12-4-1997

Champassak, Thongwan Leuam Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Larry Wagenaar

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Oral History Interview with
Thongwan Leuam Champassak

Conducted December 4, 1997
by Larry Wagenaar

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
LW: Should I call you Thong or Thongwan?

TC: Thongwan.

LW: Thongwan, could state your full name and your date of birth for me please?

TC: My name is Thongwan Leuam Champassak. I was born [date removed], 1952, in Laos.

LW: Tell me a little bit about growing up in Laos.

TC: I grew up in a big family. My father is a farmer. We have ten of us together. I am the second in the family. The life in Laos, compared to here, is very poverty, is poor. I worked very hard on the farm with my dad, especially would be the boy or the son who would help dad to work on the field. But since my father had all daughters, I was the older one, I had to help him and we worked from dusk to dawn. I did everything with my dad you have to do for living out there. We had less food and less clothes; everything there is opposite from here. Less education, and we don't have much opportunity to do anything that we have here.

LW: What was is your father's name?

TC: My father's name is Somdy.

LW: And your mother?

TC: My mother's name is Thongpheiw. They are both passed away now. My mother passed away in 1969, and my dad passed away in 1983 in refugee camp in Thailand.
LW: How many siblings do you have?

TC: Right now we have seven of us together. Three of them died. I have four sisters and one brother, six living in Holland. My brother is married with a caucasian women. He lives between Holland and Grand Haven. And another sister lives in Wyoming city not far away from Holland. She married a Vietnamese man and has four children. She used to work for ____________, but now she took the day off to take care of the four children at home.

LW: Tell me what it was like when the Communists took over. How did life change for you?

TC: When the Communists took over, it was a very difficult life for most of the officers in the army. That was just very hard for them to be there. Everything changed. More strict work. Everything belonged to the Communists. No independence. I escaped. My husband came before I did. He had to escape eight months before I did. I had to stay with three children. After my sons died eight months later, I just find a way to follow my husband to join him in the camp. We had to work hard but we don't get paid. You work on the field, they give you a certain amount. You work for your own farm but they collect most of it, give some percent to you to eat. The money is no value after that. And the work they would say, first they say we have to work side by side as a brother. When they know how to do the job they say it is my place that it is not for you. If you are happy to be here you be here, if not, feel free to leave. That's how people leaving every night. They just try to escape. If they just leave for them to see, they kill. They had to escape in the night. If I see you today and
tomorrow you don't see me, it means either I died or I escaped and I crossed the Mekong River to Thailand border to join up in the United Nation camp.

LW: We're going to spend most of our time talking about Holland, but I want to get your personal story before you came here. Tell me about the escape. How did you do it? How did your husband do it?

TC: My husband escaped with his two friends. They swam across Mekong River with a bamboo piece about this long, with only one possession, across Mekong River and they just tried a way to get to the camp. Then while he was in the camp for eight months he tried seven times to go back to Laos to get me and the kids. But he failed. Finally, I just moved from his sister, after he left me here he left me with his sister. I moved from his sister's area to my relative's house. I worked for the store from 5 in the morning to 6 in the evening to earn money. Since I get that money, 500 Kip Communist money, then I pay an old lady. She had her sons in the campsite and she knew one person who had extra small canoe with a big hole. And she talked to that person and gave him that money then he fixed the boat for us. On the day to escape, he had to add this boat after the Communist counted how many boats along the shore. And that's the day we escaped.

LW: So you escaped in a small canoe across the Mekong?

TC: Across the Mekong River to Thailand.

LW: Then you ended up in a refugee camp with your husband?

