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

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Interview with
Binh Tran
Vietnamese Resident

Conducted June 24, 1994
by Donna M. Rottier

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

DR: This is Donna Rottier. The date is June 24, 1994, and I am interviewing Binh Tran in his home in Holland, Michigan. Could you repeat your full name?

BT: My name is Binh Tran.

DR: Your current address?

BT: I live in 652 Van Raalte, Holland, Michigan.

DR: Your date of birth?

BT: My date of birth on [date removed], 1946.

DR: Where were you born?

BT: I was born in South Vietnam.

DR: In what year did you first move to Holland?

BT: I moved to Holland on August 23, 1984.

DR: Could you begin by describing a little bit about where you grew up and what it was like to grow up in South Vietnam?

BT: I was born in the countryside when WWII just done about a year, or couple years. The war really heavy tumult with the French, a big operation. They destroyed my countryside. My mom and my dad thought so, most everybody moved out to the city nearby. She thought she would put me in school somewhere in the city, maybe better than staying in the countryside. That way I was into the capital seminary school in 1949 or 1950. Until I was eighteen years old, in a priest school, high school, seminary school sponsored by the French government.

After the French government went home they no more sponsors, so there was no more school. I had to stay out by myself to rent a room to go to high school in the city--they call provinces, that means a city like Holland, bigger a little bit. Until I finished high school in 1961/1963, and I was in college a couple years, until 1966. Then I tried to get a job to work at U.S. Embassy in Saigon City, from December 1965 to August 1967.

Then I got drafted to reserve army officers. They call every man at least eighteen years old or only if they are not in college full time or they finished college. They must be drafted into the service. They drafted into the service to army officer school, or if they join to any forces, like navy, air force, that's okay. But if they not join to and then they drafted you. Generally if you don't have a high school graduate or a college degree, they drafted you into the service, army, some NCO, or most of them soldier.

I'd been in service after basic training. Before that I had planned to work for U.S. Embassy before that, so I would talk English, a lot more English than people. During the Vietnam War the U.S. government, they needed a lot of interpreters for U.S. troops. So that's the job I was transferred to work for, interpreter for U.S. troops, August 30 in 1967 to work for U.S. 25th infantry division. With interpret for MID (Military Intelligent Detachment) and CIA until 1970. After 1970, the first

divisions moved out of Vietnam. Then the war was almost over, but I'm not sure which units they move back to the United States. But the 25th they moved back to the United States. Still most American units moved back to the United States, but some of them were still in Vietnam, like 173rd Airborne and 82nd Airborne. After the 25th moved back to the United States, I was transferred to 173rd Airborne to work. The last day, December 1973, then we were back to no more work for U.S. troops and then they send me back to the regular Vietnamese army.

I had a chance to work for training for U.S. Communications System, they call ICS, that means International Communications System, to training for my FCC. They training before they move back to the United States. So we have to graduate and then we have to took over the own communications station. I worked just about a year, year and a half, until 1975, Communists occupied Vietnam.

DR: Were you married in Vietnam?

BT: Yes, I was married in November, 1969. Right now I have three children. Two sons. The older one, almost twenty-four right now. A year after I married I had the oldest one. The second one is twenty-one right now. The third one my daughter. She is eighteen; she's in Hope College Upward Bound right now. Both my sons, they've been in Hope College Upward Bound. I came here in August 1984 with two sons and one brother.

DR: How did you leave Vietnam?

BT: Most of the people, after the Communists occupied, the first people came into the United States who were on duty in the service. Most of them that came in here first were people in the navy and air force. Because they were on duty, and on 30 April 1975, that's the last day, they were on duty on the plane, on the ship, and they have to take off from Vietnam. So they take off, and they couldn't back. Some of them tried to get back on and go home, but they couldn't. That's how the first kind of people came into the United States. They take off outside of the ocean, and they were rescued by U.S. navy ships, the big ships, any small ship from Vietnam navy, or a lot of them air force. If you might know or you saw some picture, really interesting, some helicopter pilot, Vietnamese, they fly over the ocean until they couldn't go any further. Then they landed on the ships, and what they couldn't land in, they jump out from helicopters down to the ocean and people would rescue them. I understand, they rescued them on big ships, they carried to the camps, like the Philippines. That's the first year I know about or had heard about that people came into the United States right after a year.

Later, about three years after, 1978, some people tried to get out from Vietnam because, one thing, the Communists they tied people down and they gave most people in the service a really hard time. Most of the officers, or big shots like who work for U.S.

government or Vietnamese government, all the people in high rank offices or civilian service, like doctor, or representative, or senator, only in the jail. They put only in the jail after the Communists occupied about a month. They called all officers from second lieutenant up to general, from general up any office in government, and threw all the people in the jail.

