Tran, Becky Oral History Interview: Class Projects

Sarah Caulk
SC: Okay, could you state your name and date of birth for the record?

BT: Becky Tran and [date removed], 1975.

SC: Okay, and where were you born?

BT: In Vietnam.

SC: Where did you grow up?

BT: Um, half and half here. I live in Vietnam for twelve years and then I move here ever since.

SC: Okay, so what year did you move to America?

BT: Hmmm.... '86 but we left earlier because we.... it took like more than a year to travel from Vietnam to here cause we have to go through all this process. People work from island to island to even come here. There's a long process.

SC: And when you came to America did you come straight to Holland or did you move from there?

BT: No, we move down to Texas first and it didn't work out that great because the education system there-it's just not, it's not very good. The teacher there were not very supportive and so we didn't learn a lot so my dad say well, let's move up here. He knew a friend up here and his friend told him that it's great here-the city is great and just everything, the people and my kids have a lot of help from the teachers and from the school and so we decide to move up here after half a year, from living from Texas.
SC: Okay, could you describe your experience coming to America? What type of transportation brought you here? And were you among the "boat people"?

BT: Yeah, we are--we were. Yeah, it was-see-I didn't really-I was still a kid then and so my parents didn't really tell me much about what's going on because if you spread it out the communists will definitely put you in prisons for good and they'll take your properties and everything away from you, and so my parents did is that they told all of us including our relatives, except for my grandparents, that we're visiting my other grandparents and they live way down south Vietnam and so it takes like a day or two to get there-I don't know, they just telling story, you know? And I thought, down to visit grandparents, I'm so excited! You know, as kid you travel and so we don't travel that much, so I was really excited! So they say, you know, let's pack up your stuff-don't bring too much and then we left in the middle of night and all of sudden, like, Hmmm... by boat. This is interesting, but I didn't really care you know? And the next day it's like all you see around is water and then a few days later you realize that we're not coming back. So, we were on the ocean for four days... and...yeah four, five days.

SC: What kind of education did you receive, if any, while you were growing up?

BT: Um...education? Well, I finish high school here and I went to Hope.

SC: Okay, what were your parents' occupations?

BT: Now, or back then?

SC: You could tell me both.

BT: Both, we have a little store-it's more like a store and a factory where we make like
sweet goods and transfer it to other cities around where we live, we're living and we make pretty good money you know and never really have a... you know? I guess we have-my mom never really have enough time for us because she always have to do her business so we have like a nanny-you know? People who have to care for us and, but because the reason why we went here is that, or my parents decided to give up everything to come here is that well, we have four girls and at that time my mom was pregnant and they said you know we don't want-they don't want us to grow up and get marry and then that's it and be a mom. It's, it's just that you don't have anything to look forward to. So, they just say, let's just leave this place and go to somewhere different. You know, just something, to, opportunities, you know? And, they said, well, let's just take a chance and because my mom was pregnant during that time, nobody would have guessed that they were going to take this risk and go, you know, because it's dangerous that she was preg.. she was seven months pregnant so, that's pretty late and um... so... I don't know where I am now. Just lost my concentration.

SC: Parents occupations.

BT: Occupations-so, they came here. Didn't speak a word of english. So did we when we came because we just escape, you know. So they have to start all over, so they just work in factories for all these years and it's hard for them to move from being an owner-you don't have much of, well, everything they wanted to now they just work eight hours a day.

SC: They were the owners in Vietnam?

BT: Yeah,yeah. And it's hard for us too. I mean, it's just different. And we just have to
get used to this lifestyle and kind of be independent.

SC: Okay, did you grow up with any brothers and sisters?

BT: Oh yeah-yeah. I have three other sister and youngest brother and I'm the oldest.

SC: Could you describe your favorite childhood memory?