TC: Yes. After three days then they took me to a court. I had to stay in the jail for two nights to come to swear that I would pay the fine for illegally entering the country.
Since I have no money, I had to stay in the jail for another 25 days including the day they keep me there, three day before the jail and then two days, and that would be a 30 day fine for that amount of money in Thailand money. After that I had some number to join my husband in the camp. We stayed there until we interviewed with the United Nations. After interview, we had to wait for eleven months to come here for them to find a sponsor. And the hard thing, why it took so long to find a sponsor because my husband came here before in 1972 for Army leadership training. He was a captain in the Laotian Army at that time. Then he met one Christian family who was best friend to him. They took him to church every Sunday and he made profession of faith with them. That’s why he stayed here for five and a half months before he could return home for six months training. When he went there, he tried to come back a second time for advanced course. Our country fell to the Communists at the same time. He didn’t have another opportunity to come. Then he take this chance when he came here at the interview they asked him what kind of sponsor that he wants. He said he was looking for the Christian family sponsor. He did not realize that Michigan has a lot of snow, very cold. They did look for a Christian family for us. It took them eleven months to find one. We had nine members in our family. They had to find a very big house and they set up everything for nine people. That is 702 E. 8th St.

LW: You were on East 8th Street?

TC: Yes, that’s the house they rent for us. So if he had known that Michigan was so cold he would have said warm climate, but still looking for a Christian but staying in some
other climate (laughter).

LW: Who were your sponsors?

TC: Harderwyk Christian Reformed Church, that's taken care of by Mr. Jerry Hertel.

LW: I was wondering--there's a personal connection. I grew up in Harderwyk Church and remember you coming.


LW: In 1979 I was a junior in high school. I was wondering if you were part of the family that had come as part of Harderwyk.

TC: Yes, February 15 when we came here, it would be 17 on Sunday. We came here and on Sunday we go to church to introduce us (laughs). My sophomore currently right now, she was just a baby. She just turned one year old. We came here the fifteenth. She was born February 28. I was still nursing her. When she cried I said I don't care. Since we were the first Laotian family in town, my sponsor found a Vietnamese family to interpret for us because he spent 23 years in Laos. Both husband and wife knew how to speak Lao. There is an interpreter; she is the one that was in front of the church that I chose for defending my daughter in front of the pulpit with the pastor at that time.

LW: What was the name of the family that did the interpretation?

TC: Hung Lee and Tom Lee. And now all his children are grown up too; they live on the northside.

LW: So you came with nine children?

TC: No, nine in the family.
LW: Nine total.

TC: Yes, I had three children, Thun, Chang, and Khankham, the one who was just 11 months and 15 days old. Then I had my mother-in-law, my brother-in-law, my sister and her friend, I call her niece, I don't want her to feel left out. So there is nine of us.

LW: And Harderwyk paid for the airfare?

TC: No, the airfare we signed up for that. We paid them after we had money. We've paid them all now. It took a bit longer than the promise note that we signed. But I paid them up. But Harderwyk helped with rent and with food from the beginning, all supplies, all the clothes, everything--after school, find a job for my husband. Everything they are still taking care of until now, like my children's tuition. So as soon as my husband got a job, we tried to take care of whatever is possible we need and carry on from that so that we can be on our feet and just let them go.

LW: What was your religious background before you came to United States?

TC: Buddhism. My uncle is still there.

LW: Are you still involved in the Christian church here?

TC: Yes, we became members at Harderwyk in 1980, March 2, I think. Yes, that's the day we made profession of faith in the church. My husband was accepted from certificate that he did at Fort Knox, Kentucky, with the Baptist Church. Then my children and I did baptism at that time with Reverend Witts.

LW: Was it difficult to make that transition?

TC: No, it was not difficult for me. I am always looking for something that's new,
alternative concept, adapt to new situations. I was really flexible. I really enjoy that the people from church come to help me to teach me Bible in the same way that I learned English and religion at the same time. We cook and we sing together. We have lots of fun. I enjoyed it. I was 24 at the time, not 45 like now. (laughs)

LW: Times change. Have you had any contact with the new Buddhist Temple that’s out on Port Sheldon?

TC: I received a mailing from them, but I have never been in that area yet. But I talked on a phone with a Buddhist monk a few times about what Mr. Ramirez mentioned to me last time. He said so and so will come, a human rights person would come to interview. I tried to be there, but every time I try, it's always busy--something else comes up more than just go there. We'll be there sometime.