About three years after people were in the jail, they released some, about five percent. Some more about a couple months before three years, but most of them after three years. After they leave, I don't know who figures out, they try to escape by boat. So some people, they try to looking for to buy a boat, to escape. That's first year in 1978. Most of them, officers, just get out from jail, because we couldn't do anything, we don't have a job, and family, no work, nothing, because often family their own people work for the Vietnamese government, or relatives with people who worked for government or U.S. government. So we would work by ourselves. A lot of people sold their house, about three years. A lot of people, with their husband in the jail, they don't have money, they don't have a job, and they sold their house, they sold any property in their house, might keep living, or try to send money something they could manage for their husband in jail.

After they get out from jail, some of the people, we don't have a pass or permit to go anywhere outside the city or outside

the home. That year they kept a boat a year or something. Some Communists they figure out if they let the people and they figure out where you make the money. Then they let their own people know. If they have money or something, they can register to escape. But most people in the service are living with people or we don't know risk, we don't have enough money, because we have to pay by gold, not by cash, but by gold. They cost like \$550 dollars for about two bars.

But that way, a lot of Chinese people, they had the money, most of them Communist people, the Chinese, they had money. They paid for and they set up a boat and everything before they go, they escape. They teased people, look, they let them go, except very few. Most of them, they let them go. A lot of people they lost money. Some of them still owned property and they couldn't go after 1978 about three years after occupied time. Finally they turned out really poor and a lot of them finally turned out with no house to live in, no relatives, missing relatives, missing whole families. Most of them officers or in service in the jail, they get out. Some of them, they have wife and children at home. They think they leave and they might have some money. They say, okay they might escape by boat. They escape, and finally they couldn't pay all the money, they sold all the house and tried to go. But they couldn't go, husband came home. It's really bad.

To me the same. I was in the jail. Then I think, I'll try to buy a boat to escape. In 1979. But to me, because I, they tie me down really bad then and say you are no friend of mine, in my situation, go. Some friend of mine, a lot of people look like they'd just been in service. An officer or what was the most important job or something. And to me, they know my background. I had worked for U.S. Embassy with CIA. They know that and they have no people, if they know that, they kill right away afterwards. They occupy about one year. They still try to find out who was bad or who worked for the U.S. government, or Vietnamese government, who were big shots, or important jobs. Me, I was so scared that year. I was lucky, they tried to kill me and put me in jail. Because that year I worked. Usually people work I'd been wearing a different uniform, not like a regular, you are army, you wear an army uniform or marine uniform. I worked for CIA so sometimes I wore civilian clothes and you could look like you stayed neighbor and like that, one neighbor next to your house, and another neighbor. Before they know what you work during the day, or what you do during your life, and after Communists occupy, and they know and they tell everybody. Most of the Communists, they come anyhow and ask what did you do before, what was your job. If you tell the truth, it's okay, if you don't. Or they send out a meeting every week, almost every night, when they occupy about a year and they call all neighbors.

meeting, meeting every night talking and talking a couple hours and they ask everybody who they were before and then sometimes you keep secrets. Maybe somebody they know and then if you don't tell the truth, they put you in jail. They give a hard time for everybody. That's the only way some people they could stay in Vietnam is try to escape by boat.

Me, I wasn't special, but lucky somebody save my life and in 1979, I tried to go back to my countryside, because my countryside meets the ocean. My mom, because I couldn't go back in there also, and my mom went back in there and tried to stay there and work for countryside people for a while and try and buy a boat. A lot of people were like that. If they had the money, or friends or something, they might owe a friend or that relative buy a boat who stay for a while because others escape. You have a boat, for nobody knows you have a boat or at least somebody in the countryside, they own a boat before. You just keep it a secret, talking or something, deal with everything, money or something, set up where and location at the camp. How many people were on the boat, secret place. Most people try to be landing a boat to escape most of midnight or morning want to, not can go by during the day on that year.

The first time I tried to escape by boat in 1979, I was lucky to just go back to the countryside to visit my relatives and just stay one night. During the great Vietnamese Tet, it's a big

holiday for the Vietnamese New Year. That's during the day, because before, Vietnamese custom, New Year, we had about three to seven days free, no work or anything. People would just stay home or prepare food a couple weeks before and then three days during the New Year they stay home eating and playing and go to any relative or anywhere. You can go, really freedom, and that's bad, the government they benefit, doing favor for those people who go anywhere, a lot of traffic, a lot of happy, no problem for us.

