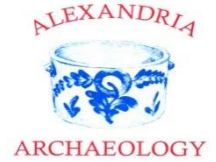




City of Alexandria
Office of Historic Alexandria
Immigrant Alexandria, Past, Present, and Future
Oral History Program



Project Name: *Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future*

Title: *Interview with Tu-Anh Nguyen*

Date of Interview: *June 4, 2015*

Location of Interview: *Tu-Anh Nguyen's Boutique, 113 Washington St, Alexandria VA*

Interviewer: *Dan Lee*

Audio and Video Recording: *John Reibling*

Transcriber: *Adept Word Management, Inc.*

Abstract: This is the first of two interviews. Tu-Anh Nguyen was born in Nha Trang, Vietnam. In about 1984, after years of hiding from the Communists, Tu-Anh's family escaped by boat and came to the United States. They lived first in New Orleans then joined family members in Alexandria Virginia. She went to school in Alexandria, then moved to New York for education and training in the fashion industry. She talks about growing up in the government-sponsored housing, helping other relatives get settled in the US, growing up here and going to New York for school, then her return to Alexandria.

This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and may not reflect the audio-recording exactly.

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INTRODUCTIONS 01:05	
Dan Lee:	All right, so this is Dan Lee. Today is June 4, 2015. We are at Tu-Anh 's Boutique, which is 113 South Washington Street. I'm with Tu-Anh Nyugen. Can you please speak?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Tu-Anh Nyugen.
D.L.:	This is Dan Lee. And the videographer is John Reibling.
ARRIVAL IN ALEXANDRIA 02:34	
D.L.:	Hi, Tu-Anh, thanks for doing this interview with us. I kind of wanted to go back to some of your first experiences with Alexandria, Virginia. How long have you or your family lived in Alexandria or in the northern Virginia area, and where did you move from?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Okay. Um, well, my family arrived in the United States at the—the last trip was the end of 1982.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	And we settled in New Orleans, because that's where my father and my older—my three older—my four older—brothers arrived first.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	And uh—and I think we stayed in New Orleans maybe about a year. And my uncle was living in the northern Virginia area, so he had contacted my mother and said that we should move to northern Virginia because the economy and life is better up here. So, then we moved up here I think—I believe in 1984.
CHILDHOOD IN VIETNAM 03:33	
D.L.:	Okay. Let's go back to before you moved to the United States. Where were you born?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I was born in Nha Trang, Vietnam.
D.L.:	Okay, can you mark that on this map for me?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Sure. It is almost south and it's right here. I circled it. Can you read that?
D.L.:	Okay. Yeah. And were your parents also born there?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yes.
D.L.:	Okay. What kind of work do your parents do?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	What kind of work do they do now or what kind of—?

D.L.:	What did—kind of work did they do before they moved to the United States and perhaps what did they—?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Okay, um, well my father, my father taught Philosophy and French and then my mother was a businesswoman. So, I think she ran a few PX [post exchange: military stores] and some other types of businesses.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah.
D.L.:	And who lived in your household, besides you?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	But that was before 1975.
D.L.:	Oh, okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Before the, before fall of Saigon.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	See, that was before the Vietnam War.
D.L.:	And then after they moved to the United States?
ARRIVAL IN THE US, LIVING AND WORKING 04:45	
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Um, well, so, so. okay, so I want to make sure that—I want to clarify. So, after the 1975—so, between that—before we came to the States, they did farming.
D.L.:	Uh-huh, okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	And then my mother sort of—you know—you see markets? She was selling whatever she could, whether it's clothes or rice or vegetables or fish, anything. And then when we moved to the United States, my father was—when we were in New Orleans, he worked at a gas station, as one job, and then he also worked at a grocery store, bagging. And then my mother worked—so, in New Orleans, my mother worked at a shrimp factory.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Uh-huh. And then when they moved—like she was peeling shrimp.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	And she smelled really bad every time she came home and I couldn't stand it, because I'm very—I'm all about the senses, even as a child. And I remember just kind of looking back, feeling really guilty about it,

	because even after she showered several times, she still smelled like she came from the seafood, you know, place and I didn't want to sit near her and I didn't want to sleep with her or get close to her and at that time, we all slept in one bed. My father, my mother, and my two younger sisters and I were on one big piece of mattress.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah. Um, and so, after they moved to northern Virginia—and then we—so, my mother and my sisters and I moved to northern Virginia first. And then she got a job, she got a job at a grocery store in Arlington. It's now a Clarendon area, but back then, her—one of her childhood friends had gone here. [They] had arrived in 1975, so started a grocery business and it's called Mekong, Mekong Center I think. So, she worked for her and then we stayed in her house. And my mother, my sisters, and I lived in her basement and that was for, I don't know, it was a few months, because between, I think between, um, I think between 1984 and probably 1986, we we moved so many times, I can't even keep track.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	And we stayed there for a while and then we moved—after Arlington, I believe we moved to Falls Church, in this area called Pine Spring. And then my mother worked, continued to work there, but then she also continued to work as a, like a housekeeper or a cleaning person.
FIRST EXPERIENCES IN ALEXANDRIA 07:13	
D.L.:	Okay, and kind of—what was your first experience with Alexandria?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	The first experience with Alexandria, I would say after I graduated from fashion school, fashion design school, FIT [Fashion Institute of Technology college] in New York [City], and then I worked in the industry for a while, but I would come back and forth to visit northern Virginia, my family. And then, when I decided to move back, maybe it was in 2000, I think. I lived in Alexandria. I got an apartment.
D.L.:	Okay. So, um—so, who lived in your household, I guess, when you were in high school?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	When I was in high school, we had moved to Fairfax. We settled in a small government housing condo in Fairfax and we still have that condo. And I think it's, it's probably a little, it's about a thousand square foot and we—at one point, we had about fifteen people in the house, because my mother was taking care of, you know, all her cousins and her nephews and she was just taking everyone in, you know, to help them.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	So high school—it's not—it was a lot of fun, because, you know, I think that people, when they talk about, "Oh, how come people in third-world country are happier than us?" I think it's when you don't have that much,

