



**Dan Nguyen, Alice Tran, Henry Tran
Lang Van
Charlotte, North Carolina**

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Interviewer: Keia Mastrianni
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Keia Mastrianni: Good morning. This is Keia Mastrianni recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm at Lang Van restaurant, interviewing Dan Nguyen, her daughter, Alice Tran, and son, Henry Tran. This is for the Charlotte Central Avenue Corridor Project. It is April 15th, 2017. All right. Let's start off by introducing who you are and your birth date.

[00:00:23]

Henry Tran: Hi, my name is Henry Tran, and my birthday is November 26th, and I'm sixteen years old.

[00:00:31]

Alice Tran: Hello, my name is Alice Tran, and my birthday is November 2nd, and I'm thirteen years old.

[00:00:36]

Dan Nguyen: Hi, and my name is Nguyen. My birthday is September 4, 1974.

[00:00:43]

Keia Mastrianni: All right. So let's talk about where we're currently at. Where are we, what business name is this, and what goes on here?

[00:00:56]

Dan Nguyen: My restaurant name Lang Van Restaurant, 3019 Shamrock Road, North Carolina.

[00:01:06]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. And let's talk about where you're from—and we can do this in Vietnamese—where you're from and tell me about the place that you're from, what it looked like, what the sounds were, what was going on there.

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:01:38]

Dan Nguyen: My family from Vietnam, and I live in Saigon—and, oh, sorry.

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:01:56]

Alice Tran: My mom was from Saigon, and she traveled here from Saigon.

[00:02:00]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. Tell me about Saigon. What was that like when you were growing up?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:02:05]

Alice Tran: It was very beautiful, the people there were friendly, the food was great there.

[00:02:18]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. And now you said that you grew up fairly poor in Vietnam, there was not a lot of opportunity, and I guess I was curious what does poverty look like over there? What is that?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[Recorder turned off]

[00:02:38]

Keia Mastrianni: Resuming recording. I was just kind of curious what it was like over there. I guess there was—you know, growing up, I think she mentioned that there was—she grew up poor, and I kind of wanted to know what that kind of looked like in Vietnam.

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:03:40]

Alice Tran: Near 1975, there weren't a lot of jobs available, and also if you didn't have enough money for education, then you couldn't get it, but if you were rich and, like, wealthy, then you had education. And for the people who were really smart and didn't have money, they still couldn't get an education.

[00:04:00]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. And tell me what kind of work you were involved in when you lived over there? Did you work?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:04:36]

Alice Tran: When she was four or five, she worked on the farm with her family and cut trees down to sell wood.

[00:04:47]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. So your family had a farm.

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:05:00]

Henry Tran: It wasn't a farm mostly. It was a forest, like somewhere around like a random forest.

[00:05:06]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. Gotcha. And at what age did you come to the U.S. or hear about the U.S.?

[*Vietnamese spoken*]

[00:05:30]

Alice Tran: She was twenty-six when she traveled to America and just followed our dad.

[00:05:35]

Keia Mastrianni: And tell me about how old you were when you met your husband and how that happened?

[*Vietnamese spoken*]

[00:06:02]

Alice Tran: They didn't know each other at first when they were twenty-one and my dad was—I don't know—my dad saw a picture of my mom, and my dad was like, “I need to find this woman.” [*Laughs*]

[00:06:20]

Keia Mastrianni: And he found her? Okay. And how did your husband arrive in Charlotte? What was—how did he find Charlotte in particular?

[*Vietnamese spoken*]

[00:06:54]

Alice Tran: My dad traveled by ship over to America and met this guy who said that finding a nice and decent place where it's quiet is great, and that's how my dad found Charlotte.

[00:07:07]

Keia Mastrianni: Really?

[00:07:08]

Alice Tran: Yeah.

[00:07:11]

Keia Mastrianni: Wow. And then what year was it that you came over with him? You were—

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:07:24]

Alice Tran: 1999.

[00:07:25]

Keia Mastrianni: 1999. Okay. And talk to me about that experience. You'd never been to the U.S. before, brand-new place, new language, new people. How was that experience?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:08:10]

Henry Tran: So my mom came in February, which was a cold year, and since Vietnam is very hot, she's never experienced cold before, and she had nobody. It was very isolated. But she believes that there was potential for her in America.

