC Central are both HBCUs. What did your dad teach?

NN: He was in the political science department, he taught a variety of graduate and undergraduate courses.

KC: What was his research specialty, or his area of expertise?

NN: I think he did mostly statistical-type research.

KC: What was UNC like in the [19]90s while you were there? Did you try to seek out Vietnamese student groups while you were there?

NN: We did. My friend actually created the Vietnamese Students Association and I served as vice president and then president, and I'm glad to see that the group is still doing well on campus.

KC: Do you remember how many students participated in the early days? Because I'm sure it's—

NN: Grown? We had a solid core of 20 to 30 that attended the meetings regularly, and then we held social functions mostly, we did some community service projects. But mostly it was just for social functions and we would collaborate with the Vietnamese students at NC State and Duke on a variety of projects.

KC: Oh cool! That's really neat, do you know if the association still spans schools like that?

NN: I think so. Because there is the umbrella Asian Student Association which I joined, and then we decided to do our own VSA thing. Which seems to be the trend now, each ethnic group has its own association, but they all are members of the ASA.

KC: And the ASA brings all the separate groups together?

NN: Yes. Even in the early [19]90s the school was pretty diverse. I remember having a lot of friends of different nationalities and hanging out with the kids on the health sciences floor in Carmichael, where it was very diverse.

KC: You said you started out in chemistry—

NN: Correct, a B.S. in chemistry, I wanted to go to dental school, but quickly discovered that was not my strength. So I switched to public policy analysis, where I got to do a lot of critical thinking and analytical writing, and that was definitely my preference.

KC: Did you begin working for the state after your master's, or after your law degree?

NN: After law school I worked with a non-profit legal organization in Durham for one year, and then moved to the administrative office of the courts.

KC: Have you enjoyed working for the state?

NN: I have, I really have. I think it's an interesting mix of people in the state workforce, in terms of age and experience of the people you get to interact with.

KC: How often do you get back to Greensboro these days?

NN: We still have family in Greensboro, my paternal great grandmother recently passed away, but we had been visiting her frequently, as well as my aunts and uncles.

KC: Once your mom and you and your younger sister came to the US, did your dad continue to try to bring more family over?

NN: Yes, he eventually got all of his siblings over. He's the oldest of eight. He and his two sisters had been here for a long time, but he brought the remaining siblings over so that their

kids could go to school here and have a much better future here, in terms of educational and career opportunity.

KC: Are they still living in North Carolina?

NN: They are, they're still in Greensboro.

KC: Have any of your family members expressed an interest in going back to live in Vietnam, or not necessarily?

NN: I think the ones who came here recently still have ties, they still have homes and businesses in Vietnam. One couple frequently goes back and forth. The others, I'm not sure. I'm not sure how they feel. I know that they've gotten used to the standard of living here and will probably stay here so long as their kids work in the area.

KC: Have you taken your sons?

NN: I have not, I will probably wait until they are much older. I've been back twice myself; the first time with my parents when they went back for the first time, and the second time was with a group of friends for more of a tourist-y, vacation-type trip.

KC: How old were you when you went with your parents?

NN: So that was 2000, so I'm 45 now...

KC: Let's not make ourselves do the math. What was that trip like? Was it a pretty intense experience?

NN: It was. It was very intense. Especially when we got to meet my nanny.

KC: Your mom's mom?

NN: No, nanny, as in the live-in maid who took care of us as a child. That was quite emotional.

KC: Because she had remembered you, and took care of you for three years before you had to leave. If I was you I would have wished I had a recorder along for that trip to be able to capture some of my parents memories. Do you feel like you were able to better understand their journey?

NN: Sure.

KC: Are there any lessons that you take from their experience that you try to really instill in your sons? [Pause.]

KC: I'm sorry, has the memory brought tears?

NN: I'm fine, I'm fine.

KC: We can take a pause, if you need to?

[AUDIO BREAK.]

KC: Tell me about what we have here. [Referring to photos.] I was looking at these while you were gone, these are some beautiful photos.

NN: This is my grandparents, probably on the beaches of [PLACE].

KC: Was that when you went back with your parents?

NN: No, this was years and years ago. These were my mom's parents. I never got to meet my grandfather, because he died in Vietnam. But apparently—they owned a tile company, so they were very wealthy. My mom (Nhu Y Nguyen), and there were five girls in the family.

KC: Are you on the Alumni Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity?

NN: I am.

KC: Can you tell me about that group? And when you came to be on it?

NN: I joined at the behest of a friend of mine, Tim Minor, who was a development officer—undergraduate friend of mine and then went on to work in the development office. They were trying to find a diverse group of alumni to create this committee and he approached me in 2002, I think, is when it was first created.

KC: Can you tell me about how you became to be involved with conceiving of this oral history project?