	you just, I don't know, I feel like you're happier, because kind of looking back now, I feel like we were happier back then, although we were struggling—.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	You know, a lot, so—and it was just people in and out. I never had friends over. I may have one or two, because I was ashamed of where I was living. Because when I was going to school Oakton, I was very involved in the fashion club. I produced all the fashion shows. I sewed and I sold my stuff. So, I was sort of, I guess, the fashionista at my school and the President and Vice President of this-and-that club and I didn't want them to know where I, you know, I didn't want them to know what my family life was like.
D.L.:	Okay. Um, speaking of your friends though, kind of who were some of your friends in high school and—yeah—that kind of stuff.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Oh, I had, I had all kinds of friends. I just have a very flexible, spontaneous, easy-going personality, so I had all kinds of friends. I had, you know, friends that were very poor and then I had friends that were very wealthy. And I had, you know, Black, Asian, Hispanic, Whites, I mean it doesn't really matter. It's about, I think, having the same values.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	So, we all had things in common about education and family and wanting to succeed and work ethics and things like that. So, those were the types of friends that I was attracted to. But the ones that I was very close to in high school, that I'm still in touch with today, are—they're Shelly, she's Filipino and she also came from an immigrant family—she was born here I think. Trang, who is Vietnamese, and then Kathy, who's Chinese-Vietnamese. Her parents are immigrants and so is Trang's, but I think they were born here, I think, yeah.
CHURCH IN ALEXANDRIA 10:24	
D.L.:	Okay—did you go to church or were you religious?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah, we went to church every Sunday and I think that was sort of a nice thing, because now, looking back, our family is so scattered and we don't have that routine, traditional, weekly things we do anymore, you know. But church was kind of fun, because Sunday was the day that we looked forward to spending as a family, because my father and my mother worked two or three jobs and we never really saw them, so Sunday was like a family gathering. So, after church, we'd go somewhere to eat and then we'd go to church or a flea market.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	And that's where I'd get to pick out clothes.

D.L.:	Was there a particular church in this area that you went to?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Well we went to Saint Bernadette's in Springfield, Virginia. We also went to the Vietnamese church in Arlington. They moved locations, so I don't know the name of it now. And then we also went to Saint Leo's in Fairfax.
D.L.:	Okay, wow.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah, yeah, and then I—and then Saint Anthony's in Alexandria, too. I don't—it's off of Route 7.
D.L.:	Uh-huh.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	So, I'm not—and that—I think it's in Alexandria.
D.L.:	I think so too.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah, by Bailey's Crossroad [neighborhood.]
D.L.:	Uh-huh.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Maybe it's Falls Church.
D.L.:	Yeah.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah.
FAMILY TIME TOGETHER 11:44	
D.L.:	Um, see—did you have a set dinnertime with your family or with your parents working?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	No, I mean I think during the week we ate dinner at about the same time, but I was pretty much taking care of my younger siblings, so I cooked and I cleaned and I did all of that and then I just made sure that they got dinner before they went to bed. But if my parents were home, then we ate dinner, but if they are not, then we didn't. We just kind of ate in and out, yeah.
D.L.:	Okay, um—.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	But I think like sometimes, I think, I remember Sundays we sat down and had dinner together.
D.L.:	Okay, what were those Sunday family dinners kind of like?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	You know, it's—it's really just eating. We don't really talk much. And you know, I don't know if you know, it's kind of a—maybe it's the culture or something. And if we do talk, it's usually me sharing an idea that I'm excited about or something. And also, I remember my mom and my

	father, so my mother and father, it's those times that we sat down together, that they corrected our posture, when we were sitting and eating. They corrected how we were holding the forks or the chopsticks or the knives. They corrected how we were chewing. But it was just really simple times like that.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	But I'm glad they did, because then it really helped us, because we never—my parents were never around to teach us etiquette or anything. But it was just those little things that they'd share with us. I think it was very helpful, because, you know, my siblings and I turned out okay. [Laughing] I mean—.
MEMORIES OF VIETNAM 13:26	
D.L.:	Um, did they—did they talk about it, about Vietnam or did they have Vietnamese foods?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	No, I—it's—well, we did cook Vietnamese food and sometimes we'd mix with American food. Um—and then they always made me drink milk, which I did not like. So, they would put sugar in it and I still didn't drink it. And they said, "You're never going to get taller, if you don't get your Vitamin D." And then at one point, they just switched it to chocolate milk, so I could drink it. But you know, it's very typical of the Vietnamese and I think other Asian culture too. We don't talk about struggles and we don't talk about the past.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	It's just we focus more on okay, let's get food on the table, work hard, and live the present, and then build a future.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah.
FAMILY VALUES 14:08	
D.L.:	Between hard work, religion, education, career, family, which one do you think your parents emphasized the most?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	You know, I think my mother would say family is priority and I think—and then education is second. And I think my father would be—and then—well, now I think my mother would say—I think my mother would say hard work first and family second, at least at that time, during those times.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Then education would be third. I think my father was education, hard work, and probably family. And this is all during that time. Because yes,