LW: I had the opportunity to interview one of the monks there a couple weeks ago as part of this project. Tell me what your first impressions of Holland were when you came in 1979?

TC: I was scared when it snowed. We had never seen the snow. It come like, we were talking about cotton field, because of all the trees cover with white. And the people were warm person who were very caring. That’s the impression I have because I am already looking at community that way. We met caring person when we come here. They always care for us. They are always come taking turns, either old or young, to come and see us, to welcome us as their family. That’s the thing that we really appreciated. The people, the family, all the change, to move out and in, all over. And so at that time it was a small town, compared to now it is not. What's so big
about is the caring persons here.

LW: The culture was so much different than what you were used to. Did you find difficulty in that?

TC: The culture is kind of like the opposite. It was not really hard on me, but the hard part I had to work between my kids and my husband. He is more in deep in the past, his background. Beside that, he is from the south; I am from the north. I grew up in a family that was very easy. Whatever happened talk it out. For his family, they keep everything inside, try to do the best they can, but it is very hard to share. You know you have to do what you know. For us, I had questions. We always asked; we always talked about it. If you don’t like it, you have to say you don’t like it. For him, you had to say opposite. That’s the thing that had to work very hard between sponsor and my children and my husband. Impress my mother-in-law and brother-in-laws at that time until May when they moved to California.

LW: Did you ever contemplate moving to another climate?

TC: No. I never had that thought in my mind. For now, if my children have some career or something that draws them to that is going to be. They will need to be there. I am still looking to travel if I have the opportunity.

LW: You’ve been in Holland now for seventeen years, did you ever run into any issues...you talked about everyone was very caring and so on...but did you run into any discrimination or that kind of thing?

TC: I did mostly in class when I took a class at community education. That is not totally against me, but against another race. Talking like, what they say, they don’t talk
directly to me. In that class it was only me from Asia. And it was about government giving money to the refugees or to immigrants. They can buy the new house, the new car. They can do whatever they want. They don't pay tax. Then it ended up to be the history class. The teachers look for that stuff and we learned the tax sections of this area's citizens, whoever will have to pay tax at that time, then I don't have to fight for that. Also they don't know about the government give everything for aid, whatever that person think about it. But for that class, it happened to be the minister's wife. Their church sponsored Cambodians also from Asia, but she know the true story from us, because we always stay together, close-knit family as much as possible as we can. Like six or seven people working together, we share food, we share shelters, and everything for buying a new car because the old car always broke down. Seven people are taking turns to buy. One person buys, six people help him. They can pay all cash. Then after they are done with that, they all save up and help another person. That's how they get the new one. The teacher stood up for that one. That's the way we do it. We still do it that way until now.

LW: It was a cultural difference that was misunderstood.

TC: So then they were thinking about in here it's different than when they are 17 or 18 or sometime before, like my baby right now. She is 13 years old. She fought her dad to go away from home at that time. He left for two months and come back. And so they can rent their own apartment. They can be free. They can do everything when they go out of that apartment, just like my older daughter right now. I paid 260 for the house and we all lived together. She paid 250 for one room apartment plus
everything. So she doesn’t earn as much as I earn. So it is kind of misunderstanding: the living in here and over there. For working, sometimes in talking we never guess. Sometimes we have to spell it out. They don’t get pronunciation. What I say is not correct. I heard from friend like they speak in Friends of the Faith, "Go back to your country," and stuff. But I just heard from others but nobody says it to me.

LW: It doesn’t happen to you.

TC: I always want to be an outgoing and talking peoples and always talk, talk, talk wherever I go. I have never got confronting in front of me anywhere that I go. I heard the last of the story. Racism is a problem, especially the student who be in school right now. They always say, "Okay, teacher hate Asian student." All this stuff. For me that is not true. If you do something that is not right, they tell you first time, second time you have to stop. The third time you go on and on and on. Who will be patient with you? After they be nice then they should be mean. Some families just understand a different way. For me, I always told my children we came here to start a new life. We had opportunities to have education, to learn as much as you can. Don’t go to school to hate teacher. You have to learn. Your job is to learn. Listen for what you have to know and learn the one you don’t know. Ask questions if you don’t know. Be polite. Respect, care, and helping, that’s the way we have to be. So that’s our philosophy. My husband and I have carried that for a long time.