NN: Like I said, I'm serving my second term as an executive board member of the Vietnamese American Association in Raleigh and I mentioned the April 30th Vietnam Remembrance Day and just seeing the older generation of folks who help prepare and the ones who attend the event. I look at them and think about what their lives are here in the United States and what their lives were like in Vietnam with the understanding that with each passing generation you lose a little bit of that culture and a group of those stories.

KC: What would you hope the product for this project to be? Like if you were to imagine that those interviews were collected, how would you hope to see them used or shared, or what would your vision be for a successful version of this collection be?

NN: I originally wanted them to tell their individual stories and we would print them along with some pictures to display at the events themselves, but we never had enough time to sit down and do that, so I was hoping that we could collaborate with you on this project to get a diverse collection of stories from people representing different parts of Vietnam to hear the different stories of how they immigrated to the US, and what their experience was, and coming here, and what life has been for them in a new country. Obviously the younger generation has acclimated pretty well. With each younger generation, they are becoming more and more Americanized, but the older generation still maintain their ways of thinking and their perspective on life that is very different from ours.

KC: It would be good if you could have the younger generation interview their grandparents and people their age. Their questions would be very different from mine. From your experience with your parents, do you think as people get older they're more ready to talk about their journey and those hard years in the [19]70s?

NN: I think they are getting comfortable with it, because some of them do share their stories anyway, we just don't have them documented anywhere, and I think that's important to document them so we can share them with generations to come instead of just passing stories down from one child to the next and then each child forgetting the important details.

KC: I think Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing populations in the South, too—

NN: Sure.

KC: Even faster than Latin Americans. So my interest in the project is through understanding the experiences of families like yours that came to the state from elsewhere, then
Interview number R-0956 from the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at the Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

we'll all have a better idea of the state today. If you were conducting an interview with folks at that event, what would be some of the questions you would ask? Mostly just about what it was like in Vietnam?

NN: About their personal life, what they did for a living, how their childhood was like, because I think the kids would be interested in comparing. They are always talking about the toys they played with the games. I remember my dad telling the boys about the slingshot, and how he felt bad about killing birds. So now he put the slingshot away and he's a vegetarian, so they make the connection. They make that connection between him being a vegetarian and the slingshot, which is funny. Those types of stories. Unique, seemingly trivial details, but interesting nonetheless, and significant.

KC: Are there stories that your mom and dad share with you about those early days? If they're not getting at the heart of it because it's difficult—the version of it in my family was my parents were first married and didn't have enough money to buy dinner, and when my dad's friend visited he stole a steak from the grocery store. [Laughs] That's our family folklore. Do you have any of those types of things you'd like to share?

NN: I don't know off the top of my head, besides the slingshot one. I don't recall any of my mom's experiences.

KC: Did your mom work in the U.S.?

NN: She worked in Nation's Bank, the Bank of America predecessor. It was in a big warehouse facility near Four Seasons Town Center, and she was basically processing checks, she would enter checks as they flew by on a machine—this was before they had check reader machines, so they had to be manually keyed.

Interview number R-0956 from the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at the Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

KC: Did she know English?

NN: She did not, she and all of her friends had to go to the technical college to learn English, Greensboro Technical Community College.

KC: Were those free classes?

NN: I think they were free to a certain group of immigrants, I remember sitting in there with her in some classes because she didn't have a babysitter and learning English with her. Before I started kindergarten.

KC: I know that Greensboro is a welcoming city for immigrants now, did you have that sense?

NN: I don't recall.

KC: Now they have a public school called the Newcomers School where people who are just coming into the U.S. and who might not necessarily know English can learn. They're very pro-immigration.

NN: I just remember of being one of few Asians in every school I attended, there weren't many at all.

KC: Do you think that's partly why you are so committed to building the Vietnamese community?

NN: That's part of it.

KC: Well thank you for talking with me today! We've talked for about 40 or 50 minutes, is there something else, a part of your life you feel like we didn't touch on?

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NN: I wanted to answer your question about what I try to impart to my kids. I think that was good question, that all the parents here struggle with.

KC: Why do you think it's a hard question? Because the amount of gratitude you feel towards your parents is so overwhelming?

NN: [Crying.]

KC: It's obvious to me that you are carrying on your dad's legacy with your organizing in the community, he must be proud of your leadership in the association in Raleigh.

NN: I hope so.

KC: That's a question I guess you'll be thinking about.

NN: Yeah, but you're exactly right.

KC: I think that must also be part of the desire to preserve the experiences of that generation, so that your kids and their kids don't forget the foundation that they were able to lay despite having to leave their country in the worst circumstances. I didn't know that Vietnamese also went through Thai refugee camps, because I've just always heard about it from the Laos side, but I've heard about how life in those camps is very difficult. [Talk of summer in Laos, visit to Vietnam.] Thank you so much for talking with me, I hope I haven't put you off-kilter for the rest of your day.

NN: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Transcribed by Katy Clune

Edited by Emily Chilton, October 1, 2018