

J:\Special\_Collections\ERA Oral History

Interview with: Madison Nguyen

Interviewed by: Danelle Moon

Transcriber: Elizabeth Lopez

Nguyen.DS400056.wav

0:00:11 at beginning

**Moon:**

Basically just to give you kind of an intro to the project—I started this project about three years ago.

**Nguyen:**

Don't worry I understand.

**Moon:**

And so I had really focused on some of the women who had been in politics early on like Janet Gray, Susan Hammer and so I thought it would be really cool to include you and some of the other more recent female office holders into this program. We will transcribe the interviews and we will make them accessible in the library so that people can come in and listen to the tapes or read the transcripts. Okay so it's part of—

**Nguyen:**

—without editing anything, it's just—

**Moon:**

—it's raw transcripts.

**Nguyen:**

Wow.

**Moon:**

But we haven't actually put anything up online as well. People would have to come into the library and they could listen to your interview and then they could also read the transcript.

**Nguyen:**

Okay.

**Moon:**

Thank you so much for first of all coming to my class, that was really fabulous. And also for just taking the time out to talk to me today. So basically what I'm trying to do is just document the experiences of women in Santa Clara County politics. I have a list of questions but some of it's going to sound kind like a repeat from what we already talked about in the class. But I was thinking, "I wish I would have talked to you about doing this kind of set up in the class." But it occurred to me after I had done it. So I thought maybe it would be interesting for you to start with your family background and how you actually came to the U.S. and how you got involved eventually in politics.

**Nguyen:**

Sure. My parents left Vietnam back in the late 1970's. It really was 1979 and our story is not any different from many Vietnamese workers and families who came to this country after the war ended. The country was in turmoil in terms of the communist government taking over. So a lot of people fled and we're not an exception either. In the middle of

the night my parents, along with other families, board a fishing boat. There were 60 of us I believe and we boarded the fishing boat— my dad was a fisher man. So he knew how to navigate hopefully through the big ocean or sea. And so we got on the fishing boat. We were stranded at sea for about a week before we were picked up by one of the Philippines fishing ship. They brought us to the Philippines. We were stationed in refugee camps for almost three years. For us that was quite a long time because I think the average length of time for refugees at that time was roughly around maybe a year or a year and a half. Two years max. So my family thought that we were going to be there for a long time. Maybe perhaps even permanently.

They put us in schools. We learned English with the missionaries who were there. They came from different parts of the world. They were there to do charitable work and teaching English to the kids in the refugee camps were one of their responsibilities. So that's how I began to learn the ABC's. My family started getting accustomed to the living environment over there because that's where we were going to station for the rest of our life. But it wasn't until a church in Scottsdale, Arizona, a Lutheran church, got together with a family and decided to sponsor us. So we came to the United States. Scottsdale, Arizona, was the first city that my family came to. And you know my dad— I don't know how far you want me to go?

**Moon:**

No that's good, that's great!

**Nguyen:**

When we came at that time there were 10 people in the family. My youngest sister has not been born until we got to Modesto. But that's later on. So with the 10 of us, they put us up in a small house. My dad worked as a janitor for the church and they gave him \$500 a month during that time. And everything we had in the house was pretty much donated. We wore clothes from the different thrift shops; from Goodwill. And then there were clothes that people donated to us. You know for us that was the American way of life, we didn't know any better. We were really happy with whatever was brought to the door. And then I began elementary school at Yamaha elementary school.

**Moon:**

In Modesto?

**Nguyen:**

No. In Scottsdale.

**Moon:**

In Scottsdale. That was your first U.S. destination. There is one question. On the missionary experience from the refugee camps to the U.S. had your family converted to Christianity as part of that process?

**Nguyen:**

Not so much. I think the kids did. More or less as a way of sort of paying back, we had to go to church. We had to attend church every Sunday. But for my parents, since they didn't speak English, they weren't expected to go. But we did. You know we weren't forced to go but my parents thought it was a nice thing to do.

A nice gesture to repay these folks who brought us here to America. So I learned about Christianity and became a Christian at a very young age— attended bible study classes on Sunday and that was the same for some of my siblings. The older ones were not really Buddhist. We practiced what we called Confucianism where we celebrated the ancestors who have passed away. And we gave thanks to them on different special days throughout the year. So that was the religion- it's like—

We stayed in Scottsdale for a little bit less than a year before we realized that “oh my gosh,” my dad— I remember every night when he came home—[he was completely exhausted] so we knew that we couldn't live like [that] because there are eight kids. [My father said], “You know if I keep up [working with] this kind of money we're not going to go anywhere.” Although education was free for all of us at the time because we were still in elementary school and high school, but if we wanted to go to college he was afraid that he wouldn't be able to afford the opportunity for us to attend college. So we were trying to find different ways to make a better living.

So he started calling around to reconnect with some of his friends who left at the same time but live in other parts of the United States. One day a friend called from Modesto called and said to my father, “Why don't you bring your family out here? It's an agricultural town. You can find work here and you don't have to speak English. All the kids can work if they are 14 years old.” My dad thought that was a good idea. So we got together and drove in a station wagon that was donated to us by the church and we drove from Arizona to California.

**Moon:**

—And settled in Modesto?