LW: Is there a lot of community amongst the various Asian-Americans now--Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian? Is there a lot of contact among various communities or do they tend to sort of keep to themselves?
TC: For this situation, it is kind of like they just keep to themselves. In some parts, like factory when they work together, Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese are friends, in some way. But the culture is still different. We all came from the same area. Most of Buddhist religion, which is similar, but most of the Vietnamese prefer the Catholic. Like my sister who married a Vietnamese, she goes to the Catholic Church with her husband. Vietnamese, they are pretty good leaders and they are very demanding. Everywhere they go, they have a good job and good connections. Like last year they had a float in the Tulip Festival, all the Vietnamese community. Now they have Laotian Christian Reformed Church and the Buddhist monks. Either of them try hard to support young generation, but yet it is not successful, but it is still coming. The people between that, we have more than the joys of Buddhist monk or temple or go to church. So a community is in here. Each of them just by groupings. Like all of us in here we just get together like brother and sister most of the time. But for other, whoever in school, whoever needs help, go help them or they come to my house to ask for help.

LW: Is it frustrating for members of these various groups when the majority population tends to think of Asian Americans as all the same? Tell me a little bit about your thoughts on that.

TC: What is frustrating from my opinion is that I want everyone to understand the new situations. For example like school in here. Last interview they had, they took some parents and the students come to interview to get the student Abigail. And they can't find her because the majority of the students is Laotian people. And they have after
the Cambodian, some Vietnamese probably would be the same size. The students fight for all the racial rights. You have for Laotian people why we don't have support, but for that category we have some opening to get them in. But most of the time, I don't know why it is so hard to get them in the school system to work. Number one, when we work as an assistant we don't get the health benefit. Number two, we just work for six hour per day. And number three, in the way of love and care, I work for this because I love children. I love them. I care for them. Most of them didn't even know me when they came here. I deal directly with the parents and the children who I get in touch. It is stable. Who I cannot reach is the very level for that area. Either skips class or parent did not understand what the school system means. Some of the families say because there is a Laotian worker there, my kid's doing bad. They're blame sometimes doesn't make me very...what should I do? I cannot fix the problem. I cannot make them understand. I try to contact them so many times and most of the time they try to avoid, either they don't want to see me or they don't want to hear their family problems. Or they just say, "What is her business to get involved with us? Why do they send her to deal with us?" So at some point I just hope everybody to understand I am here to solve problem, to understand between school and home. What we have to help this young child to learn, to success, to be educated for their future. Their parent cannot be there for them when they will be beginning their own life. They have to do it their own way. If they don't learn, they don't learn. And so, besides that for Asian family...number one, they want to have a job to support the family. When they work hard, they get tired and
they don't have the family life with their children. So after they learn from school they have nothing from home. Most of the family is that way, but some families are very good.

LW: But some families are just too tired because they are working too much?

TC: Some families, even they are tired they still will change the shift to fit with the kids' schedule. The husband may work nights, the wife may work days, and they will take turns and have about a half an hour in between of their time. That family is very good. They can go on, finish high school, go on to college, get the best education and get a good job.

LW: Tell me a little bit about what you do.

TC: My job is called a bilingual assistant. I work from building to building. I started with Monica Giddy in Holland, as part-time work because Friday afternoon I don't have school. I worked for her from 1984 until 1990. They said that I had enough credits from Holland Community Education to graduate with a high school completion. After I graduated, I asked Monica if I could have a full-time job with her. She said no, I lost all Laotians to the north side. Then, Mr. Ramirez asked me to come and work for him. He needed me to get a full-time job there. Then, I started working my first year in 1991. I traveled seven buildings at that time. My main job was to work with the Asian and Laotian students. I would work with them in class and call them at home. For instance, field trips, translating the letters, all kinds of that. When they need is a parent meeting, an IEP meeting, and that is what I did until now. Last year we had a Vietnamese assistant, Dot. He just graduated from
high school. This year he did not return because he wanted to go to school full-time.
We have a Cambodian right now to help. He just works for the Pine Creek
elementary school here, but I never see him. Instead of working for the Laotian
student, I work for all of them. I work whatever building they have. I work with:
Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, Korean, Filipino.