By the way, I try to go back to the countryside, I just look like visit my relatives one night and they captured me. They said I don't have permission to go. Then they told me come in here, and asked me questions: what did you come in here for and what did you do in here? They put me in jail again a couple weeks. Lucky I get out and then back to Saigon again. I stayed for another two years. Finally my brother got a job as a teacher, tried to go back to the countryside to teach in a primary school. That way he could prepare a boat and everything. Lucky I kept that day. On May 23, 1983, that is the day I left my countryside on Vietnam at about 1:30 in the morning.

My boat was really small. I would say I'd never seen anybody whose boat was like me, really small, like a sampan. I tried to build the wood sides up a little bit higher. But nobody couldn't go in that boat, but to me, I thought, I can row that boat, if the ocean's really peaceful. I tried to look in the weather really

good, and that be lucky, four days four nights the weather was really calm. If a big wind like that, I thought, I would die in the ocean. A lot of people die in the ocean, some of them really big boats. A lot of people are missing after Communists occupy, a lot of people missing on the ocean.

During the war, not a lot of Vietnamese civilians or women or children died. Maybe a lot more then, but not a lot like the short time people who die in the ocean or are missing, because right now a lot of people with families here in Vietnam, they're missing their children on the ocean, and never know where they were, right now. When I came here, or people who been here, we still hear about some small island in Indonesia or Malaysia or Thailand they still hide Vietnamese people in there, most of them women or girls. That story I heard about, but I'm not sure. When we had been here already, they've been raped a couple days on the ocean by Thailand Christian boat people, and Malaysia and Indonesia. They saw all the Vietnamese boats, most of them a lot of women and girls in that boat. Some of them they rape them right on the boat and then they take them along with them a couple days. After that they release them and some of them try to go back and they land in the refugee camp. Some of them they took away with them and they killed them all. I was in the camp, Malaysia camp, a couple boats and about ten women, some of them

married already, they had two or three kids, most of them were married, and they had been raped on the boat.

When I was in the camps, I know people, they want me to work for them. I represent for the people in the camp to work with the U.S. representative in the camp to solve any problems people would have, so I know a lot of the camp people. Anybody when I was in the camp at that time, everybody's situation, I hold a record of everybody, about five thousand people that live in Malaysia camp. Every day, I have to look in the record, what their positions were before, what there job was, or what kind of people, before U.S. representative will accept you to the United States.

DR: How many people in your family did you leave Vietnam with?

BT: I left, two sons with me, and one uncle, that's the four people in my family. I left Vietnam on May, 1983. Four nights, four days, I land outside Malaysia ocean, on the oil rigs. They had a lot of ships they set up on the ocean, they brought from the ocean. A lot of people they land that way, but for me, I have a really small boat, I came, and lucky right in there. I went with my small motor, a motor a little bit bigger than a lawn mower motor. The motor was broken, I couldn't go anywhere.

They told me directions to go to Malaysia refugee camp in the island, they call the Pulau Pidong Refugee Camp. They have a big island. I stayed in the oil rigs about two days, and they had a supply ship from Malaysia capital with food for a couple days. A

supply ship to supply any ship. Before that a lot of people in there, about four or five thousand people in 1979. I know 1981, 1982, about ten thousand people living there all the time. The year I came just about five thousand three hundred, four hundred something. I stayed there about one-half month. After, they took me to Pulau Pidong Refugee Camp in Malaysia.

When I stayed there about five months, four months in the Pulau Pidong Island, and everybody the same. Some stay there longer, one year, six months, some of them two years because they don't have priority to go. But if people have priority to go over there, going to the United States, just people who worked for the U.S. government or Vietnamese government at least a year, all the people in service, they have a record on paper to show them, and then they couple times interview and then they about at least for five months after, and then they accept. After they accept, they transfer to a second camp right to Malaysia capital. If people don't have priority to go into the United States, they stay there with another representative like France, or Canada, or Australia, they accept no people. I stayed in a second camp in Malaysia about another six months, and then they transferred to Philippines camp. That's a large camp. Everybody must before come into the United States, must stay in the Philippines camp at least five or six months for language training, cultural orientation.

DR: Were you sponsored by a person or an organization to come to the United States?

BT: Let me tell a little bit about people, processes, before they came over. That year more people land in Malaysia country because Malaysia is nearby and they have already a big island. An easy way to land in Malaysia because Thailand is nearby, but Thailand people that heard about that they raped a lot of people and they took away. So they scared they couldn't land. They tried to go around a little bit because Vietnam there are a lot of provinces nearby Thailand, really close. They might go about one day and they get into Thailand border into Thailand country. They had heard about that, then they didn't go to Thailand, they go around and they get into Malaysia. A lot of people they go by boat they don't have a compass with them. They don't know which direction they go. Some of them they just know by their mind or they just know by direction a little bit on their mind, but a lot of them, they don't have a compass to go with them. But if they have a compass and they go the right direction to Malaysia or Indonesia. Most people they land in Malaysia, more than in any country. Next is Singapore, because Singapore is between Malaysia and Indonesia. That's the three countries. The fourth, that's the Philippines.