**Nguyen:**

—And settled in Modesto.

**Moon:**

Now what had your father done prior to coming to the U.S.?

**Nguyen:**

He was a fisherman. We lived in a small village in Vietnam and that's pretty much the profession that, if you call it a profession at all, that a lot of—

**Moon:**

—That was the trade?

**Nguyen:**

Yeah.

**Moon:**

Okay and so had— so what part of Vietnam was that?

**Nguyen:**

I was born in Nha Trang which is the third largest city after Saigon. I mean after Hanoi—I'm not sure which one is bigger. But I was born in Nha Trang but my parents are from this small village out a little bit north of that— it's called Phu Yen. We didn't really have much going on in that small village. And right after I was born my parents moved there and they did the same thing. He just fished because we were really close to the ocean.

**Moon:**

So what do you think, having come from such an agricultural rural environment in Vietnam, what do you think—How did he become aware of the benefit of higher education?

**Nguyen:**

Well I think that the notion or the idea—the primary reason why he wanted to leave Vietnam and come to America was for that. So that his kids could have a better education. So that we would have the opportunity to go to college because not that he wasn't aware that education was important, he was fully aware of that. It's just that they [my parents] didn't have the means to send their kids to higher education in Vietnam had we stayed there. We were poor. We lived in the village so if you wanted to attend a good college, you have to move to the city. And we didn't have the means to move to the city. And so we thought, instead of moving to a bigger city in Vietnam, let's risk our lives and come to America where you have all these opportunities.

**Moon:**

So how many of your siblings graduated from college?

**Nguyen:**

Everyone of us except for my oldest sister because she got married [early]. It's because when we came here we were pretty young. I started first grade in Scottsdale. All my sisters went to elementary school all the way up to community college and then on to college. And they all graduated. And you know when people ask me "who are my role models?" I have to say my parents because they never had a real profession and they don't have professional skills. And they raised their kids in the best way that they can by working really hard in the fields with other migrant farm workers. So I think just looking

at how hard they worked and the sacrifices they made—that prompted us to want to be more successful. So that we don't have to go down the same trench and be able to provide our kids better opportunities.

**Moon:**

Were they able to move into the middle-class as part of?—

**Nguyen:**

I wouldn't categorize my upbringing as living in a middle-class neighborhood. We received public assistance. My parents were on welfare for a very long time because the number of kids that they had so we qualified. We lived in Section 8 housing for a very long time. And then we just kind of moved up. We bought our first house in 1989 and it was a 4-bedroom house. It was like around \$89,000 and they [my parents] still live in that house. So it's pretty amazing.

**Moon:**

We'll that's a great immigrant story. You know some of the great American story that comes out of an immigration to the U.S. and of the opportunities that people actually get here, which is kind of surprising in California with the cost of living. So you went to community college in Modesto?

**Nguyen:**

Well yeah, I just went there for a couple of—I think they were on a semester system. It was during the summer. I started out after high school. I got accepted to many colleges and universities but it's because we [my family] couldn't afford it. I had scholarships but then you have to pay a little bit more. Or maybe half or a quarter and so my parents couldn't afford it and I didn't want to take out a student loan because I didn't know what



a student loan was at the time. I just didn't want to borrow money from anybody. So I went to Modesto Junior College (MJC) for a semester and then after that I went to UC Santa Cruz.

**Moon:**

Okay so you transferred from Modesto Community College. When did you graduate from high school?

**Nguyen:**

I graduated in 1994.

**Moon:**

When you went to U.C. Santa Cruz what did you major in?

**Nguyen:**

In History.

**Moon:**

In History. Oh that's right! I know we talked about some of this stuff. This might be a little bit of repeat. So when you were in the History department there were you taking— did you specialize in U.S. History or European?

**Nguyen:**

U.S. History.

**Moon:**

Alright so then you went from your undergraduate program to Illinois—

**Nguyen:**

To Chicago.

**Moon:**

To University of Chicago?

**Nguyen:**

Yeah I took a year off and found work in Colorado. But it didn't pan out so I drove to Illinois to attend U of C.

**Moon:**

And what were you studying there?

**Nguyen:**

In Denver? No, I was just trying to find a job. I was just trying to work in Denver. I was there in 1998 so the economy was really booming and Denver was just one of the metropolitan cities. It was classified as the next big thing. I moved to Denver with a couple of friends who were also trying to find work.

**Moon:**

So then what were you studying when you went to University of Chicago?

**Nguyen:**

Social Science. Well, I wanted to study history but the stuff that I was interested in happened after 1945 which became more like social science or sociology. So I was told that if I wanted to look at the contemporary lifestyles of Asian Americans and their transition to America after they left their country, that's really not history anymore. It is social science or sociology. You know, my initial interests were to continue studying history at the University of Chicago.

**Moon:**

And so then you went from University of Chicago to—

**Nguyen:**

Back to UC Santa Cruz.

**Moon:**

How come you didn't just stay at the University of Chicago?