LW: Do you know those languages?

TC: No. I just know Laos. So, I travel from building to building. This year I travel five
buildings; middle school, here (Glerum), and then Waukazoo, Woodside, and
Lakeshore schools.

LW: That is a lot to cover. Where do you live now? You don't live on Eighth Street
anymore?

TC: No. I live at 258 West 16th Street. I lived on 8th Street until December 15, 1980.
We moved to that house. We own it now. We bought as a land contract from a lady.
She was a member of the congregation at that time. She moved to another church.
That couple, they always helped with the love. They are a very nice couple.

LW: How many children do you have now?

TC: I have four, I gave birth to six children and lost two boys. My son will turn 26 in
March, and my older daughter will be 24 at that same time.

LW: Same age as when you came here.

TC: Yes. That's what I told them. I came when I was 27. I was 24 when I went to the
camp. We waited for three years to get here. I had Thun, Chang, Khankham, and
Francine. Khankham, who was a baby when we came, she went to upstate New York
to Wells College. That is an all-woman college. Francine, who is the one who was born here, and also Mark Andrew was born here. I tied my tubes at that time and he died 19 days after birth with spinal meningitis.

LW: What was the cause of the first child you lost?

TC: My second son, I had him in Laos, had diarrhea. At that time it was a very bad disease. Twenty-two children, the same age as my son, died on that day. We buried him before we escaped through Thailand, to follow my husband.

LW: Those are difficult tragedies.

TC: It was very difficult, I almost died. A car almost hit me in the road. I just stand in the middle of the road, I did not know that I walked in the middle of the road.

LW: Tell me what your first job was here in Holland? Did you work right away when you came?

TC: My first job was as a housewife. I would go to school. I would walk from my house to the school, about two and a half blocks. I volunteered. My first job was as a volunteer. I volunteered at the schools. I volunteered as an interpreter at Holland Hospital. Since the beginning, my husband worked second shift and in the mornings he would sleep. When we came, we were the first Laotians here, and my husband used to have social life and a lot of friends. He asked my sponsor to ask different churches to sponsor Laotians to come here from camp. Every three months we had a new family come. We had to go pick them up and translate between the sponsors and them. We would go to Grand Haven, Muskegon, Zeeland, Holland, Overisel, or Hamilton. Their sponsors would always come to ask them, and we went with them.
If they would come in the evening, my husband couldn't go, and my sponsor would ask me to go. I would take my kids and go with them. That is the way I learned, everywhere I would go I would make a mistake and laugh; I learned a new way, and I did it when I make a mistake. Most of the people were really nice. They never put you down, they always help you to say the right way. I had a lot of fun. Some of the sponsors would hold my baby, Francine, who is 17 years old now, and say, "This is my kid." We would make fun of them and we laugh. That couple is very old right now. That is what I would call my first job, translation, an interpreter for all the friends, and go to school, and take care of my children at the same time until 1984. That is the first time that they paid me to work for them. In 1986 they had an on-call interpreter for Holland Hospital. That is the time that they started to pay. So, that is all I did.

LW: Where has your husband worked?