If some of them go a little bit big boat, like some of the big boats they go a week and they sail outside, sometimes they can go to the Philippines in about six or seven days. Some of them

they are lost about one-half months, and they land to the Philippines. But a lot of them they lucky and if they lost about one-half months, a couple boats, I don't know how many, about half the people die on the boat. Some of them are still alive, but when they landed, they couldn't walk, they couldn't do nothing much at least about a month later.

When we were accepted, already transferred to the second camp. We for another interview waited at least three or four months. When we waited for an interview the second time, the first camp we just need a representative for the country to accept, but that's not sure to go yet. But waiting for a second camp, that's the INS, from immigration, they accept. After they accept that and then they already send all the documents to the United States. I don't know if everybody in here is sponsored, but when they accept the second time already, and then we wait during they accept. After that they send us to the Philippine camp.

In the Philippines we have to learn the language, cultural orientation during the time waiting for a sponsor. Some of them had a sponsor before they finished four months in orientation in the language, English, but some of them, they finished four months in language, everything, the process and all, but they don't have a sponsor. They have to wait more. But a lot of them have a

sponsor ready for them before a couple weeks before they finish orientation or English class.

I heard a lot of sponsors from, they call one of them the USCC, that's the United States Catholic Conference. They pick people who are religious, like me, I was Catholic. The USCC, that's the agency from New York. A lot of people are Catholic, Vietnamese Catholics. They came here by that agency. I heard about sixteen or seventeen agencies, different names, but I couldn't remember it all. Most are sponsored by the church, a lot of Protestant churches, Reformed Church.

Everybody at least they had a sponsor before they came over here, because we don't know where we're going to. We don't have how we live in here. We learn in Philippines orientation, they teach most everything before coming into the United States, how you live. They show everything like the name of restaurants, common restaurants in here like McDonald's, Burger King. They already teach these in the Philippines. I saw pictures in Philippines, also.

I was lucky from the first time I worked until when I go in the service. I was mostly work for with American people, until I been in the camp. Finally they looked into my record. They picked me up and I worked for them without pay, without anything in the Philippines in the camp. I been fifteen months in camps, eight months in Malaysia and seven months in the Philippines. In

the Philippines, too, a lot of people they didn't work, they didn't do anything. They just stayed home. Every day they had the food ready, for an important meeting, and they just lay around. To me I was busy every day in the camps; eighteen months I don't have time to rest. Yes, you need the rest, you don't need to work, but people, and then they call and come by home from in the Philippines. A lot of people before I help try to work for them, a lot of problems every day in the camp. People come and complain about them. They stay in a little room, six, seven, ten people in a room. We sleep on the floor, a little bed on the floor. Some of them are really confused. They had four young guys in one room, all one family with two kids in there. Then people would come behind after about a month, and then they sent this one single girl to stay together with them. A lot of problems. They couldn't stay, four guys there, they sent another girl to live in there, but with no room, no bed separate. A lot of problems, they call every day. A lot of people they don't have too much English to talk about to solve the problem.

DR: How did you get from the last camp in the Philippines to Holland?

BT: After we finished in language and orientation, they called us in the office and let me know, tomorrow or next week, you will go into the United States. That's the INS or somebody representing the Philippines, an American. They go interview. That's a lot of interview. They will point where we're going to. Like me, they

pointed in Grand Rapids. They give me a map. I still got the map. We go to Grand Rapids with our last sponsor. Some of them, they have priority to chose which state to go into, like me. In the camp of four or five thousand people just two cases special, me with another one. That's a priority in a camp.

I know the five priorities. Number one, they benefit for people in the service, from full colonel up to general, that's a first priority. When they came in the camps, look like from the year 1979, the first year people in that camp, until 1984, I was in the camp. If those people came in the camp, they don't need to stay there too long, just about two or three months. They work really fast for them and they let them go right away. Because that's an important person, they don't keep them in there too long.

The second priority. If people have worked for the U.S. government, or also in the service, they had the second priority. Second priority, INS could not deny those people. They must be accepted. So I had second priority.

The third priority, people they can go into the United States by relatives in the United States a year before. Like people who just came into the camp and their relatives came in here escaped by boat about a year before, they'd been here already. They had a record from here over there. Okay, they are relatives, look like a father, wife, or son. Brother a little bit is okay, but they

didn't consider too much about relatives brother, without husband, wife, and children. That is the third priority.

The fourth priority for Vietnamese people who were in the service, like military service, anybody who was in military service. They must be accepted. They couldn't deny that one for a priority.