**Nguyen:**

U of C is great. Obviously it is a great institution, an academic institution. My interests were, well, I wanted to specialize in conflict resolution, especially in the Asian-American communities and tackle issues of assimilation and adaptation and I just felt like Chicago was not the place to explore that interest. I looked at California and then I looked at southern California, particularly in Orange County, where there is a huge Vietnamese population. Also in San Jose, which is home to the largest Vietnamese population on a citywide level. So this [San Jose] was the place to come if that was the interest that I wanted to explore. So I looked at San Jose and I realized that San Jose State doesn't really have a PhD program. So I thought about returning to Santa Cruz, I love the University. I've been there. I know the environment and so—

**Moon:**

So you were working on your dissertation or had you already gotten an Ed.D?

**Nguyen:**

I finished most of my core courses and started working on my field statements. When I started working on the field statements and going into the writing [part of it], that's when I also got involved in politics.

**Moon:**

Okay so why don't you tell me a little bit about how that, how you entered politics and what were some of the reasons why you wanted to do that?

**Nguyen:**

Sure. You know, you went through the same transition. I don't have to describe it— but you know you have to [do] two big field statements and your advisor looks at it, sort of delving into the interest that you want to explore and then when you are ready to write, you write your dissertation based on that. So my interests were exploring the Vietnamese community and seeing what type of transition they made since 1975 to the present, which was 2005— which were the last 25 years. So I was looking through that period of how the community itself had really transitioned itself into mainstream America on a broader scale; but [also looking] at San Jose on a smaller scale. Just looking at the generational gap within it—looking at the different conflicts that derived based on the transition that they made, the kids growing up here, or the 1.5 generation where they were born in Vietnam but are raised here [in the United States], like myself. What kind of conflicts we have with our parents or the older generation? And trying to come up with different methodologies to resolve that conflict. So that was my specialty, or I wanted to specialize in.

So I started looking at the Vietnamese community here and realized that “oh my gosh” this group of people have done so well economically. They sent their kids to the best schools in the nation. Socially, they are a really solidified group. What is it that they are lacking? So I started to do research. I [conducted] a lot of oral history. Talked to a lot of people. What I found out was that they lack a huge political voice. No one except one person ran for Congress about 10-15 years ago—didn't really go very far. And ever since then, nobody has never really explored the notion of politics, especially local politics. So

then I asked myself, “What is the reason for that? And I asked other people. “What is the reason for that?” It turned out that through the immigration pattern we all learned in a historical context that when an immigrant group comes to a new place, in order for them to emerge as themselves, they care more about being able to provide for their family financially before they think about giving back to the community. I think that is common sense. Everybody goes through similar transition. The Vietnamese community itself is not an exception to that.

The community itself is probably the newest ethnic group to come to America. It just happened after 1975 whereas with the Japanese and the Chinese and Filipinos they came here decades ago. So I asked those questions and it turned out that because people don’t really want to register to vote. They have never thought about it. So what I did to get more people enthusiastic and excited about elections at the local level because they were not really interested in the local politics but rather in national— at state or national level. Vietnamese people are very politically engaged. It’s just that you have to sort of open the flame a little bit and show them what it is really all about.

One day I was watching MTV. You can imagine how young I was if I was watching MTV. And there was this great program on MTV and it says “Rock the Vote” where they are trying to get these A-list singers to come together and do a huge concert to rally people to take part in the political process. Registering to vote, go to the polls and all that sort of thing. So I thought, “I can do the same thing for the Vietnamese community here.” So that’s what I did. I went out to the different businesses. I collaborated with a

lot of community leaders and I said [to them] “Let’s put together the biggest concert and try to get people enthusiastic about registering to vote and vote for the upcoming election.” So that’s what I did.

I went to the small businesses, asked for donations, got enough money to hire the singers to sing at the Santa Clara fairgrounds and we put up a really huge show. We had about 15,000 people who came to the Tully fairgrounds [same fairgrounds]. We registered about 5,000 new voters for that election. And that’s not just in San Jose, but [people from different parts of Santa Clara]. The whole objective was if you register [to vote] you would get a free ticket to go to the concert. And if you have friends or siblings who are under 18, which they can’t register, you can bring them for free.

After that was done and over with, the same folks who I worked with pulled me aside and said “Hey, there is this vacancy on the school board, on the Franklin-McKinley School District. Why don’t you make a run for it?” I was like, “Ok that was a little crazy because I am full-time student. I just finished a big project and I am exhausted. I can’t think about politics now.” That was actually the first time that the notion of politics [or running for public office] was introduced to me. All my life I thought that academic was my true calling. That one day I would become a professor in Sociology and just live my normal life. So I went back-and-forth and back-and-forth again I told them I couldn’t do it because my parents didn’t invest all this energy and time and sweat for me to put away my academic endeavors and get involved in politics. I was working with a lot of older people and they were like, “Listen, we know that education is important to you, but you

have nothing to lose. If you make a run for it and you lose, you can always go back to school in the Fall.” So I said, “You know that makes sense.” Because I really didn’t have anything to lose and I’m not really doing anything right now. School doesn’t start until September anyways. So we did.

We put together a campaign. It was really grassroots. No one has ever [anyone running for a seat on the] school board before in the Vietnamese community. Trying to come up with the Vietnamese translation for the word “school board member” was really tough. I didn’t really know the correct translation so I started asking around and searching for the right word in the Vietnamese dictionary so that we [our campaign] could broadcast and publicize the campaign. You could imagine everything that we’re doing was done for the first time. Trying to explore different ways on how to run a campaign and trying to get the volunteer groups together were tough.