(Pause)

BT: Hmmm.....It's not that we could.....It's kind of hard to be honest because when I came here. If I have to say this-I probably would have to go back to Vietnam and that's when I have all my fun. Never worry, and there's always things for me to do and uh.. people do things for us, you know. So, we have people to care for us and ever since I came here I have to take care of my siblings and my parents both worked and so it's hard and being a newcomer here and not speaking a word of English when I came as a kid-you know how when you have friends, you know you got to talk to them and communicate and I don't know. So, it's hard to make friends until I was in boy, late, in junior high or so, or high school. That's when I starting to speak up a little bit and talk but, it was-I was just too shy to talk and that's the problem. You don't learn when you don't talk and um.. so, I was always the quiet one in back corner and kind of watch everyone else. Cause I thought, you know, nobody would want to talk to me cause I don't know how to communicate but, you just have to pick it up and just have to face--and, you guys-I don't know if you guys know, but you are very fortunate to be here and to live here all your life and you don't have to have-you don't ever have to experience this kind of lifestyle changes or whatever you stated but, um.. it's difficult.

SC: Okay, what church, if any, did you attend in Vietnam and what church do you attend
BT: We don't attend any church.

SC: Okay. So would you say that religion is not a big part of your life?

BT: That's not-that's not true. My parents, they don't believe in God. They have their own religion but, and I-I believe in God but, my problem is that my parents will not-they don't want me to be a Christian, so I just kind of do it on my own things. I just don't go and say, oh, I'm a Christian or--it's more like.....

SC: Personal?

BT: Personal-what I value. Instead of saying, oh yeah I go to church every Sunday.

SC: Okay

BT: But I read Bible when I.... I bought I little book of Vietnamese. I can show you real quick here but, I like reading out a little----It's the same, just uh, and it's all Vietnamese, you probably can't read anything, but it's talk about God and stuff like that and they do send it to me every-I think every month or so and I haven't really taken look at it yet, but it is just kind of something I do when I have time and read the Bible-stuff like that, but I don't go to church that often.

SC: Would you say your experience here at Hope College influenced you in that area?

BT: Oh, yes-oh, yeah! I never thought of that until I live with my roommates and they really have a big influence in my life, at least with my spiritual life--yeah, definitely.

SC: So did your family come here as a refugee or by choice?

BT: What do you mean by 'choice'?

SC: Was it kind of like you had to get out of Vietnam or did you just all decide to come
here because it was a better opportunity here?

BT: Yeah, more like that.

SC: More like that?

BT: Even though we do have the money in our... our life back home—it's not like we have to eat you know, only one meal a day or one of those that people you see on TV. We have much of everything, it's just that the house is a little different. Things are a little different, but we're very comfortable, more than comfortable. It's just that because they know if you're a girl, you're not going to go beyond college and they want us to go beyond that and it's not... I can tell you right now that it's not cheap to escape. You got to pay a lot of money to the people who own the boat and you got to give money to people for-kind of shut them off you know, more like that—so that you can escape. It's a long process. It's not like, oh, okay let's leave next week. No, so.....

SC: Where do you presently work and did you face any discrimination in finding the job here in America?

BT: Not really, I apply at Spectrum and it was my first application and I got hired within two weeks. So, when I was.....

SC: As a nurse?

BT: As a nurse, yeah—but it was kind of... it was awesome like, you don't have to look far.

SC: Have you experienced any type of discrimination while you've been here and could you describe this for me if you have? And, also, were people accepting and friendly when you came here?

BT: In general? I mean, there are some locations that I feel like I am not treated equally
but, it's not like something so, you know, like one of those things you hear on TV. You can just tell little hints or, just little things that people do, you know?—attitude and just stuff like that and not everyone is the same though. I've been very fortunate that I met really good friends and they're all very wonderful people and so, I don't experience a lot of that. I don't know—answer your question or not.

SC: As a child, do you believe you were influenced more by the Vietnamese culture or more by the American culture?

BT: As a child, or now?

SC: As a child, as you were growing up—how did your parents raise you?

BT: As a child—well, you know I was more Vietnamese than an American when I was a---when I came here of course, cause all I know that is that I grew up in Vietnam and so of course Vietnamese, being a Vietnamese, definitely, was part of my life or the whole thing, you know? But, you know, you get accustomed to the culture and to the people and lifestyle and everything else and so you kind of pick up a little here, a little there and so, I'd say now, as an adult, I'd say half and half. Cause when I went back to Vietnam, I mean the way I wear my clothes and they can definitely say, oh your not Vietnamese, you know? You're Vietnamese American! It's hard not to show em that you are Vietnamese because they look at you—they look at your skin, they look at the way you wear your shoes. They don't wear shoes. They wear sandals, so that's one thing that they definitely look at you and they're like, you're not a native here. So...