Fifth priority is they accept children, like minorities that came in there without parents, no relatives in here. That is the fifth priority. Without priority are people who don't work for government, no relatives, not been in service, nothing. They couldn't go in the United States.

DR: Could you talk a little bit about coming to Holland. What did you do when you first got here?

BT: I landed here about 8:00 on August 23rd, by Our Lady of the Lake Church sponsored. That's the one lady, Mary McIntosh. She take care of me and my family. I really appreciate it. They already rented a house for me at 201 W. 14th. I lived in that house for two years. I landed to Grand Rapids Airport and she with one sister, Jennifer of Our Lady of the Lake, and another person pick me up. I came with two sons right now and with my brother, with another brother. Not my blood brother, but another brother, in my case two brothers, one with me a blood brother and the other brother.

We stayed there about two years and a couple months then I mortgaged and I came over here. That church helped me a lot about a couple months. They got me work right away. Just to get some support from the church. They supported me about six months and then they put me to work right away. I could work right away because they know my record and everything, but a lot of people when they came here, they couldn't talk English very well. Right now a lot of people, they stay home and learn some more English at Community Ed.

But in the Philippines, everybody had to learn English in there, but most of them are people like women or something, they couldn't learn, a long time they forgot English. Even my wife or myself or my son, we learned English in high school. English beginning teaching in high school in 1956. That's the first year I took it in high school. Everybody they came here from that year now, most people we learn English. Most of them they can read and write a little bit good, but they couldn't talk, because no conversation, just those people who been work for our own and had a chance to the G.I. and the American people, and they could talk. Until later, five or six more years ago, they know they come over here, they try to learn more in Vietnam, and practice some more. They can talk, but most of them, they know a little bit of English.

In 1984, not a lot of Vietnamese people come in around Holland yet. Still not many. I don't know how many families, but around ten years ago. But now I know in Holland at least a hundred families right now.

DR: What was your first job in Holland?

BT: A month after, Mary, they, put me to work. I thought I need to stay about at least six months. If I learn more English I try to pick up some new slang here or some new word in here. But I had worked for a long time in Vietnam, and I learned a lot of different words to use. When I worked in the U.S. Embassy a lot of work, jobs working right in the office here. But they still use a lot of words different in here. Working there I translated a lot of documents. I learned from U.S. Embassy education, a lot of new words. When I been here they didn't use that word right now a lot. When I was in the service, with the G.I., a lot of talk, a lot of words different right here. I know a lot of words, G.I.s they talking, that's most of them, slang they use in the service. But a lot of talking or the way of talking, I pick up, I learn that.

First I worked temporary for a security guard from Pinkerton Security Guard. Before they had some contract in here. I worked in this building right here on Ottawa and 24th, an empty building from before, the Dunn Manufacturing Company, before they went bankrupt. It was an empty building. I worked there about six

months for security guard. After six months I told them I was an electronics engineer technology. I been learning with ITT, ICS for about a year. I had my certificate and had already applied for that job. But I lost any documents, I didn't bring them with me. So I burned our documents.

Most people they burned their documents, very important documents, before the Communists occupied. A lot of clothes, you couldn't believe, looked like military uniforms. We burned our own uniforms so when the Communists came. But after, about a year after, they don't have uniforms or clothes to wear to work with, so they're looking for that uniform again. Before they come, about a week after, everybody talking, the Communists really bad, really strange, they kill everybody, they burn, they steal everything. Most of them look like any paper related with government or with the U.S. or any English words, they burn it. They don't let the Communists know. Because they said if they saw any language, an English word, they thought that the people worked for the CIA or something. They don't know who the CIA, what kind of CIA job. But they could find any paper, document, from those people in the houses, though, with an English word, they said, you worked for Americans, or something American.

Then I worked for them almost six months. I said, I'd like to work an electronics job. I had school for that. I worked after I get out of school. Then I work more than a year and a

half in repair telephone equipment. I learned, but right now I didn't work that job. I can repair telephones, like when the telephone is broke, or doesn't have a dial tone, or why a telephone doesn't work. One of the ladies at Community Ed.--also I been here I went to Community Ed. to learn English right away--and one at Community Ed., her name is Joy, she was a community counselor. Right now she is in retirement. Her home is right down 32nd down here. I show her a little bit about, I had one certificate right now for the Vietnamese work and then English also. I showed her. She said, okay, and she brought me to MESC to interview. They interviewed for Thermotron Industries Inc. I worked at Thermotron in the plant on Kollen Park. I continued to work there for six years, after exactly six years and a half. The reason I'm working there because I thought Thermotron is a good company, but not good pay, benefits weren't good.