**Moon:**

What was the group originally that you were working with?

**Nguyen:**

There were not any particular groups. It was just individuals helping me out by working with me on the campaign. We ran an [aggressive] grassroots campaign and it was very successful. There were three vacancies on the school board with four candidates in which I was the only new challenger. The other three were incumbents. [On Election Day, I finished first with the most votes].

**Moon:**

So this was the Santa Clara—

**Nguyen:**

This was the Franklin-McKinley School District, which is also in district 7. The district that I represent right now.

**Moon:**

So why do you think they elected you in contrast to some of the other people that were running?

**Nguyen:**

First of all, my opponents, the incumbents, they weren't ready for me. They thought that it was a joke. They're like, "She's so young. [I was 28 years old]. They thought that I was just one of those idealistic college students who wanted to change the world, wanted to try something new. So they didn't take me very seriously. But we put up signs everywhere [in the district]. And my opponents didn't even respond to it. And so I realized that they didn't take me very seriously. But because we were doing all that, it really generated a lot of publicity for the campaign. For a lot of people, sometimes they don't know who is running until you actually look at the ballot. For a race so small such as the school board positions, people, residents, voters don't pay much attention to. But here we are for the first time sort of running a very aggressive very progressive grassroots campaign where we actually go door to door to knock and talk to people. Which really doesn't happen when you are running for a school board position. So we were putting ourselves out there with a lot of volunteers, a lot of youth and people were just like "oh, wow. There's an election going on and all I know is this Nguyen woman who is running." So my name was probably the only name people talked about. I think that's what propelled the non-Vietnamese to get really engaged. For the Vietnamese



community, for the first time they saw a Vietnamese name on an official ballot. So I think they were really proud and because my last name, fortunately, is pretty much the same with 80% of the Vietnamese here in San Jose.

**Moon:**

Name recognition.

**Nguyen:**

Name recognition, the last name recognition that is. "Oh, I don't really know who Nguyen is but I'm going to support a Vietnamese person because at least (this is what I heard from a lot of people) maybe she shares similar interests or we probably have similar stories and she can relate to what we have gone through. If anything, let's vote for her and try it out."

**Moon:**

So it worked out that way.

**Nguyen:**

Yeah, it worked out really well.

**Moon:**

And so from the school district- how long did you serve on the school board?

**Nguyen:**

Almost three years.

**Moon:**

And when you were there, what sort of things were you working on?

**Nguyen:**

I was really big on making sure that parents got more involved in the day to day operations of how teachers run the classroom- and just get involved because I feel that when parents don't get involved and don't really know what's going on, and what their kids are doing in the classroom, it's really hard to help them academically. So you know, we were definitely not advocating for parents to tell teachers what to do, that's not very effective. But I think that it's important for them to attend PTA meetings, for them to become more engaged and have regular communication with teachers when they feel that the child is struggling academically. For a lot of Vietnamese, we came from a country where the teacher is an all mighty person. Once I send my kids to school, you [teacher] have complete authority over my child and whatever you say goes.

So they are so used to that mentality that when they come here [United States], a lot of that remain with them so they don't want to interfere because they thought, "that's not my job." My job is just to raise my child when he or she is at home but when he or she is at school, it's really the teacher's responsibility to discipline the child. So I'm going out there saying, "Yeah that's true to a certain extent but you do need to be more engaged so that— because at the end of the day both the teacher and the parents want the child to be successful. So the more engaged and the more dialogue you have with the teacher, the better it is for your child." So parental involvement was one of the key things that I was working on.

And then the other thing was after school academic homework assistance. A lot of these kids they— the parents are monolingual. So it's really hard for them to spend 6- 7 hours

at school, come home and not being able to speak Vietnamese to their parents. There's this huge language gap, the language barrier between the child and the parents. And so we are trying to advocate for more after school academic assistance for the kids as well as ESL classes for the parents. Those were the kinds of programs I was advocating for.

**Moon:**

So from the school district you went on to start your campaign for city council. What were some of things that you learned along the way in the process of having served already in a school district sort of election process to moving forward to a higher level sort of campaign?

**Nguyen:**

I definitely gained a lot more experience in terms of public speaking and also on an academic level. As well as public service. I think that in the public service sector, probably being a school board member is the hardest job of all. And the reason why I said that is because you are engaged with parents, teachers, school administrators on a daily basis because when the child is struggling or when they are going through a hard time, the first person they [parents] call is you. They feel like you have authority or you have the power to change whatever is negative that is happening to them.

Which you really don't because you are making policy but a lot of parents they don't really distinguish between whether we are making policy changes or implementing policies versus getting into the day to day operations—which we don't do because that's why we have teachers and school administrators. So in that capacity, you learn a lot and you engage so much with parents and teachers that it become very beneficial for you to

run for higher office. Being on the school board, I get asked all types of questions from parents in different situations. For example, when I go to the supermarket, parents approached me and asked, “Hey my kids attend this and this school, how is he or she doing?” So I responded, “I don’t know.” I’m a school board member and I don’t really get a chance to be involved in your child’s day-to-day operation.” But I get those questions all the time. Being a school board member, I have ample opportunity to engage with parents because they know who I am since they often attend school board meetings. Therefore, they feel comfortable to approach me and talk to me wherever I may be in the community. And so in that capacity, I get to interact with them on a daily basis. So having that experience really help me in my current position because to a certain extent, I understand what people’s needs are and I am comfortable with helping them to achieve those needs. I think that is really critical to becoming a good public servant.

