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Tran, Bich Thuy Oral History Interview (Vietnamese): Asian and African American Residents of Holland

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Interview with
Bich Thuy Tran
Vietnamese Resident

Conducted August 3, 1994
by Donna M. Rottier

1994 Summer Oral History Project
The Asian-American Community in Holland, Michigan

DR: The date is August 3, 1994. This is Donna Rottier and I am interviewing Bich Thuy Tran in her home in Holland, Michigan. Could you please repeat your full name for the record on tape?

DT: My name is Bich Thuy Tran.

DR: Your current address?

DT: 285 Cypress in Holland.

DR: When and where were you born?

DT: I was born in Vietnam in 1949.

DR: Thank you. When did you first move to Holland, Michigan?

DT: I first move into Holland, Michigan in October, 1990.

DR: Could you describe a little bit about your life in Vietnam and what it was like there?

DT: In Vietnam before the end of the war. . . My husband is a soldier. When the war ended and we come back to my small village--we have a small farm there--and it is difficult to live. We plant rice, just a little, but we have not enough to spend for food, clothing, and my children grow up and we have a very hard time to live there after the Communists come in. I am very lucky to have an opportunity to come into the United States.

DR: How many children do you have?

DT: I have two boys. One twenty-three and another one twenty-two.

DR: Did you go to school in Vietnam?

DT: Yes. I went through high school in Vietnam. My husband, too, but my children did not--just through sixth grade, and that's all.

DR: Did you have a job when you were living in Vietnam?

DT: Yes, we got the job. Myself, I can make dress for customer. Because we live in small village, I just make for the season, like when the rice come in and they have money, and I just make clothing that time. During three more seasons, I have nothing to do.

DR: How did you go about leaving Vietnam and coming to the United States?

DT: I had to stay in the Philippines in the camp for eight months to learn English and learn culture in the United States before I come in here.

DR: How did you get from Vietnam to the Philippines?

DT: We go by airplane.

DR: Who left Vietnam with you?

DT: My husband and my two boys.

DR: Were you sponsored by a family or an organization to come here to Holland?

DT: At first, we have no relatives, we have no sponsor. But I come with whole group that's called American Institute, in St. Louis, Missouri. I stay there for three months and a half. I have a friend, she lives in Holland. She comes to visit us. That big city in St. Louis is too crowded, many trouble and she is so afraid. She said, "Holland is so nice, why don't you move into

Holland? At first we will help you." That made me decide to move into Holland.

DR: Did you know anything about Holland before you came here?

DT: Yes. She described about Holland like a small town in our country--so quiet, and people very nice, and the most important is it's easy to find a job. I moved over here to live with her for three weeks. After that I rented a house in Sixteenth Street. I lived there for two years and two months, and I bought this house.

DR: What sorts of things did she and other people do to help you when you got here?

DT: Oh, I got a lot of help from people in Holland. I got a lot of help. I cannot say how grateful my family is to people who I met in Holland. At first is Mary McIntosh. She helped us a lot about finding a job. Of course we have difficulty at first, like we have no chair, no table, no dishes, no nothing when we moved into Holland. Day by day she helped me find a job, find something. Now I can get everything new I want with our own money, but I still keep those things she give to me and the people give to me. I keep it for memory; when I see it, I will remember that time we had hard time to live and the people who helped us.

DR: What was your first job in Holland?

DT: At first I still stay in St. Louis. My younger son, he come to visit my friend, who I told you before. He just stayed for three days and he got a job at Request Foods. Mary McIntosh asked him

about my family and he told her that, "My mother and my father are still in St. Louis." Mary asked him, "Did they want to come here?" He said yes. She gave my name into Request Foods and they called me right away. I moved into Holland Sunday. Monday I go to work at Request Foods. The job, it go up and down. I got laid off sometimes, but during the time laid off I worked like at Heinz Company. The most I am so proud about my family because we come into United States. We just got from the government, from Social Services, seventeen dollars for food stamps--no cash, no checks, nothing more. I'm so proud about ourselves, but I am also so grateful, to thank the people helping us to have a job. We don't have to live with Social Services.

DR: What sort of work did you do at Request Foods?

DT: We make everything for, the most is food--food for airplanes, food for retail, just food.

DR: Do you still work there now?

DT: No, I transferred to another company. I am so lucky. I got another job. It's better. It pays better and the job is better and I like it so much. It's BLD. We make the parts for autos.

DR: How long have you worked there?

DT: Almost one year.

DR: Where does your husband work?

DT: He started work at Bil-Mar. He still works there. We live here with my sons. They, too, work there.