	<p>family is very important, but if you don't have hard work, how are you going to improve your life, right? So, but them emphasize the hard work a lot and the education.</p> <p>It was more—so the education is if you get straight As, you're going to get money, whether it's ten dollars on your report card or whatever. Um, and then hard work is that, you know, everything takes an dedication. If you want to have something great, you have to be patient and you have to put the effort into it, whether it's school, to get good grades through hard work or working for other people, yeah.</p>
MONEY FOR GRADES, ALLOWANCES 15:32	
D.L.:	Okay. Speaking of getting money for good grades, did you get an allowance?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I never got money. [Laughing] I think I would get straight As and one C in math or science. Uh, so money, no. We only got money during [Lunar] New Years.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	So, you know in the Asian culture for New Years, you—which I actually really miss that tradition, because I think seeing some of my siblings and my younger—my cousins, I think were already—by this time were already losing that tradition. So, back then, every New Year, all of us, my brothers, my sisters, and I, we have to stand in front of our parents and we have to prepare like a little one-minute, you know, "It's the New Year. I bless you good health, happiness," or whatever it is that we wish for them, and then they would give us the red envelope with money.
D.L.:	Uh-huh.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	So, that was the only time that we got money. Well, once in a while, we have a relative coming to visit us, you know, they may give us money, but we didn't have allowance or anything.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah, we couldn't afford to.
D.L.:	So on those moments in which you did get money, maybe not huge amounts, but some spending money, what kinds of things did you spend it on? You had talked about your love of fashion.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Oh yeah, I, um—I'm still the same person. I live for the present and the moment. My sisters would save the money. And I would get—whatever money I'd get, I'd put it in a little piggy bank, so I'd have that. But then I'd leave aside things for like going to the flea market, buying clothes, and then just rearranging, you know, cutting them, or buying ice cream and dessert, which I love, or books, you know, like just art books and creative

	things, yeah.
CHILDHOOD RESPONSIBILITIES 17:29	
D.L.:	Okay. Um, you talked about having to take care of your younger siblings.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Uh-huh, and my older [siblings.]
D.L.:	Can you just—oh, okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Because I'm the middle child, so I'm the fifth child out of seven.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah, the fifth child out of seven, but I'm the oldest girl. So, in the Asian culture, the oldest girl takes care of everything, or especially the Vietnamese, yeah. Okay. And so, that involved cooking and—yeah, I tutored my younger sisters, I did my brothers' laundry, I, you know, went groceries, I cooked. Um, we didn't have money to buy birthday cake, so I baked a birthday cake for every single person. Whenever it was their birthday, I was in charge of all of that. Yeah, and just really running and managing the household. So, I was at—I felt like—I think they had a nickname for me that I was like a mother, I mean because I, I didn't really know what having fun or being a teenager was like, because I had so much responsibility.
COOKING AND VIETNAMESE FOOD 18:34	
D.L.:	Okay. What kinds of things did you cook back then and do you still cook them now?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah, I—one of the squid dishes that I made up, it's like I have mushrooms and these clear noodles and onions and, I don't know, nuts and just flavoring, and then I stuff it in the squid and I put a toothpick across and then I roll it. So, that was like something that my brothers love and my sisters, so I used to cook it a lot, like almost weekly. But then I could cook Vietnamese food. I could cook American food. I can eat something and just know how to cook it right away.
D.L.:	Okay. Did you learn that—where did you learn these recipes, besides experimentation?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Experimentation and then my mother just showing me one time or my father showing me one time how to cook. Because I love cooking and I love eating, so it's really easy for me, yeah.
D.L.:	Okay. What were the big holidays or celebrations for your family?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I would say Christmas and New Years. We always looked forward, we always looked forward to opening presents and getting everyone together for Christmas. And Christmas was my favorite, because all my aunts and