**Moon:**

When you were going to starting your first election campaign for the city council—could you talk about that a little bit, what your experience was? I know you were competing with another person from the Vietnamese community and—

**Nguyen:**

Yes, absolutely. When I started out, there were nine candidates in the pool running for the same seat. I think what really distinguished me and my opponent, Linda Nguyen, from the rest of the candidates was the fact that both Linda and I were really young and very progressive. We also understood local issues, issues that actually affect families living in the district. We were being described by members of the community as cross-over candidates which meant that we understood these broader issues that residents care

about; but at the same time, we happened to be the only two Vietnamese Americans running in a district that is home to a rather large Vietnamese American population. We stood out among the other seven candidates because we were different. When we were in the community, beside talking about things that matter to the Vietnamese American community, we were able to articulate issues that actually mattered to the broader community. And I think that was what people wanted to listen to.

**Moon:**

What were some of the issues?

**Nguyen:**

Street improvements, affordable housing, bringing jobs to the district, transportation issues, public safety. With other candidates, they spoke more about their life experience and didn't really focus too much on issues that affect residents. I have more experience, I have more life experience. And you know, yes life experience is important but when you're talking to a regular voter in the district they really don't care about your life experience. What they care about is what you are going to do for me? And that's fair because if I approach an elected official, I want to know what he or she is going to contribute to the community that I live in.

And so we understood that very well. So we were able to articulate to a broader community of our political agenda and our platforms and our priorities. So we came out and I was the top vote getter and she was second and then we headed to the run-off. The primary was pretty calm. The run-off, now that gets a little ugly because the community itself for the first time realized no matter who wins that it's going to be historic because

for the first time we are going to get a Vietnamese-American on the San Jose City Council. But what came after that was just a lot of ethnic politics, probably at its worst. Well, not as bad as what I am going through right now. But at the time it was at its worst.

**Moon:**

It was the preparation for what you are involved in right now.

**Nguyen:**

Yeah. A lot of folks, especially the older generation brought in what they, what I consider homeland politics. The issue of anti-communism versus communism. Interestingly enough, for me and Linda, she was born here. I was born in Vietnam but left the country when I was four years old. We both understood that communism was a bad idea. And for me, being a history major, I thought it was dead after the era of Senator McCarthy. So I questioned why we were still talking something that ended in late 1940s? But as I talked to some of the elderly folks in the Vietnamese American community, I understood that even though America didn't practice communism, people who came from a legacy of war and violence, and were impacted by what happened to them prior to the war and after the war, that this became a part of their history and a part of their life story. So I couldn't ignore that.

And we are not trying to ignore that but I think for us its like, you know, giving that respect and that sensitivity toward their life history. But at the same time, looking to build a better future for our community, for the future generation, for ourselves. And so how you balance, how do you integrate both of that without making people feel left out of the process? And that was the biggest challenge. A lot of folks I would say— there is

a huge generational gap. Obviously the older generation is feeling that we should focus more on talking about why we are so anti-communist and why we should not support communism. And for us it's like, "I don't support communism and I don't want to talk about that all the time. That should not be my only platform."

There are other things to talk about. There are other priorities in my district that I want to talk about because I am serving a district that is home to 45% is Latino, 28% Vietnamese, 11-12% Caucasian. And so you have to appeal to the broader community. And if you consider yourself to be an elected official, you have to represent everyone equally or at least to the extent that you can. Trying to convey that message to the Vietnamese community was really difficult at first because for the first time, they were proud to have a Vietnamese person representing them. They were hoping that I would carry out their agenda, right? And I am willing to do that to a certain extent, but at the same time I need to be very considerate that there are other people that will vote for me or have voted for me. And I need to take their concerns and their needs into consideration, as well. Now that was another challenge.

**Moon:**

What do you think gave you the edge over Linda's campaign?

**Nguyen:**

I think there were two things. One was my political experience on the school board. The other was my background. We have very different backgrounds. I come from a very—I came from very humble beginnings. Growing up very poor, benefiting from a lot of governmental assistance programs and subsidies. I think in a district such as district 7,

where the majority of the people come from the one of the lowest social-economic background, they can relate to my life story. We have a lot of immigrants in the district so when I went out and talked about how I grew up and how education was so important and how you need that in order to be successful, people can relate to that story. Whether I was talking to an African-American, Caucasian, Latino, they didn't really look at me as a Vietnamese person talking to them but rather a girl who actually went through all that stuff, and she understood my story and I understood her. We could relate on the surface. My opponent didn't have that kind of humble beginnings. Her parents are pretty wealthy and very connected in the Vietnamese community. I guess it didn't just- probably her story didn't appeal to as many people as mine.

**Moon:**

Remind me again when you were elected, was that 200—

**Nguyen:**

—2005.

**Moon:**

And so you're serving now into your—

**Nguyen:**

I'm in my third year.