I work in there six months and then I went back to school in Grand Rapids right away, at ITT, electronics engineer technology. I worked first shift in there. I got off before 3:30, came home, I cooked, took a shower, and then grab some food and then 5:15 I left here and went to Grand Rapids, and 6:00 sitting in the class. Two years continued like that, from September 1985 to September 1987. I finished two years at ITT. After I finished I tried to get a technician job at Thermotron, just assembly, electronics assembly, an easy job, but I like it, just so I repair, like I

been working in Vietnam before, repair a circuit board. Repair and hook up to the oscillator on the circuit to look at, even on the circuit, half the people on the light they view the circuit, they work good or not. Even those that work, what happen, people maybe, there'd be some wrong direction. I like to work that job, but finally they don't let me work it. I asked somebody, it's just one department together, people sit down together. It isn't too much different, but a little bit of pay, wasn't different, but I like to work that job more. They don't let me work that job. They only work on another couple years after. They put me on a shipment take care of the whole department, shipment. I packed up their circuit board to ship it. I do that for three years more. I got a little tired of the job. They called the ACS department at Thermotron. They hook up a thermocup line. They hook up for temperature in the chamber, because when you hook up it looks like most everything in there, they need the thermocup. One of them makes a cold system and one of them a hot system.

Finally I tried to put applications like Prince Corporation, Donnelly, some big companies. I looked around in Holland, I know which companies are the good ones. I took that application. Finally about three years ago Donnelly they called me and interviewed. A year before--I should have worked four years ago, but it's been just about three years--Already they send me to take a test and everything. Finally they didn't call me to work. I

don't know why. I thought, well, if they didn't hire me and they didn't call to take a test for a doctor, didn't have to pay for a doctor or something. I didn't know too much. I didn't bug them, I didn't call them. Finally about a year after, I forgot it. They called me ready to work already. A day after they called back and they said they canceled. I asked them why, because everything is ready. I don't understand why the big companies who need people to work, call people to work already. Finally they cancel and they said they don't know. I forgot it. Another year after, I didn't put applications in, and they called me back again. They said, "Now do you want to go to work?" I said, "Okay, why not?" A little bit more pay. So I work at Donnelly right now.

DR: What do you do at Donnelly?

BT: Right now I work at the North side plant. They have two plants, JF Donnelly South and JF Donnelly North. Mostly I make car windows. They call operator technician. You work with a team. They set up a team with two machines. One team is two machines, at least fourteen people for two machines. I work with a machine, making a Buick car window, the side window. Two years before, we were machine operator the whole week, and another week you were to trim windows, on the trim you prime, black primer. A year later now, they change processing machines to rotation every day. Monday you start doing machine operator. They put a number

stations. On a machine there are six stations. Station number one, Monday you start to machine operator. Tuesday you go back to station number two to trim the window. Wednesday you make station number three, trim the window, too. Thursday, you go to number four, black primer. Friday you go to number five, repair. The next day you go back to trim again. There are six days in this machine. I work two machines. We make both of the side windows, two machines, one on the right hand and one on the left hand.

DR: You said that there are probably now about 100 Vietnamese families living Holland?

BT: I would say a little bit about the people and how people come into the United States. I would say again, looks like the first time people would come on the duty, on the service. People they on the boats, take off. Then they are rescued on a U.S. ship in the ocean and they took off into the Philippines camp. When I been here, I know about four or five people, most of them single people in the service, they've been here. Until 1978, 1979, people just tried to escape by boat. From that year, I don't know how many people had been here already, but not many, very few. The Reformed Church, they sponsor. In 1984, when I came, should be the first family from Our Lady of the Lake sponsor, but I am the second.

I should be living in Philippines camp about three months before. I came in here on August 1984, because another brother,

he was talking about he knows my brother. He'd been really bad in Philippines camp, drunk or something like that. They put him in the jail. I was all ready to go, but I had to wait for him three months in the camp. I'm so mad about because we don't like to stay in the camp too long. The church rent a house, they were ready everything to me already. I didn't come; so they picked another family, the first family. The first family stayed in the house 201 14th about two months and they had a relative in California. They moved there. I already came, so they kept that house, so I stayed there, too. So that was the second family from Our Lady of the Lake sponsor.

They were still going here by boat, escape by boat, until 1982. People from, they call the Amerasian, that means American people who G.I.s left in Vietnam. That year in 1982, Vietnamese government and the U.S., they agreed to process so we would let only G.I.s' kids left in Vietnam come over here. That's from 1982. Some of them came over here, but they came still in the camps. I'd been in the Philippines camp already a couple months and then the first time people they came into the Philippines direct from Vietnam. They stayed there at least four or five months. Everybody since 1982, processing they work on that cases.