	uncles and cousins, anybody who was in the area, we'd squeeze them all into our little condo.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	And they would spend the night and we would be, you know, stacked up with each other and it, it was just a lot of fun. And we um, we didn't have a lot of money to buy gifts, so—but what I would do is I would draw and I would do like these—I would make things and I would wrap them up and put them under the tree, so it made it look like we had a lot of presents. But it was just fun, you know. And we played music and then we sing. And then New Years, we did the dragon dance, you know, in the family and we made each other laugh, so it's those—yeah. And it's not the same. We still have that. We still do that tradition, not so much New Years, but Christmas for sure. But now that my siblings are married, they take turns, you know, so we don't always have them together. Like Thanksgiving, one of my sisters would be at her in-laws and then Christmas, they'll be with us. And then it takes turns, so we never have the whole family together.
FAMILY HEIRLOOMS 20:47	
D.L.:	Okay, um, let's see. Are there any family objects or heirlooms that you still have? And if so, like who keeps them in your family?'
Tu-Anh Nguyen	You know, that's a good question. I don't think we have any, because, you know, after the war, we just—my parents only cared about the kids being safe, so we didn't take any belongings. And when we escaped Vietnam by boat, we didn't take anything. I mean one thing I took was, um, the picture, a framed wooden picture of my Saint Theresa, that one of the mothers, one of the head mothers at the Convent of the Carmelite gave it to me. So, I carry that with me on the boat and I still have it, in the original frame. And I think my mother has a piece of jade from my grandmother, that later on my grandmother brought over to this country and gave it to her, so I have that. And then we have some pictures from the 1960s, that over the years people collected and gave them to us, but we don't really have any valuables.
D.L.:	Okay. Well, I mean let's talk about those photographs. Who—like the photograph that John sent you earlier—who took it and kind of who keeps it or, yeah, who's—?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah, my mother is, my mother is the, is the person that kind of keeps the family together, the relatives and everybody. So, she had that picture and I don't remember who gave it to her, but somebody from the camp.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	And so, she kept that and then she gave it to me, so I have it. I now have it. And then some of the black and white photos of my parents, those

	from just relatives and friends. My parents were very photogenic and my mother was very, um, her family well-known in Vietnam, but also she was, she was very well-known for her beauty, and her intelligence, but more because she's very beautiful. So, a lot of people—like if you mention her name, a lot of people now today, who are her age, they would know who my parents are. So, when you look at some of their photographs, I'm like, "Oh my God. They were so beautiful." And you know, so the relatives and the friends gave them [photos] to us.
MUSIC 23:13	
D.L.:	Okay. Um, what about music? What kinds of music, perhaps, do you listen to?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Uh-huh.
D.L.:	And what kinds of music do your parents listen to?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Growing up, I always loved music and I even remember in Vietnam, I had a little book and I wrote down all the songs that I love that were Vietnamese. And I would sing them all the time and I would just write them. And then we also would hear a lot of French and 1920s type of American jazz. You know, Louis Armstrong, um nineteen—you know—1950s, sixties, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin type of music. So that was—so it was either that type of music or French or Vietnamese.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Uh-huh.
LEAVING PARENT'S HOME 23:59	
D.L.:	Um, what age did you leave home? Um, you talked about going to fashion school in New York.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Oh, eighteen.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I first went to Virginia Commonwealth University for Fine Arts. And then after two years being there, I didn't want to be there anymore. Because, although I love art and I'm a very creative person, I don't see myself as a fine artist and I—and then I just, I just felt like being surrounded by all these artists, it was so dark.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	And I'm such a light person, that I felt, like I almost felt there's darkness over me. It's hard to describe, but I think that's—maybe that's why fine artists are so amazing and talented. So, I decided, you know, I love

	fashion too much. I'm going to apply for the Fashion Institute of Technology. And I did it by myself, on my own. I took the train up and brought my portfolio, did all the interview. Because if I had told my parents, they would try to stop me.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	So, I did that and I then I got in. And so, I think I told my parents two weeks before I was going to move up to New York. And I said, "I'm going up to New York to do fashion design." And they were very upset. They tried to stop me. But I said, "I'm going." So, they didn't have a choice, but we put everything in my dad's station wagon and they drove me up to New York.
GROWING UP IN GOVERNMENT HOUSING 25:22	
D.L.:	Okay. We had talked about the time in Fairfax and the condo.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Uh-huh. My father still lives there.
D.L.:	Okay. Okay, can you describe the neighborhood a little bit? Um, for example, kind of what it looked like, who your neighbors were, that kind of stuff?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah, the neighborhood, it has a tennis court, because we used to play tennis there. And it's, it's all townhouses and our section is just one little court. It's Linden Leaf Court and it's just one little court. And there's probably, I would say maybe twenty-four units.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	So, you have the two-level, that's above us, but it's another condo, but it's a two-level condo. And right below them is the first ground level, but it's all one floor. And then they had a swimming pool. But what I was always upset about, and when we were growing up, we were very ashamed because it's basically the same community, but we—but in that little court, everyone knew that it was government housing. And everyone knew that we couldn't afford to live in the same neighborhood. So, it was just very obvious. And the swimming pool was right across the street from us, but we couldn't use it, because we were considered government housing. And then everybody else who lived in that neighborhood could use it. So, my sisters used to stand outside in the fence and would look through it. I did the same thing, you know, but, but my father didn't want to let go of that condo and he's, and I'm glad he kept it, because he's still there, he's very—he doesn't like change. So and then they have a home in Orlando. But when they stay here, during the nice weather, he still lives there. And I told him, I said, "I think one day I'm going to come in here and do a little documentary," because I still can't get over the fifteen of us—."