**Moon:**

Okay so could you talk—you have like a lot of interests in a variety of issues but you've kind of been overwritten by this particular concept within the community about the signage. So could you talk quickly about that?

**Nguyen:**



About other issues? Like issues that I took on type of leadership? Absolutely. My biggest two priorities are public safety and affordable housing. The reason why those are my focus is because unfortunately in an environment or in a neighborhood where most of the people live in lower economic background, things happen. Again, that's just patterns of neighborhoods throughout the United States. District 7 is no exception. I focus on making sure that families who live in certain unsafe neighborhoods that public safety is a concern that should be addressed.

The other issue that I focus on is supportive housing. In the last three years that I've been on the city council we have built over 700 homes, affordable homes, in district 7. Which is huge because no one, I mean I looked at some of the history of San Jose, and it's like no one has ever done that in one particular district. I mean they do it throughout the city right now but since my focus is on affordable housing and I realize that my constituents really need that. Every time we have a ground breaking event, the next day it's full. People get on the waiting list immediately. The last affordable housing complex that we built, 2,000 people applied for 213 homes. I mean, it's just amazing.

**Moon:**

Are these homes that are for sale or just apartments?

**Nguyen:**

Apartments. You are looking at a 2 bed 2 bath for about \$900. Where can you get that in Silicon Valley? I mean the condo that I live in now, which I purchased, has very similar characteristics and qualities as these affordable homes. That was something that I focused on. When a developer comes into my office and want to develop affordable

homes in my district, the first thing I say to them is I want to make sure that they are going to develop quality homes for these people. Just because they are affordable doesn't necessarily mean that they have to be cheap in terms of quality. I've been doing a lot of that and we have a couple of more complexes in the pipeline that are coming.

**Moon:**

If we can talk a little bit about the dilemma that you are in currently with the business district question and then what is the status of the recall campaign?

**Nguyen:**

When I ran in 2005 I had various platforms but the two priorities that I wanted to provide for the Vietnamese American community were to build a Vietnamese community center.

The second was to help small businesses thrive. In district 7, or in the Vietnamese community, we—the Vietnamese mentality is that we don't really like to work for anyone because we come from a country where you just have your own business. You open your small business on the ground floor and you live on the top floor. So everybody owns something and everybody thrives because I need bread and you need thread, I need fish and you need meat—that sort of thing. It is a very vibrant community. So when they come here, they like to continue that pattern. The Vietnamese work 16 hours a day, 18 hours a day sometimes just to save enough money and 5 years later they open their own business. Or they borrow money from their friends and families to open some kind of business. They hardly want to work for anybody. And that's just a cultural mentality.

In district 7 there are tons of small Vietnamese businesses and I want to be able to, in the capacity that I am in, help them to thrive. How can I do that? So I thought, on this one

particular section on Story Road 15-20 years ago it was pretty dilapidated. Pretty broken down because the only thing that was there was a radio station, a K-mart, and the old HP campus. HP moved out but the radio station is still there, and K-mart eventually went out of business and then Wal-Mart moved in. But the whole area was just pretty dilapidated. So it wasn't until a Vietnamese developer came in and developed a Vietnamese mall there that attracted other small businesses to come in. Within 5 to 6 years the whole area became so vibrant. It was a thriving ethnic commercial area. And so I thought, "Let's help them some more." Because the only people that would come and shop there were Vietnamese Americans.

What can I do to attract more non-Vietnamese clientele to the area and at the same time help the city to generate more tax revenues? Last year we figured that the city was able to generate a little over a million dollars in sales tax from this area. So if we designate this area as an official business district, where it actually appears on visitor's brochures and maps for folks who visit from out of town and want to go to a place where they can find a bowl of pho, which is a type of Vietnamese beef noodle or anything that is Vietnamese related, they can just go there. A place like Chinatown or Japantown in San Francisco. You know those places so you just go there if you want something. That's what I wanted to do. We did that very successfully. The city council unanimously supported the project and I thought, "Wow, in two short years I fulfilled both of my campaign promises." Which is rare, too. People either do that at the end of their term or they do that before they run for re-election. But here I am right in the middle of my first

year, I finished two big platforms that I promised to the Vietnamese American community.

At the same time I work on projects that appeal to the broader community such as affordable housing and public safety issues. And so I am doing well. And that's because we work really hard. We have such a young team and they are just so passionate about everything. They just got out of college and they are working for an elected official who they believe in. We just go out there and we do all this great work. When we went out to the community we said, "Okay, we need a name for this district— it's a Vietnamese business district but we still need a name for it." So we held a couple of community meetings and people came up with different names: Little Saigon, New Saigon, Vietnamese Business District, six or seven different names. That's when I realized, "Oh my gosh, what happened?" I didn't even know there was such a huge interest at the beginning because when we [the council] voted on it, only four people came to speak. Two Vietnamese men came to speak in support; two other non-Vietnamese came to speak in opposition. The city council unanimously supported the project. So had they [little Saigon advocates] came at the beginning to support it, I would have realized, "What a huge interest." But it wasn't like that. The vote was fast and it passed at the council meeting. I thought it was great.