SC: What are some of the cultural aspects, traditions and celebrations of the Vietnamese?

BT: Well, the big one—like holidays? Like here, Christmas is the biggest holiday, it seems
like it. In Vietnam, New Year is the biggest one. That’s when they have a few days off and I’m not familiar with it anymore cause I haven’t been-you know, because here during-our New Year holidays in February, so during that time we don’t have any holiday off. So, we don’t really celebrate but if it’s back home, definitely that’s the biggest holiday. We don’t receive present like Christmas, but we do receive money-lots of money, as a kid. I don’t have anymore because I’m too big now, but it’s fun to receive money.

SC: Could you explain the Vietnamese family structure and what are the roles of the father and the mother?

BT: Hmmm……. I think it’s pretty typical in every culture is almost very similar. Just dad and mom. Both of my parents, they play a pretty important—I don’t know what I’m trying to say here. It shouldn’t be hard. I don’t know why, I’m just. Um….. I think it’s….I can tell you right now that they’ve done a lot for us. They sacrifice half of their life-being in this country, not knowing much of the culture or the language, they struggle a lot for us and people-definitely the-sometime they came home from work and say, people treat us like nothing and da, da, da, da, da. And they cried and I felt bad because I feel like, at least I know the language enough to talk back-would tell people, stop this. They don’t have that to back them up and so, I----they’ve just done a lot for us and looking back at when they don’t do much until now they do so much—they take care of us and like a being Hope student here for four years, last four years, you know, I never have to pay for my gas, I have my car and they would just work in a factory so they don’t make that much money like most people do-just enough. And, it
seemed like I never have to ask for anything cause I have everything already and I consider myself very fortunate cause they pay for my education-for whatever I need and somehow make it possible for us and so I think they're just the greatest!

SC: What were your first impressions of America?

BT: I don't remember much about-it's a-Uhhh... I don't know. It's kind of strange, kind of-my first time here it was exciting to come to America, you know and we---I have to remember, this is years back. I never thought of this much. We---from the Philippines we traveled to Dallas and it's a big city, and so my first impression was like, Wow!, it's so beautiful cause I can remember-I think we came there at night, during the night time so it's all dark and cities-light-there's just sparkle everywhere so it was kind of beautiful. It's nice and I always want to see snow and of course down in Texas you hardly see snow until we moved to Michigan here and I was like, I want to see snow so bad and believe me, I don't want to see any snow anymore! But that was the most exciting thing as a kid is to want to see snow!

SC: How would you describe the city of Holland?

BT: Quiet... well, a few years back now it's starting to grow a lot bigger- I don't know you familiar with this area but I think it's one of the most beautiful city just because I've been to a few cities here and there and it seem like it's not as-I guess it depends on what area you go. But, if you go up north and you go.....I don't know. But, to me it's clean and it has flowers and trees and I'm a person-I like forest and I like trees, I like flowers and grasses and we go to Chicago, it's beautiful, but I miss that part. And, so, the people here-very friendly over the years. When I first came here I saw, well
actually I heard people say, there's so many Dutch people here and prejudice and da, da, da, da, da. I didn't really experience much of that cause people are very friendly.

SC: What do you like the most and what do you like the least about Holland?

(Pause)

BT: If you asked me this question years back, I would have to say Tulip Time, I don't know. I'm not sure anymore. The most about Holland? The community I think. It's friendly people and lots of places to go, I mean if you're a visitor. But, overall, I just like the city, I just like the atmosphere of-it's not too small like Zeeland or Hudsonville-I don't know you've been there before. But, it's also not so huge like you walk in there and your like, oh my gosh, I'm going to get lost. So, I like it in-between where it's not so small but yet, it's not so big.

SC: Is there anything that you dislike about the city?

BT: I don't know. I have to think about that one. Um...... Yeah, I think so. Over the years, seem like there's more violence and just more, you know what's going on around here seem like it's starting to get-we move from a little city to like a bigger one right now and when I travel around the city you can tell that there is houses and apartments starting go up, you know? All over and... which is nice to see that it's growing, but on the other hand we see a lot of violence and I don't like that part of growing up from the city here, it's kind of hard to see that happen to Holland.