I know right now not many. They came here just about five years ago, not too long. I know four or five people like that, most of them were girls. One of the ladies had two daughters.

There were about five or six women, they had American people right here in Holland. Until 1990, that is the last benefit from the U.S. government and Vietnamese. They call it the ODP. That is from the U.S. Embassy in Thailand they call ODP, Operations Departure Program. Later they call the education camp, they mean a sub-program, an education center for all the officers who were in the jail. After they in the jail at least three years, they can apply to come over here. They stop that in 1990. They came here right now.

I know right now in Holland about eight families, officer, they came just about three years ago. Our Lady of the Lake sponsors right now about seven families. Me the second, and the third one, he was not in the military service, but he escaped by boat. The fourth one, he escaped by boat also, but he was a policeman. The fifth one, countryside, he escaped by boat. The sixth one, that was three years ago. He was an officer, a police major, not even eighth or ninth year in jail. That is the sixth family. The seventh family officer also. So I know right now in Holland about six families of officers: one police lieutenant, and one major, and also about a year after one captain in the army, he was the brother of a major officer, two three another lieutenant in the army.

DR: Did you mention before that there are some people in Holland who are working on organizing a Vietnamese association?

BT: Yes. Right now we've been meeting two weeks already. The first week like I told you, one of the men, he was captain in the army. Last week in my house, on Saturday. On this week Sunday they come to my house again. We already go into a little bit, set up, and picking people to represent in Holland. To try to talk and try to let all the Vietnamese out there know we try set up a committee of people, something we've got to set up, put something together. Last week we talked a little bit. This week Sunday they plan to talk again.

Also, I just found two weeks ago, that the first week of meeting, one Vietnamese girl [Olivia Ly-Pieknik], she's about thirty-two years old. She works with some company, Afco Industries, but she also works with the Grand Rapids Press. She tries getting around to know anybody, Vietnamese around Holland to try to get any information. Last week we were talking about it. She said she was talking with somebody, the church or somebody, sponsor for the Vietnamese Association. That's so we have a little bit of money when we want to do something. Like already for another month we try to set up a picnic or something like that. She gets some ideas really good like that. We've been talking about this again and how we to deal with that. We might get that set up and how we get money. Or people leave who don't have an agency or a place to sponsor. We might collect money from people who want to go to the picnic. Later on we try to work on

that. I'm not sure when we do it or not or if still continue. But we like to get if something happens, if people need something. Right now because I know still some officer they might come over here now. Because right now still a lot of Vietnamese officers they still wait in Vietnam to come over here. Right now the officer when they stop to work on that now in 1990, right now I know just about two weeks ago, the number one from 1990 until now, number twenty-two or twenty-four came. Before they go, the whole family, children without marriage. Right now a couple friends of mine, captain, he might go right now, or he went here already, I'm not sure. That's what we try.

I'm not sure how many people came to my house Sunday. That girl, she's living in Grand Haven. She married with American man, but she talks English very well. She knows a lot of people. I don't know how long she's been working with the Press, but she been here about a couple years before me. I don't know how she study English very well. I just found out last week, her hometown is the same as my hometown. We just talking a little bit about our hometown, and I know her family, regular Chinese people. We call Chinese people, but in Saigon look like Vietnam. A lot of them we call Chinese people, but most are Vietnamese-Chinese people. Look like me, my parents were Chinese also. My grandfather and before, they were Chinese, but my father and my mom, they stayed far away from people talking China. So they

didn't talk Chinese; they just know a little bit. Look like that girl, because some of them, they always with Chinese people. So sometimes we call them Chinese people. Sometimes it makes them embarrassed a little bit. But she were young, and I don't know how long she's been learning English, but it look like she just came here to learn English. In Vietnam I don't think she learned English too well.

But some of them young, they been here like people. So they been just ten years, like my second son, Phe, he talks English about the same as an American. When he been here, he was ten years old already. But he went to school and also he took some family from the church and pick up English every week when they play. He always talked English around there. Until now, he talks English very well. Right now he works. He's just off from school, his first year in college. He works at Meijer, and I let him apply because at Donnelly, they offer college students work for summer. He works now a month and a week or so, at Donnelly also. He works three jobs right now. Saturday morning he works for Holland City Hall for soccer or something.

DR: Are you involved with any other community activities? Do you belong to a church or other religious group?

BT: I go to the church, right after I've been here. Our Lady of the Lake Church, because that church sponsored my family, and also Catholic church. I was Catholic religious. Before, a couple

years been here, every summertime they call me to join with them for picnic at the church. We played soccer two time about three years I'd been here. We play in the church, about five or six years ago. But we Vietnamese, we Catholic people. At St. Frances de Sales, we get a lot of Catholic people right now, at least about a hundred people. So we went to the church, and every week right now they try to sing in the church. A Vietnamese father also, they have every two weeks on Sunday, 3:00, a Vietnamese mass. We sing, with the Bible, something by Vietnamese by themselves. I been with them, but I don't know too many, I been busy.