With all these different names that came out we thought it would be best if we sent out a survey. We sent out more than 1,300 postcards and asked what name they want for this particular retail area. Of the 1,300 surveys that we sent out we received back 117 which

is very small. That was less than 10%. And of 117 surveys that we got back, only 44 people chose the name Little Saigon. So to me it's 44 out of 1300- it's really a small number, statistically speaking. So I thought, "Okay, well, that doesn't really make me feel like the majority of the people support the name Little Saigon." Contrary to what this segment of the Vietnamese population was telling us that the entire Vietnamese community wanted the name Little Saigon. Well, if that was the case, we should've received at least a couple hundred surveys back. And if that was the case, then I would be more than happy to recommend the name Little Saigon. What happened was that throughout the whole time that we were doing outreach to designate this area as a Vietnamese retail area, we talked to a lot of Latinos because the last thing I wanted to do was to segregate the two communities.

We have about 40% of Latino business on that particular road. The other 60% are Vietnamese Americans. In a situation like this, you have to be very sensitive that you don't go out trying to create something great but intentionally alienating the rest of the community. We spent a good six to nine months doing that kind of outreach. And really, almost begging, pleading to non Vietnamese retailers that this project is going to be great for this area. I told them that it is an ethnic name for this specific retail area but they will benefit from it. Because I was trying to encourage more clientele to come and shop and eat at their restaurant. We did so much work with that type of extensive outreach. So when it had gotten to the point where I had to pick out names, I realized that I did my due diligence in terms of doing outreach to the non-Vietnamese and I couldn't just turn my back on them now. Had they not agreed with me to support the designation for this area,

we wouldn't have a project in the first place. They actually went down the trench with us and did all the necessary work. This particular Vietnamese group who advocated for the name Little Saigon only got involved in the naming process. What happened to the people that actually put in all this work before? I have to take that into consideration. I guess if I wanted to become popular or whatever, I could have just gone with the name Little Saigon but I wouldn't be able to live with myself. Or go out to the community every day and face those people that I worked with for the last 9 months.

**Moon:**

Was there a particular name that they had agreed upon?

**Nguyen:**

Yeah. They wanted to name it New Saigon because they thought the Vietnamese community was very vibrant and they've done a lot and contributed to the growing economy of San Jose. A lot of Vietnamese actually wanted that name too because they thought this was the new Saigon for us. So they liked that name. For me, it was difficult because now I had to choose between New Saigon and Little Saigon. I chose Saigon Business District which I thought was going to make everybody happy because I thought that's what they wanted. We also talked to a lot of people and they said whatever recommendation I come up with, as long as it had the word Saigon with it, then they would be okay. For a lot of non-Vietnamese veterans who are Vietnam vets, they expressed that they have memories there and if I come up with the name Saigon, they'd be fine. That's why I came up with Saigon Business District. It is a business district designation so it has to have the words "Business District" attached to it. Because that's the part that we were trying to promote. And that was it. It's as simple as that. It wasn't

supposed to be political. It wasn't supposed to be creating any kind of controversy. It was meant to be a great thing. It was a great project.

**Moon:**

Do you think that the conflict that's been created around that now is just really a minority faction in the Vietnamese community?

**Nguyen:**

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, I can tell you that I have been receiving an outpouring of unprecedented support from the residents in district 7. Both from the non-Vietnamese and also from the Vietnamese community. I think that for this segment of the community who advocated for and wanted to name it Little Saigon, they got what they wanted. We compromised and the banners are up. It says, "Welcome to Little Saigon." It pains me that they are really driving this recall based on perhaps there was pride that was hurt. Maybe there was misunderstanding that took place. Maybe I made a mistake in terms of saying certain things that were interpreted incorrectly. I don't know. I really don't know. But I hear all these accusations all the time. And I said, "Well, give me the evidence. What did I say that made you so upset? I'm more than happy to apologize if what I say came off the wrong way or hit people's wrong nerves." But there was nothing that they could come up with. All they said was how I didn't listen to them and that I no longer have the trust of the Vietnamese community. Obviously, I can't make everybody happy.

**Moon:**

So what is the status of the recall campaign?

**Nguyen:**

So on Tuesday we voted to have the recall election on March 3, 2009.

**Moon:**

Oh so there will be a recall election?

**Nguyen:**

Yes.

**Moon:**

So does that mean that you have to develop a re-elect campaign.

**Nguyen:**

Absolutely. It's heart-breaking because recall- because the whole recall process should take place when an elected official actually committed some kind of malicious act or a big crime. But this was just a disagreement. We are always going to disagree on a lot of things and if you really take this and you make it really simple, what I suggested was just my idea. And I feel like sometimes I am giving- I'm not even allowed to have an opinion? I mean, it's an opinion. I feel like, wait a minute, if these people are so anti-communist, we left that country because we didn't want to be persecuted for our own way of expression, then why are they doing this to me?" They are suppressing my free will to even express, to have an opinion on a name. I just don't get it.

**Moon:**

So even if they did recall you, the name would stand.

**Nguyen:**

No, because when we made the compromise, we rescinded the entire project. Meaning that even though they have the banners up that say Little Saigon, it's not official and it's not a formal official designation from the city. It's a private project. They'd have come



up with their own funding to put up the banners. It's almost like you have your own shopping plaza and you want to call it "ABC Plaza." In that context, it's not an official designation from the city of San Jose.