D.L.:	Yeah.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Lived in there, like flat mattress everywhere, so.
D.L.:	Can you, are there any particular sounds or smells that you associate with um, with that neighborhood or some of the earlier years?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	The sound of the ice cream truck, that was something we looked forward to every afternoon, after school, around four o'clock, I think, maybe between 3:30 and 4:30 is when the ice cream truck came. And that was when, if we had some extra money, we'd all run out and stand in line got a ice cream. We loved the sound of the bell, you know, they have that. And I loved the smell of the grass, because we loved the outdoors. And I think that's another difference, too, is that back then, kids didn't have electronics. They didn't have all these video games. So, after school, they went outside and they played games and they ran around and they were active, you know. Um and that's what we used to do and we loved it. And we used to—there's certain things—games that we played that we would cut branches from the trees and we would find the rocks. So, the smell of the woods and nature, I would say, that I really liked.
D.L.:	Okay. Um, can you talk a little bit about the neighborhood ethnically or—?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Um, I think that—well, now it's different. But back then, it was, like I said, it was pretty much all Caucasian in the same community, just except that corner, the court, Linden Leaf Court.
D.L.:	Uh-huh.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Which is the government housing of twenty-four or thirty units or whatever it is. It was mostly Asian, Spanish, or some Blacks.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	But mostly, I would say mostly Asians and Hispanics or Indian or Blacks or something.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	But then, the rest of the neighborhood, pretty much, was all Caucasian, the majority.
D.L.:	Okay. Did you have time to play with the other children, like on the grounds and—?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	No, I just played with my younger sisters and cousins and siblings, just because it was also my responsibility to keep them on track, you know, to babysit them and keep them on track and make sure they do their homework. So, it's sort of like, you know, after the bus drops us off, then, you know, we eat snacks or whatever, drop off our books, we go outside

	and play and then before dinner, close to five o'clock, they had to come in for dinner and they have to do their homework and then they go to bed, kind of thing. And we weren't allowed to watch TV during the week.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Only Saturday morning cartoons.
D.L.:	Okay. You talked about your extended family all coming together for holidays. How often do your extended family come over for these big family gatherings?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Um, are you talking about now or before?
D.L.:	Before.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	It wasn't a lot, because we all worked so much. So, I would just say, you know, if it's somebody's wedding or if it's Christmas or New Years.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah.
D.L.:	Um, what kind of stores did. I guess you were doing the grocery shopping, so yeah, what kind of stores did you go to? You know, talk about flea markets as well, um, yeah, I mean just the grocery store, 7-11.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	We walked to Shoppers back at that time. I think if we were, I think my father said Shoppers was the least expensive, so I think we went there. And then, on Sundays, we would go to the Vietnamese [clearing throat] excuse me, the Asian store to get the vegetables and the Asian spices and things. And where was—where was the—those were usually in Arlington, at the time, because Arlington was where a lot of the Vietnamese community was. And then sometimes we went to eat in the [Eden] Center [in Baily's Crossroads.]
CARS AND TRANSPORTATION 31:00	
D.L.:	Okay. What kind of transportation did you use, like in your daily life?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	We walked everywhere and then we took the bus. And then, we took the bus to school and then we walked everywhere after school, if we wanted to go places. And then we, took the bus, you know, the regular metrobus or whatever. What do they call it now, metrobus? Okay, yeah. And then like we had one car. So—but that car was being used by my father for work and then my brothers shared it and things like that, so.
D.L.:	Okay. How often did you travel? Why don't you—? Or can you describe your first experience going into Washington D.C.?
Tu-Anh	I think when we first moved up here and then went into downtown

Nguyen	Washington D.C., I think it was a lot of fun. But then, after that, we hated going downtown D.C., because every time we have visitors or relatives, my father would pack everyone in the station wagon and then we'd go. He drags the whole family down to Washington D.C. to show the relatives and the visitors the monuments and the White House. So, after a while, we're like, "Oh my gosh. I think it's one year and we've been here thirty times or something." And we don't want to do the whole touristy thing again. So, it's kind of funny, because I don't even—I don't take advantage of being in the Washington D.C. area and really taking the time to go down to the monuments or the Lincoln Memorial, you know, and just historical places like that is just because I feel like, oh, I did that my whole childhood. But I know Washington D.C. very well. I do other things, the restaurants and museums and, you know, other places, but just not the historical sites.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah.
EDUCATION 33:08	
D.L.:	Um, let's talk a little bit about your education. Um, before, yeah, I guess before you came—when—before you came to the United States kind of, what was your grade school?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I never went to school in Vietnam.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	So, I didn't have the opportunity to, because we were hiding from the Communists and my parents did farming, and so we just had to be around to help out the family. So, I never went to elementary school. So, my first time in formal education was here in the United States in the end of fifth grade. But I do remember, you know, taking care of my younger siblings, and then in between then, I would go to the local elementary schools and standing outside, looking into the window, and seeing all the kids learn and wanting to be in there.
D.L.:	Okay. Um—.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	And plus, I think we moved way too many times, every two or three weeks.
D.L.:	Yes, I was going to ask about that.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah, every two or three weeks we went in hiding and my mother and father put us somewhere, with a friend or a relative to—so that they could focus on what they needed to get done. So, we didn't really—but there was a time period—I don't remember the exact age, but I believe maybe at age seven, that I was living in Saigon with my aunt, my father's older