Also the church, sometimes Mary she sponsor at least two American kids already. She sponsor and she put them stay in my house. One of them stayed about a year, and then he moved to California. Another church, Third Reformed Church, they sponsor. That family, she and her husband, know me when I been here, her kids the same. They been around a long time ago. Right now she and her husband moved to Texas. John Englehard. He been working here at Holland Hospital, director of Pastcare Center. He got a job in Texas and then he moved his family there. Her church sponsor him, and then she let him stay in my house also about a year, taking another young man and he moved to California. Another one, Mary just once sponsored about a year and a half ago. He just moved out of my house about a couple months now.

Everything I can help him. Now he work, but he couldn't talk English. Every time you interview him and give him a raise or a review, called me to interpret. I been home about a couple months now. My foot since been healed up. I hope I can be back to work July 5th or 6th. They did surgery. I just feel good right now. The doctor he recommend surgery. After surgery I don't feel good until today. I thought I'm not going to surgery. I thought after surgery maybe worse than before, but I hope maybe not.

DR: What one thing about your experience or about yourself would you like people to know about yourself?

BT: I thought to me, my personality. If I feel free, I can do something, my experience or my ability, I can do anything. I don't mind, but something is really busy for me, I still forgotten and I still do something. I been really busy before I got done with school. After school, it been two years. I been in school in ITT. I been off that two years, I back to Grand Valley. But finally this year I quit. I earned just about, I don't know how much credit. They transfer me from ITT two years, forty-eight credit. I tried Grand Valley three years ago half-time. I got about thirty credits right now. They called me up, they said well the program, they'd offer me industrial engineer technology in Grand Valley, about four or five more years. If I not continue the program, I can, I don't know how they transfer another program. I said I don't know. I quit.

But when I been here, I left my wife and my daughter in Vietnam. They just came here exactly right now two year and four month right now. My wife, she didn't talk English good right now, just a little bit, pick up two year already. She tried back to school in Community Ed. every day. I try to bring her to MESC to get a job. She been volunteer work at MESC about three months ago. I got a job in there. They interview for. Finally they don't have a job. One lady at MESC, manager, she really tried to help me, because I been interpreter for her one time, twice, to help Vietnamese people get a job. So she know me and she call me in. I said, okay, why don't now you help my wife. Finally she couldn't find a job. She said if my wife volunteered to work there and she try to help her and talk. My wife volunteer work there three months. Finally, last day, I apply at Teamwork, I know Donnelly, they hire Teamwork work for them, maybe three months, six months, after they might hire. They didn't hire direct from outside. She working right now at Donnelly for Teamwork, right now seven weeks. I hope maybe in a couple more months maybe they hire her. While she work, pick up talking English. My daughter, she pick up a little bit at church right now.

DR: Is your daughter in school right now?

BT: Yes, she's in Upward Bound. I'm going to pick her up about 5:00. They get off Friday night, and then back on Monday. Just for six

weeks or so. Last year she been done her first year, she must have been here a couple months. She been last year in Upward Bound. This year second. My second, Phe, he been there a couple years. Elizabeth the director of Upward Bound, and one, a Mexican lady, and another guy. I know a few of them in Upward Bound. Sometimes they talk with me.

Holland is a good place to live. Most Vietnamese, we like living in small towns. We don't like to live in the big cities. Look like few people, they live in Saigon City, that's a big city in Vietnam. Like me, I been there, I live in there. Very few people live in Saigon, but most of them in smaller towns. Though years before, not a lot of traffic jams. Most people they didn't drive a car before. Also in Vietnam we don't have much signal or rules on traffic, on driving. So we know a little bit, signal light, something like that, and speeding, we don't have a speed limit. So people, they drive any way any way. So here they like small town. But a lot of people, they miss that, they get a ticket. Me, I don't. A lot of people, they been here already. Most everybody, we would say, it's a nice place to be.

DR: Do you plan on staying in Holland?

BT: I plan to stay here maybe all my life. But another thing that I hope, if when I will retire, maybe the second chance, maybe I might move to Florida. I've got a little bit problem, I've got a sinus problem, because it's cold, now my feet get cold if the

weather is winter, my feet are really cold. Inside the house I wear socks and the weather, shoes on, boots on, but it's still cold. Before I don't have a problem, but three years ago my nose is cold. My wife, she has that problem in Vietnam. I been in countryside when we were young. I been sick, catch cold a lot, when I was young.

[End of Interview]