**Moon:**

But you don't really feel isolated from the Vietnamese community as a result of this, its more of just kind of a small faction of community members?

**Nguyen:**

The thing is, as this controversy progresses, I realize that the same people who are against me now are the same people who were against me back in 2005. I actually gained a lot more support now compared to 2005. I know that there are a lot of people that came forward now saying that they didn't really wanted to get involved back in 2005 between two Vietnamese women. They didn't want to pick sides. But now given what they have gone through with me during this entire ordeal, they are ready to work on my campaign and we are really to defeat this recall. So I actually gained more support.

**Moon:**

Plus that your district is much broader than the Vietnamese community.

**Nguyen:**

The difference is back when people who supported me they were proud and they came out in full force. Now because of this small group that is being so vocal and they are so out there, that people have become more reserved. And even if they want to support me, it's like silent support. So the silent majority, even though they are supportive, they don't come out and say, "I support Madison." Rather, they say, "Yes, I support her."

But they only say it among their friends and family members. In that regard, I firmly believe that we will defeat the recall.

**Moon:**

Well that would be great.

**Nguyen:**

The only thing is that you have to get people to vote because my biggest concern now is that voters might not understand that they have to go vote. They have to vote no because if they stay home and say, “Well, I don’t want to go vote to recall Madison so I’m not going to go vote.” That would hurt us because by not going, the other side will get more votes. It’s like whoever gets the majority wins. Even if it’s with just one vote.

**Moon:**

So do they have to go to a polling office then to do this?

**Nguyen:**

It’s just like a general election. The polling place where they usually go to vote, or if they vote absentee, the county sends home the absentee ballot.

**Moon:**

Oh okay. Well good luck with that. I am sure that it will turn out in your favor. Can you recap your experience so far in this council, what are your plans for the future?

**Nguyen:**

I have big plans. First of all, I want to finish my full term here. My re-election is not up until 2010 but there are so many projects in the district that I want to complete that we started when I first came on board. You know, we are parks deficit. We are in the middle of building two big parks in the district and that hasn’t happened in the last twenty

years. So we are starting to see this huge transformation of the district in terms of— compared to districts that are more fluent. We’re making segway into that and I think that is very empowering for the people who live here. I mean, when I go to community events and I have a lot of— most Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese who have lived in the area for twenty years and they say, “We have never seen a council member that’s so hands-on, I mean, we see you everywhere and you’re doing all these things.” In a specific district when you do something, everybody takes notice. And so I’d like to finish those projects that are in the pipeline and then— I’m not really done here until 2014. I really don’t want to move up unless there is an opportunity and when my constituents say, “Yeah, maybe you should move up.” But I think—

**Moon:** —in terms of?

**Nguyen:**

In terms of running for higher office. For me, it’s either doing things that make an impact at the local level or doing things that make an impact on an international level. Definitely Congress is something that I’d like to see as part of my political career way in the future. But not in the next 5-10 years.

**Moon:**

That all sounds great. I know my students in my class were just thrilled to have you come and talk. Cindy Chavez actually came a couple of weeks later and one of the things that she had said that I thought were interesting, and I was wondering if you had experienced this, she was saying that she definitely felt discrimination as a woman and as a Latina woman in the city council on a variety of different levels. And I was just wondering what your experience has been on that end? And then also she had mentioned

that in some of her campaigning she had a lot of really terrible people threatening her and threatening her family and I was wondering, with all the things that have happened, if you've had to deal with any of those types of conflicts within the community.

**Nguyen:**

Oh absolutely. I mean, for her it's threatening and for, it's right in my face, especially when this controversy broke out. Back in 2005, there were just a lot of threats. I mean, I was driving down towards my campaign headquarters one day and somebody took a BB gun and shot at the car. So, my window shattered. If I were not steady with the wheel, it could have caused a huge accident. If I had reacted differently, the car would have spun in many different directions. Also, all the major donors who contributed to my campaign, their businesses were trashed. Graffiti, windows were broken into and so you have to ask yourself whether these were accidental or did people actually plan out these stuff? But that kind of stuff happened around campaigns all the time. It happens so much that we just don't particularly talk about it since it's so normal. And then when this controversy happened, the first couple of months when the reaction was especially strong, I would go to a couple of Vietnamese events and people would just get in front of my face and said, "We don't want you here. Go home." They also try to push their way into me. Other people had to get in between us. What I had faced and gone through with this whole controversy were a whole lot more, I would say—

**Moon:**

Did that surprise you, that part of it?

**Nguyen:**

No, because the older Vietnamese in the community have been through so much during the Vietnam War and violence in a country that you can't really blame them for their emotion and passion with this issue.

**Moon:**

I know you probably need to go on with your schedule, maybe I can come back another time and ask some follow-up questions. In terms of looking at the role of women in politics what role do you think you play as a Vietnamese-American woman.

**Nguyen:**

I think that's going to be very long.

**Moon:**

And they are waiting. Why don't I schedule another appointment because I would like to get your perceptions on the role of women in politics and how ethnic origins—

**Nguyen:**

Yes, I think that's going to be pretty long so let's just do that.

**Moon:**

Okay, we'll schedule another one then. Thank you so much.

**Nguyen:**

No problem.

[recording ends]