	sister. I think I probably lived with her for three or four months. And she taught me how to write Vietnamese, so like ABC and things like that. And so, I'd learn how to write and read a little bit and I was able to write letters to my father, who was already here in the States and read his letters.
D.L.:	Okay, when did you learn to speak English?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	In Singapore refugee camp.
D.L.:	Okay. Do you speak other—well, you speak Vietnamese and—.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I speak and—so, I speak Vietnamese. I read, write Vietnamese fluently and I speak it fluently. I also speak Spanish and I can read and write. I wouldn't say fluently, but I'm pretty comfortable. I also have knowledge of French. When I read or speak or listen to it, I can understand and pick it up. Not as fluent as Spanish. And then recently I was in Italy, but after three or four days, I just kind of picked—I think once you know one of those romance languages, it's easier to pick up others.
D.L.:	Okay. Who were your favorite teachers when you moved to the States?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	<p>You know, I don't know. The only teacher I—so, there are two teachers I remember in high school, but in middle school, I really—there wasn't any one teacher that really stood out for me. And then elementary, I moved so many times. But in high school, there were three: one was, and he passed away last year and I did a speech at his funeral, but he was a marketing director for DECA [club for students interested in marketing, finance, hospitality, and management.] It's a club. He, I didn't have him as my teacher, but I was the President of the marketing club, the DECA club. So, he was sort of the teacher that was the sponsor or the supporter of that club. So, he would help me and we got to know each other very well. And he made all—I produced all of the fashion shows in high school and he made all my crazy ideas happen. And he was always very entrepreneurial. He used to sneak me out of school early, so I could go do a fashion show at Macy's [department store.] And then another teacher was my Spanish teacher in my senior year, Mrs. Owens, who I ran into also at Mr. Posten's funeral. And she was very strict. She had no emotions.</p> <p>She wasn't your personable, friendly person. She was very reserved, but she was a very good teacher, so I remember her. And then, another one was my ninth grade English teacher, Mrs. McKenney. And yeah, I think she was probably my favorite, because she was beautiful, she was fashionable, she was stylish, she was creative, and she was very compassionate and very loving and, very nurturing and supportive.</p> <p>So yeah, and she had this beautiful bleached blonde hair. She was just always elegant and classy. I think I'm always attracted to that. But no, she</p>

	was just, yeah, I really, she was my favorite, because she was really supportive.
D.L.:	Okay. Did your parents take an active role in your education?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	No, they weren't around.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	They worked too much. My mother—so, at one point in high school, she only came home once a month, because she was a nanny out in Potomac for a couple. And so, she would come home sometimes once every two Sundays or sometimes once a month. So—and my father worked too much and went to school too, so I didn't—.
D.L.:	Okay. You said that you had gone to—you went first to Virginia Commonwealth. Um, kind of when you graduated high school, what were you—what were your plans for after college?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Well, I didn't really have a plan, but when I graduated from high school, I know that I wanted to be some—I wanted to be doing something in fashion. And then also, I wanted to be a movie star. But that's not very practical, so I—but I loved art and my parents didn't want me to go straight to New York to fashion design school, so they said, "Pick a school in Virginia, so it's less expensive and everything." And I didn't want to go to [George] Mason [University] because they didn't have an art program. Marymount was a private school. We couldn't afford that, even with scholarships. And Virginia Commonwealth University [VCU] was the other alternative, because they have a great fashion, design, and fine arts program. So, I think my first two years, I did both fashion and fine arts, to see which—.
D.L.:	And did you move to—?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I switched and I transferred to New York City.
D.L.:	Okay, but did you live in the dorms when you were at VCU?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	The first year and then the second year I got an apartment on campus.
D.L.:	Okay. And did your older siblings go to college as well?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	My oldest brother and my second brother, but not my third or my fourth, yeah.
D.L.:	Okay. This sounds kind of weird, but do you remember approximately how much tuition cost when you went to FIT, just in comparison to what it is now?
Tu-Anh	You know, I think it's—well, when I went to FIT, I stayed in the dorms.

Nguyen	It was right on campus and it just made a lot of sense. So, you know, I think it was twenty thousand or twenty-five thousand a year.
D.L.:	Okay. And kind of, do you know—?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I don't know how much it is now.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	It's very expensive.
D.L.:	Yeah. What were some of your best memories or what were some of your most vivid memories about college, I guess on FIT?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	At FIT, well I love, so the dorm life was funny, because we had all kinds of people. And I remember the gay guys dressing in bikinis and putting wigs and everything, running up and down the hallway and showing off. And then, sometimes the Fourth of July, on the whole, this block, the school was like, I think it's two blocks and one avenue or something like that. But the Fourth of July, within the school, everyone dresses up and all the guys would be just very flamboyant. And then going to the studios, the design studios, I'd work late. My friends and I, we would stay up till four o'clock in the morning, in the studios, constructing our garments and working on our designs. And, and then the, oh, my Alternative Film Club. I started an Alternative Film Club.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I was the first one that started it and I heard it still existing.
D.L.:	Um, what kind of, can you give us a range of like years in which this was—?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Um, this was in nineteen, 1992 to 1994.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Uh-huh.
SOCIAL LIFE AND DATING 41:42	
D.L.:	Let's talk a little bit about your social life, I guess like when were you allowed to date?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I not allowed to date until I was out of college. So, before my parents drove me down to VCU, they sat me down and said, "We raised you so that you can become a grown, responsible adult and have a future. So, we are paying and helping support you with loans and whatever money that we can, to go to college, so that you could have a future. So, we do not