DR: How have your jobs here been different than the work you've done in Vietnam?

DT: I like the job over here better because we have benefits, we have insurance, we have everything to protect if we have disability or we're sick. In Vietnam, if we're sick, we have nothing. And we don't know about the future. Now, like I work here, I know about the future. When I retire, I have some money in the company, and when I retire, I can use this.

DR: Do both of your sons live in Holland, too?

DT: Yes. They work at Bil-Mar, too.

DR: Do they live here with you?

DT: Yes.

DR: How well could you speak English when you first got here?

DT: Just a little. I can say "Good morning," "Good afternoon." When I was a little girl in Vietnam in high school, we just studied English about one hour per week. We just know "table," "chair," "house," something like that. But I learn from Philippines a lot more. At first I come here, I cannot speak like now. I still feel that I am so poor with my English. I want to go to school very much, but you see, I am a mother, I am a wife, and I have to work. . . .

DR: You're very busy. You speak English very well, though.

DT: Thank you.

DR: Have you taken any classes since you've been here?

DT: No, just I learn from work, from everybody I have met, and I pick up some more.

DR: That's very impressive. Have your husband or your children taken any classes or gone to school in Holland?

DT: Yes, my children. They have a class in Community Education, but because they're working, so sometimes just few days a week and sometimes few days a month. But they have very good opportunity at work because they have a class at work, too, but they are too tired and it's really too much.

DR: Are you a member of any community organizations or groups?

DT: My family is a member of St. Francis de Sales Church for three years.

DR: How did you choose that church to go to?

DT: I am Catholic when I was in Vietnam. So when we come here, I know that we have two churches, one of Our Lady and one St. Francis. I live near St. Francis, and I join with St. Francis. With the church, we join with our faith, not because somebody invites us.

DR: Is the way you practice your faith or your religion here different than the way you did when you lived in Vietnam?

DT: In Vietnam I think the religion is better, I mean, before the Communists come in. Because we have time to go to church every day, every day. And we're close with the group. We're close with the group at the church because we have smaller town than here. I don't know too many people in our church here.

DR: What do you think about that?

DT: Sometimes I feel lonely. Like when we're sick or one of my family have a problem. Like my husband was in the hospital and I don't know who to talk with or to meet with. Of course, some people, I know they're helping us a lot, but I mean from church.

DR: How many Vietnamese families go to St. Francis?

DT: Not many. About ten families.

DR: Do you have much contact with other Vietnamese people who live in Holland?

DT: Yes. Like we have a party like a wedding or something like that, and we see each other a few times in a year.

DR: Do you have much contact with people who live in Holland who have come from other Asian countries?

DT: No, not very often. At work I know some people, like Laotian or Cambodian. When they have their wedding or birthday, they invite us, once or twice a year.

DR: Does your family celebrate any special holidays or traditions?

DT: We celebrate Christmas Day, and just a little for Vietnamese New Year. We don't celebrate birthdays, but we are going to celebrate for twenty-five years of marriage next year.

DR: Really? Congratulations. How has the way that you celebrate those things, how has that changed from when you lived in Vietnam?

DT: I told my family now, we live in the United States, we have to do the American way. Like we have to have a small gift for each other, those things.

DR: What sorts of hopes did you have for your family and your children before you came to the United States?

DT: Oh yes, I hope, I dream a lot. I think everything's okay now, except one thing. I hope that my children, when they come here, they can learn more when they go to school. But they grow up already. They know how to spend money and then they have left school for a long time and now they go back and they can't join with the class. That's the only one thing I'm disappointed.

DR: Are either of your sons married?

DT: Yes. The older one, he's got a wife and son in Vietnam. We left them and now I fill out the papers to sponsor them. The government agree and we just waiting for the right time for arrival.

DR: So they haven't come yet?

DT: Not yet, but we waiting, we still waiting.

DR: Do you know when they will be able to come?

DT: I hope about one or two more years.

DR: How old is your grandchild in Vietnam?

DT: Five years old already.

DR: What hopes do you have for them when they come here?

DT: When we first come here we just thinking about the future for my grandchildren. I hope that my grandchildren later will be better than us now. I talk with you today and I hope that later when we have passed away, and my grandchildren later they know their grandparents--how they come here and how they live at first in Holland.

DR: Do you have other members of your family who still live in Vietnam?

DT: Yes. My mother's still alive. She is eighty-three now. And my brother and sister. But they have all their family, so we just write letters and give regards from family here.

DR: Do you think that you would ever go back to Vietnam to visit, or even to live?