TC: From the beginning, he worked for Prince corporation. He biked there. He worked third shift for seven weeks with his brother. When his brother got that money, he said that he was saving that money to buy a ticket with his mom to California, and he just left for California, with his mom, after the Tulip Festival without telling my husband. After his brother left, he stopped working there. He got an interview at Herman Miller and he worked there until 1989. His job was on second shift and he switched to first shift. When the problem came up to him, he just wanted out of there because of his physical and emotional problem. Then he had no job until 1994. Then he started working with the PIC program, to Kandu Industry for four months. After
that he worked for my sponsor's son, Mike Hertel in a small company called Die Cast, Inc. That was the job he worked until he had a stroke on October 19. He had no benefits that year, and I worked at the school with no benefits, and his bills were $10,000 for that time. He went to emergency two times, and they admitted him to Blodgett Hospital to take care of the problem. Right now he took the pill, and he cannot be home alone, either he will go to day care or come here with me. That is why he is here with me today. He doesn't want to go to day care yet.

LW: Has it affected his ability to talk?

TC: No. It is not that, but it affected his memory. He remembers some things, but he does not recognize the long-term. I took him to school three days in a row and he still doesn't remember how to get out and in of the room I am in. He always asks.

LW: It is a difficult thing to have to do.

TC: Some nights he cannot sleep until 2:00, and some nights he goes to sleep very fast. He always wants to sleep. He eats a lot now. Before he did not eat that much.

LW: Tell me how you think Holland has changed since you have come.

TC: I still remember my kindergartner asked why there wasn't a school road down in 1990. They predicted the year 2000. They said that Holland, in the year 2000, will be like New York (laughing). They said something like that. They put it in the paper too. It is a very growing and blooming industrial kind of town, especially when we built the mall. Everything gets too big.

LW: Are there quite a few new Asian-Americans coming to Holland?

TC: Yes. They are moving from different states. A lot of them came here from
California, Wisconsin, Illinois. Some of them from different states like Ohio, and some other areas, but the majority of them come from California and Chicago. When they came here about six months ago, the put up a new house, and they find a job that they want right away. They always connect with someone who had a job here and always come and work at the factory. Same way with the Vietnamese and Cambodians. The number at the school is increasing every year.

LW: What controversies have you witnessed in Holland?

TC: I don't know that I have.

LW: Are there any controversies that you have thoughts on that have happened in Holland?

This is a question we are asking everyone, so don't feel like I am singling you out.

TC: I don't think I understand the question.

LW: A controversy, in a sense, is something that has been difficult for Holland to deal with, where there have been opposing points of view.

TC: I believe that the Holland city cannot control whatever happens. They are trying the best they can right now to make the best city to live in. My daughter is very sensitive about where we live right now. It is either in the city or a very bad situation to live in. Before they had shootings and stabbings on 14th Street, Washington Square. That is just about next to us. We live on 16th Street. Some of her friends and their parents say that they don't want them to hang out with Francine because of the area we live in--it's very bad. For me, I see it as though Holland city tries to compromise every situation that comes to this city. In my opinion, I hope every nationality living in here should understand the same way and open up and share their opinions and
work together to try to do the best we can to live in harmony. I would like to see more volunteer or more people getting involved from Asian parents. Either get involved with school or the Holland city. Don't just do everything for money, but to just do something to share with the community so that they know they are here to support and help take care of the problem. What we have to fix here or the problem that we have...the problem comes from __________. What is the big problem here, what is good to know, what then don't we know, what should we do to understand each other? Most of the people say that I am too busy with everything, but for me busy is good. I would like to see other people get busy as much as I do, and that everybody will work at the same level. When they are in that area, they will know the truth about what happened over there instead of saying something that they never saw. For example, when I come to the classrooms to observe the class, where the children stay, they always say that my children are very good at home or maybe they will say that they never see them at home, but they are good and that they love the children. I will do the same because I love them. But in another way, I had to study, to be very good at math. One way to find out is to come here and see. Some areas they do what they call a window. You are in the back to see the whole classroom, and not just see your kid, but you see the whole classroom without them knowing that you are there. You see exactly what your kids do to bother others. Most of the parents that come to school to see it, they get connect to teacher. They are very good, they are pleasant, they are caring. The parents that never come, they don't know. That is my goal, I want them to learn. That is why we have the evening
class for the parents. It includes myself being there to introduce to them. We had that last year and it turned out pretty good. This year my husband got sick, so then I had my sister taking a turn to do that. It seems like it is about one or two mothers come that are Asian, and the rest of them are Hispanic students' parents. I test them by seeing them at home, or help them with things they don't know, not only at school, but after the work hour I spend my time with them.