	<p>want you having a boyfriend or dating."</p> <p>And I met my first boyfriend the end of my freshman year and I did not introduce him to my family until, I believe, the last year before I graduated.</p>
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I was hiding, because they were so strict with me. But they weren't like that with my younger sisters at all. It was so unfair. I think that that happens a lot.
D.L.:	I know!
Tu-Anh Nguyen	And like, I remember I think it took me a whole month to ask my dad if I could go to prom. Because the guy who asked me to prom, I was so scared to ask my father. I said, "He's going to say no." So, I kept dragging it and dragging it. And finally, I asked my father and he didn't give me an answer right away, so I have to keep bugging him. And I think it took him a week to give me an answer, and then he was okay. So, talk about that prom a little bit, if we can.
D.L.:	Yeah. Did you go with a group or was it just you and your date?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	<p>Yeah, it was—it was one of my girlfriends and so it was four of us. And my father said, "I'm not going to let you go, unless they come and pick you up and they come in the house and I know exactly what they look like." So, they came in the house and I remember being really ashamed of where—they knew where I lived. You know, it was just—because where they live was completely different. They lived out in, you know, Herndon, Franklin Farms area of Oakton. You know, single homes and nice. And they came in and they were so nervous, because my father can be very intimidating, because he looks so serious and he doesn't talk that much.</p> <p>And then he gave them a whole lecture about drunk driving. And then, when we got out of the house, they were like, "So glad we left there. Your father made us so nervous." [Laughing] And then we had to go home, oh, I made sure that we had to, I had to get home early, because I was afraid my father was going to get upset if I got home too late. And then, when I got home, the lights were on and my father was still up. [Laughing] So, that was prom.</p>
D.L.:	So, you had talked about your first boyfriend in college. Can you kind of describe how you met or—?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Sure, um, his sister, his sister was dating my brother. I did not meet him at VCU. He, he's actually, he was Vietnamese, but also was raised here. So, he was very Americanized, but still had the fifty percent Vietnamese. He lived in Boston and he was going to, I believe, Boston University at the time. And he was three years older than me. And his sister, who was

my brother's girlfriend, just one day out of the blue, she was like, "I want to introduce you to somebody. I think you guys would be great, you know, with each other or for each other," whatever. And so, she introduced us, but she waited until I got to the end of my first year. But when she told me that, I was a senior in high school. But she made the introduction and then I never met him. He just called me and we talked on the phone. But we had like this great friendship for three or four months.

And I remember telling my roommate, it was so funny. I remember telling her, I said, "This is really weird. I don't even know what he looks like, but I think I'm in love with him. Is that possible? This is crazy!" And then I couldn't study, I couldn't, you know. And then I was thinking, "My parents are right. You cannot balance a relationship and school," you know. And then I finally, yeah, it was kind of funny, actually. So, after four months of talking on the phone, writing letters, and the phone back then in the dorm. You don't have cell phones, so you just, after you talk, you say, "Okay, we're going to talk on Sunday at 7:00 pm," or something. And then sometimes, you know, somebody else in the dorm is taking up the phone and I would be so upset, because I'm like I can't get a call, right?

So then I remember it was distracting my schoolwork that I kind of like him. So, then I told him, a little bit before Christmas I said, "I can't talk to you anymore. I can't be friends with you anymore, because my parents are not going to be happy and it's affecting my schoolwork." So, I just kind of broke up with him, even though I'd never met him.

Yeah and then um, and then we didn't talk. He was very upset. We didn't talk and then just out of the blue, after Christmas, I said to my mother, I said, "Mom, I want to go to Boston and visit our cousins for New Years." And she said, "You never want to go to Boston and visit your cousins. It's so cold up there." And I said, "Well, I want to." So, I didn't call him until I got to the airport. Then I called him on the phone and I said, "I'm in Boston." And he's like, "Okay." It was from the payphone at the airport. And I told him where I was and he said, "Stay still. I'm going to pick you up." So then, when he came to the airport, it was sort of like love at first sight. And that was kind of—and I got engaged to him and we dated, long distance, and we wrote letters. Yeah, I mean that seems like it's not the way dating is done these days anymore. And you know what? It's so sad, because I have clients that come in here and they would tell me, one guy told me he met this attractive woman, who's smart, he really likes, but she lives too far.

And I said, "Where?" "Well, she lives out in Middleburg." And I said, "That's not far. That's like an hour's drive." "Yeah, but between traffic and my busy schedule," and I said, "You mean to tell me that you really like somebody and you're not going to put the effort and the energy into