DT: If later in the future there, they are changing the government, I don't know yet, maybe I'd rather live here. I want my grandchildren to live here. Because we have done well, I always tell my family that we are different, we have to live very good, to make others like us. Finally, I don't think any problem when I live here to join with the big group, like when I work, when I go out, I don't think anything difficult for us. I think if we are good, we can be like everybody else.

DR: What sorts of things will you do to teach your grandchildren about your Vietnamese culture?

DT: I do worry about that because I see my friends that live here about seventeen or twenty years. Their children don't know anything about Vietnam. I will remind mine, I will teach them about our culture, about our customs, but I don't know if I can do that or not because now the children just go to play with an American and they don't know about Vietnamese New Year, they don't know about anything. But I will teach them as much as I can, and if they keep it or not, I don't know.

DR: What changes have you seen in the four years that you've been living here in Holland?

DT: I feel much better now. When at first I came here, I like Holland, but I don't know anybody from Holland. Now I know a lot of people. Everybody I have met is very nice to my family. I feel like it is my home now.

DR: Have you ever experienced yourself discrimination or prejudice against you because you're from Vietnam?

DT: No.

DR: How do you think Holland as a community has responded to Asian-American people who live here, or Vietnamese, or Laotian, or Cambodian people who live here?

DT: I think because this town is the second one where I live, so I think in Holland, I know that everybody in Holland is treating us very, very nice. I think with Asian, with all of us, not only Vietnamese or Cambodian or Laotian, because I go to some wedding,

and I know some people where I work and I know that it's very, very good.

DR: How is Holland different from St. Louis where you lived before you came here?

DT: It's too many things different. When I first come in St. Louis, I stay in apartment with four families, two downstairs and two upstairs. I never come downstairs or go to the street with only myself. I go with my husband because they're drinking and they're fighting in front of my house. And the police horn can be heard all day long, around and around. I feel nervous. Sometimes if I picked up the curtain and look down, and somebody points at me. I am so afraid, and I never want to go any place, because at first we don't have a car, we don't have nothing. If I want to go to buy postage stamps, I don't dare to go myself. I don't dare to go across the street in one direct line because it's a big, big, big street and you just go halfway and the green light coming. I feel nervous.

The first night I came here when we arrived here about ten o'clock and I feel tired with eight hours drive with my friend, he came to pick us up. When I wake up in that first morning, I think I stay in my village. It's so quiet. I didn't hear anything outside. At first I said, "Where we are now?"

DR: What do you think you as a Vietnamese person can give to or have to offer the community of Holland?

DT: I told myself and I told my family that we are always being good people. We work hard and we get pay that is reserved for our labor. So be good, always.

DR: What changes would you like to see in the community?

DT: I just hope that they have enough jobs for everybody. I don't want anybody to lose their job, or no job, lay off.

DR: What do you think is the best thing about living in Holland? What do you like most about living here?

DT: I think the most is the job, and the second one is everybody is nice and kind.

DR: On the other side of that, what do you think is the worst thing about living in Holland? What don't you like about living here?

DT: Just one thing, but not very important because I know that everybody that lived here many years ago, just one problem, is snow (laughter). But we have to accept it, because everything is better, so we accept few months so cold. That's alright.

DR: Why have you stayed in Holland for as long as you have?

DT: Because I choose this like my country. We have a job here. We have a house here and we know many people here. I never think about moving to another house, another town, because I don't know anybody there and I don't know how to find a job. I think everything okay now.

DR: If you had to say one thing about yourself that you would want people to know about you or you would want to be remembered by, what would that one thing be?

DT: I was thinking about that, and I don't know. I just want to tell the people that I say thank you for everybody, for government, for the country. But the most I thank God about let us come into the United States, to live in Holland, so lucky, to have everybody nice to us. I just say thanks to everybody friends who I have met and my neighbors and my sponsor. And I promise that my family, we will do the best, we will be good people, as much as we can do, to be grateful for what we have received from this country.

DR: Good. I've asked all my questions, but if there's anything else you think I should have asked or if you would like to say more, feel free.

DT: Finally, I would like to say thanks to Mary McIntosh, Mary Butler, Mr. Jim Wemple, and Mr. and Mrs. Schipper, who helped us a lot during time we stay here. I just want to repay people for what they did for us.

DR: Well, thank you very much for taking the time to do this. I appreciate it.

DT: I thank you very much. I am so thankful that you offer me a chance to talk about this because sometimes I want to say thank you to everybody, but I don't know how to. My English is not good

enough to describe my heart and my soul for everything I have got
in Holland, so I just say thank you.