(end of side one)

LW: Why do you think there is a reluctance to volunteer?

TC: The volunteer is a good benefit for me. When you don't have anything to do, you can just serve the community. Number one, you have a friend, number two, you learn a new thing, and number three, you have a job that you do the best because it is at the volunteer end. I used to volunteer before. I go everywhere I can go with my kids before I get a job. I go to Headstart program, I rode the bus with my daughter, I came home with her. They need you over there. Take care of all the kids, sing along with them, all that stuff. That is my philosophy. Besides that, if you don't do anything and sit at home like my husband, I want him to do volunteer work, but he is not my type. He is different (laughing). It is fun. You get to know most of the people in that building. You share some of your personal and family information. That is the way to get to know people, and you know the truth. Instead of just bringing someone out to meet others. If you don't have a job, volunteering is a good one, everywhere.

LW: Have your priorities changed since you've been in the United States?
TC: No. I am still the same, but I am just looking ahead at something better. I still have the same mind set and goals. Working hard and trying to help other families who are struggling with some questions.

LW: You work in the bilingual area, what are the benefits of the program in bilingual education?

TC: I cover the gap between the family and the school. Most of the time, from the beginning, the teachers in here, when we talk, we have face to face. I tried and adopted that, but my husband can't. For some teachers, because they never learn a different culture, when the children came here on their age at 12 years old or ten years old, they are in a lower classroom. When they do something or make a mistake, the teachers talk to them they always have their head down. That means respect, but the teachers say "you have to look at me face to face." That took until my second year working there, whenever they had a problem with that they would take me in. For our culture, we have to look down to show respect, we cannot look eye to eye. Here, that is rude. Another problem is when they would send a letter home, for example an overdue lunch or a report card, or a meeting. A very important letter from school to home, it would never get there. Even though it would get there, they don't know what to read and they just throw it away, or they never give it to them. That is another thing I do. I make the call, I talk to the parent, I have the paper. I come over and home visit. The parents never know anything. Unless they have been here...Right now, we don't have a problem. From the beginning, it was a very big problem. We would take one step at a time. I travel
seven buildings in that year. It was very busy.

LW: That is a lot of territory to cover.

TC: Yes. At home, at church, at school, everywhere...at a store. They would even call me at 2:15 in the morning too.

LW: Do you think there is a perceivable generation gap?

TC: Yes. The problem we still have right now here is that the children that were born here and grew up here say that their parents are old-fashioned thinking. Some parents do not accept the new cultures here, but the kids grew up here. That is very difficult. Also, the school system here is different from the school system over there. Some of our classes are either workshop and we sometimes will have to pay money to do the project. Over there, whatever project, we don't have to get from the parent. They are accusing the children, some parents don't want to give money unless they know what is going on. To join a sport, you have to get a physical exam, and pay money to get in or pay for the uniform. That is a new thing here. They never had that over there. They have teacher conferences here and they do not have that over there unless they kick the kid out of the school. Whenever the school calls, it is bad over there. That is why they are very sensitive when the school contacts them here. Also, the PTO and PTA is new for them, everything is new for them. Fundraisers and selling candy, it is very depressing for some parents. They don't want to do it, but the kid is afraid and my kid has to beat so and so, and all that. It kind of pushes them both ways.

LW: Do you play a mediating role between the children and the parents often because of
the differences?

TC: Yes. I just kind of walk around. I take the information, first of all from the teacher, then I talk to the children, then I go home for the parents. I take all of the three informations combined and find out a different way to make it work. If I go direct, it never works. It takes a lot of thinking skills to do this.

LW: A lot of what I am hearing is that the children are more Americanized and the parents...

TC: They are overly adopting....

LW: Their culture that they know, primarily, is here, and it is different from what there parents have experienced.