	driving there to get to know her?" And he's like, "I only date people within ten miles radius." But it's so common. People do that.
D.L.:	Yeah. And then what happened to all the courting and the romance?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	<p>You know, like just—I don't know. I'm very old fashioned. I still am, so it's—I think it's sad. Yeah, I mean that the writing of letters is, Oh my gosh! And I'm kind of upset, because I'm such a big believer in feng shui. So, I basically get rid of everything from my past, when they don't work out. So, when I got—when I broke up with him and I was in another relationship years later, I had, I kept all his letters and photographs and everything in a box. And then I just threw them all away and burned them. And then, even other relationships before I got married, I just got rid of everything. So now, I don't even have any of my past, which is kind of sad.</p> <p>But I'm very big into feng shui. I'm like, if it didn't work in your life, get rid of it, don't keep it. That's emotional clutter that's stuff that's not good for you.</p>
AFTER COLLEGE 48:56	
D.L.:	Okay. So after college, what happened next there? What was the next move?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I worked, you know, I worked in the industry. I worked in the fashion industry. I worked in advertising.
D.L.:	Was this in New York [City]?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	<p>And you know, just living out of a roll-on suitcase. At one person's house to the next, because I couldn't afford to have a real place. And then I was in between jobs, but I didn't want to go back to D.C., because I said, "I need to stay in New York City." So, that's kind of—and then I think, at one point, for like five or six months, I lived in a carry-on suitcase and I shared a bed with one of my mother's girlfriends that was like in her sixties, and so we shared a bed and I lived with her and her son and her husband in a tiny condo in Queens, New York.</p> <p>But she was taking me in and she said I didn't have to pay rent until I get started. So, I helped them cook and clean and all of that, when I came home from work.</p>
D.L.:	Okay and then—?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	And my sister, my younger sister did it, the same, she went through almost the same route, but I think she only lasted two months. I think I

	lasted like six or seven months.
D.L.:	Okay, so how long did you live in New York between FIT and moving to Virginia?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I think on and off, like six or seven years probably.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Maybe, let me see, maybe like four or five years after school, on and off.
D.L.:	Okay.
TN;	Yeah.
D.L.:	And so kind of—.
MOVING BACK TO VIRGINIA 50:32	
Tu-Anh Nguyen	And then I moved to Charlottesville, Virginia.
D.L.:	Okay. So, can you describe, I guess, a little bit about what you were thinking or kind of the reasons why you moved back to Virginia?
Tu-Anh Nguyen	<p>Yeah, because I was in a lot of debt. I had a ton of school loans and my parents were still not in a financial situation to where they could help me out. I got jobs in New York, but you graduate with a college degree in fashion design and you're making eighteen thousand dollars a year and living in New York City. That's just not—but that's sort of how the fashion and the creative industry is. They pay you very low, because in those type of creative industry, it's like once you move up, you can move up to the extreme, right? Whereas everything that's very stable, like technology and things like that, you graduate, you may have a very stable job and a good salary, but your salary keeps going up gradually, over the years. But see, in fashion or creativity, in the creative field, you can have a really low salary, but if you're really good at what you do, it can double, triple, just so much.</p> <p>And so my parents said, "Why don't you go home." Plus they were not supportive of what I was studying anyway. They were like, "It's not practical." So, they said, "Why don't you move home? Why don't you go back to school? Try to become a doctor or a lawyer or a dentist, just like your cousins, you know. And it's more stabilized." And I said, "No. I don't want to, but I will move back, because I don't know what to do."</p> <p>My mother opened a beauty salon in Charlottesville, Virginia, right outside of UVA [University of Virginia], and she said, "I need a manager. So maybe you could come and work for me and manage the salon for me and I'll pay you, while you figure out what you're going to do." So, I said okay and then I worked there. I managed the salon for like</p>

	two years. But after four months, I metm after four months, one of the clients that came in there was actually a fashion designer and she's a bridal designer. And I met her and she actually hired me to be one of her illustrators, one of her artists. So, I was managing the salon and then I was working as a fashion illustrator for, for her.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	She was an older Hungarian woman, yeah.
D.L.:	Okay. Great. Right now, it's about fifty minutes, so I think we're going to stop. We can continue at the next one or like reschedule or whatever.
SCHEDULING THE NEXT INTERVIEW 52:57	
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Okay.
D.L.:	Yeah. Does that work for you as well, I mean we'll coordinate it between the three of us. But I really want to get into the part about you moving here and setting up this, you know, your work.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Sure, which we're so excited about, like with this, how we just launch it and how all these men are so excited about what we're doing. Because before, they would—before they had to pay for my time to go shopping for them. Now, they don't have to pay for my time at all. They just come in here and get fitted and get shop. And then my, the, my staff helps them. All they pay for is their suits and their clothes. So, that's really exciting for me, because then everybody—then I can help make a lot of people polished, than just a small group of people. And I was telling—I was driving down Old Town [Alexandria] this morning and every stoplight I look at the guys walking on the street in suits and I said, "Oh my God! Ten guys I've seen already in ill-fitting suits. I need to grab them and fit them." [Laughing] So, yeah.
D.L.:	Great. Well, yeah. Let's reschedule, you know, let's schedule a time to come back.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Okay. Did I do okay? You guys didn't give me feedback, so I didn't know what I needed to do.
D.L.:	You did fine.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Okay.
D.L.:	Great. It's very easy to interview you, because, you know, just one question and you're able to extrapolate on it really well and give us examples. And it seems to trigger memories and I think like that makes it a much more full interview.
Tu-Anh	Oh, okay. Yeah, just whatever you need me to do.

Nguyen	
D.L.:	Oh, just be yourself.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Okay, so we'll schedule another time?
D.L.:	Yeah.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I can tell you I can do the last week of June.
D.L.:	Okay.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	I'm going to Italy and New York and I'm traveling for the next two weeks, but the last week of June.
D.L.:	Okay, great. We'll talk about this on your email.
Tu-Anh Nguyen	Yeah.
END 55:06	