SC: Are you or have you been involved in this community in any way?

BT: Like activities and stuff like that? I was in Upward Bound back in high school and we do little things here and there in the community and Project Pride. You know that right? And
I do go and translate for people that needed help. And recently my father sponsored like a family that just came from Vietnam not to long ago, here and we help them out and we take them to places and get paper work done and all that stuff that we need to get it done and we just kind of do little things here and there-nothing big.

SC: What stereotypes, if any, do you believe have been placed on the Vietnamese by the Americans?

BT: I don't know-To be honest, I don't... I have more American friends than Vietnamese and so.... I don't know.

SC: In what way has your life changed in coming to America?

BT: Definitely that I finish college and I think if I were back in Vietnam I would never have the opportunity because, so what if you finish college in Vietnam? Your chances are you're probably not going to find a job and then you get married and then be along and that's it for your life, and I just learned so much about myself as a person and just about everything else, you know. Just like when I came back there for a semester to study-I mean, I know Vietnamese. I know how to read and write. It's just the literature and history I need to know. I left when I was twelve, so I don't know much about the history and I just want to know about my culture more cause I want when I have kids, I want to pass it on to them, you know? So, that's very important to me and see, if I stay in Vietnam and be a Vietnamese and never travel, I would never know much about myself. When you travel, you see other people-you see hunger, you see people who don't have a house to live, you know, there's this.... I travel to down to this village, it's a very small village, and this woman (she must be in her sixty) no
family member and her little, what you call house here, is from here to this-to the end of this table here and that’s it. Just like some few leaves and stuff like that. And, you look at yourself and are like, how fortunate am I to have all this and we always want more and more and more-we can never stop. And that’s human nature to always want more and I thought, you know, I’m not going to ask for anything anymore, you know. I have so much. But, then you kind of like-kind of forget about it after years later but, you just have to keep in mind that you gotta appreciate what you have.

SC: Would you ever want to go back to live in Vietnam?

BT: Live? You mean like forever there or just visit?

SC: To live there.

BT: To live there? Um.. I don’t mind if I stay there for a few years to work and stuff like that and they do need nurses and doctors there, cause over the years they have foreigners coming there and they don’t trust the Vietnamese health care system so they want like nurses and doctors that go to school here and come back there to help them. So, I really want to do that, but if I have to live there forever, I don’t think so. I like it here, but I do like to live in Vietnam too. I love to go back there just to visit my family and just to travel, but live there, I don’ t know. That’s kind of scary.

SC: Well, that’s all of my questions. If you want to say anything else or if you wanted to tell me about having two birthdates you could tell me about that.

BT: Oh yeah. Well, when we escaped and go on the ocean for four, five days then a Malatian boat came and pick us up, and we were very lucky because other boats never have a chance to make it. They either die or they ran out of food and water so none of
them never survived, and so the problem is that-the thing is that they pick us up, brought us to a little island and I don't even remember. It's so tiny. You could walk around the island once or twice and you pretty much know what's going on there. And, we were interviewed by a couple of Americans. I don't know who they are really. And, so we have to do all of this paperwork and at that time, they asked for our birthdays and my parents-they don't keep track of our birthdays because it's not important in our culture to have a birthday. They celebrate your birthday when you're like a year old-huge. I mean, and then when you're in your sixty that's when they celebrate it again. I don't know why. Or, when you die they celebrate and I don't know why either. It's more like a remembrance, you know, of that person. But, if you're ten, twelve, twenty-five, don't do that. I mean, they're starting to be more like our culture here now, but back then they don't. And, so they don't remember any of ours. So, what they did is they change our birthday to January 1st-all seven of us. So, when we went to go do all this paperwork, we put January 1st, January 1st....They were like, my you guys have the same day. And, it never clicked to them that it's fake. It's all fake. And if you happen to have some Vietnamese friend or even some foreigners or something like that, ask if them for if they have a fake birthday cause chances are they probably will have a fake birthday cause I know a lot of people do so that's not uncommon.

SC: Okay, anything else you'd like to say?

BT: I don't think so.

SC: Okay, well thank you very much for letting me interview you and sharing this with me.
BT: Your welcome. I hope that you have a fun time here at Hope. It's a good school.

SC: Thank you.