TC: Yes. And besides that, some of them do too much. They want to be like movie stars, or singer like Michael Jackson, or a sports star like Michael Jordan. That is hard for parents to follow too. Some kids are demanding because the parents always let them get their way.

LW: That is a difficult thing. This is difficult question to ask, I think, but often when Asian young people are together, it happens that the majority of the population, or people in authority, tend to think that they are members of a gang, or something like that. Have you witnessed that, and do you have thoughts on that?

TC: The thing, in my opinion, is that there are categorized that way. The thing is that for the Asian children, or Asian women, or Asian man, we have a different category. Usually in the past, over there or here, except in the Hamilton school, they had four families there, they were all related--cousins. One time the sponsor's son showed up,
I don't know if they did it just for fun or for real, but all the cousins or relatives saw him and jumped on him. It means "Hey, if you will do that to my people, I will beat you up." Six or seven people on one. That is not fair, but they protect each other that way. Most of the children come from a family that says "go ahead and do that, I will take care of the problem." If the family said, "Don't do that, it is wrong," that kid's family did not hang out with that group, and don't do something that is wrong. We had a lot of them in here and they would go to California and then come back here to be the role model to keep everyone at peace and shape it all. That is not acceptable for either Asian family, but they do that anyway. Or they will wear the pants way down to here and drag down their belt, or have an earring. All that kind of stuff is not acceptable over there. Most of the parents beat up there kids, but over here it is abusive and they cannot do that anymore. The kids then know that they have some power over the parents, and then they do whatever they want. Most of the parents are the victim. Some of them have to leave the family because the kid did not respect abuse by the husband. We have three families that way. It is a lot of stuff that makes a major problem here. I just don't know where they come up with the family relationship. Most of them have three kids and four kids and head out with the 18 or 19 year old kid, just like their own sons or daughters..

LW: Do you think that gang activity is a problem in Holland, or is it really overblown?

TC: It is not really a problem right now. It is pretty good in our area right here, but in the past it has been a very big problem. The meeting that I attended, for this group they always go around and are seeking wherever it is very quiet with no problems, and
then they will all hit when you forget about it and they will all come back. That is what they told us. A gang member that had been in a gang before presented it for us. It seems like it is true. He said we cannot label whatever they are, they can change their name, they can give you a symbol. But whatever since then you have labeled them, there is nothing to control them, we just have to be aware of what is coming.

LW: Tell me your thoughts on Tulip Time.

TC: Tulip Time is fun.

LW: You enjoy it?

TC: Sure. I march with the kids every year.

LW: Do you where a dutch costume too?

TC: Yes. It is from school, they gave it to me and I wear it every year. It is fun, I love it. On Saturday we always sit at the corner of my house and watch the parade past high school. I even live by the tulip lane. I enjoy it. Every two years I have a different color.

LW: Have you had any contact or interaction with the college in town, Hope College, and do you have any impressions of the place?

TC: My son and I talked, and we are thinking that Hope College will be expanding and getting bigger. Then, they can buy the property up to our house (laughing).

LW: I see (laughing).

TC: Then we can move.

LW: Could you describe for me the gender relationships, the role of women in the Laotian community?
TC: The role of women is the opposite now for our country. Over there the man is the head of the family. Over here we can drive, we can work; right now in my family I am taking care of everything. I don't think that I would say that I would be strong or that I would be the head of the household for my family. I believe I have the ability to do what I know that he doesn't know. I should try to cover as much as I can. I don't want everything to be delayed or behind. That is the way I think. We both share, whatever he doesn't know, I know. We take care of it that way. As long as we can get through, there is no problem. But, some families they have a problem with that. They say, "Oh, my wife is the boss." That is the way, for me, that when we say that we just make people upset. Instead of the compromise. We have more opportunity here compared to our country.

LW: That must be exciting to have those new opportunities, for most Asian women.

TC: Yes, we get some freedom, that is a lot better (laughing). We still listen to them though.

LW: Any other thoughts that you have that we haven't covered? We covered a lot of territory. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today.

TC: You're welcome.