[00:08:27]

Keia Mastrianni: And was there a community of individuals that helped you kind of get on your feet here?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:09:11]

Alice Tran: Traveling here to America, my mom found out there was two people who were dad's friends that lived in apartments, and she would usually go over them and watch TV to like have some sleep, and they also helped her along the way too.

[00:09:27]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. Did they help with job hunting and things like that?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:09:53]

Alice Tran: My mom was afraid to ask people for help, so she walked on her own around the town to try to find jobs, and that's where she found a job at a restaurant.

[00:10:03]

Keia Mastrianni: This restaurant?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:10:45]

Henry Tran: So before she got a job at this restaurant, she went to go eat. She only had five dollars with her, and she went to go eat at this Vietnamese/Californian-style restaurant, and she ordered stuff, and she asked the owner if there was a job waiting for her, and so, yeah, that's her first job.

[00:11:06]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. Okay. And that was before here?

[00:11:10]

Henry Tran: Yes, this was before.

[00:11:11]

Keia Mastrianni: Gotcha. And then tell me how you stumbled upon Lang Van and this job.

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:12:02]

Alice Tran: She was living in a house, and then that was when Henry was born and she wanted to find a place near the home, so she could take care of Henry and work for some

money, and that's where she found Lang Van. She saw the place, the customers were really friendly, and she wanted to, like, help the customers and make them more happier. So that's why she applied the job here.

[00:12:27]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. And what year was that?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:12:35]

Alice Tran: 2000.

[00:12:37]

Keia Mastrianni: 2000. Okay. And I know this is a sensitive part of this story, but I think it's worth recording it. There was a period of time when you had to live in the car, and that was while you were working here at Lang Van as well?

[00:12:51]

Dan Nguyen: Yeah.

[00:12:52]

Keia Mastrianni: Can you talk just briefly about that and how long that went on while you were first getting on your feet?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:13:20]

Alice Tran: Sometimes she didn't have a place to stay, so she would sleep in a car with our dad for a total of like three months or so.

[00:13:29]

Keia Mastrianni: So, I mean, I guess that time was basically just relying on the kindness of people who would let you kind of crash and stay, but like you aren't living with anybody. That was kind of how it went? Is that how it was?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:13:49]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. When did you assume ownership of Lang Van and how did that come about?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:14:35]

Alice Tran: The first owner who worked here couldn't work anymore, so she sold it to two people, and also the two people couldn't work here either, so they gave it to Mom. But Mom was, like, renting it, so she was paying them slowly to own the restaurant.

[00:14:52]

Keia Mastrianni: Gotcha. Gotcha. All right. So she was paying them to fix the restaurant, is that what you said?

[00:15:04]

Alice Tran: She was paying them slowly to own, start owning the restaurant.

[00:15:07]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. And what year was that?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:15:25]

Alice Tran: So 2004, 2005 is when she started taking over the business, and by 2009, she owned the restaurant.

[00:15:32]

Keia Mastrianni: Wow. That's incredible. And the previous owner must have seen something in you that just seemed like you were the right person to take over. What did she ask you?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:17:00]

Alice Tran: So one of the owners couldn't work anymore, but they loved the customers that went here, so they made Mom promise to make the customers happy and enjoy their life and stuff. And Mom promised it, so now she's working for it to honor her words.

[00:17:20]

Keia Mastrianni: Mm-hmm. Can you say that one more time? Because the sound cut out there. The owners made her promise what?

[00:17:30]

Alice Tran: The owners made her promise to make the customers happy and enjoy their life even more, and my mom said that she will promise that, and so she wants to honor the owners' words.

[00:17:43]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. And you've done that like 100 times over with your customers. Has this place become a special place for you, and why has it become so special?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:18:52]

Henry Tran: So she would never believe that she would have this opportunity to even be integrated with America. She was scared of, you know, like not knowing, since because she didn't have a good childhood and didn't have, like, the opportunities for her that were in Vietnam, so she went here. And she felt like this restaurant gave her the social skills that she has now and, like, it helped her integrate with other people so that she understood their culture, and she wanted them to understand her culture too.

[00:19:24]

Keia Mastrianni: Yes. And does she recognize that through this restaurant and just the work that you do with people and customers, that you've introduced people to Vietnamese culture and food just by being you and being here?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:20:27]

Alice Tran: She believes customers do understand the Vietnamese culture, and sometimes they would help her and she would share her knowledge, and they would share their knowledge, and it, like, integrates together.

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:20:56]

Alice Tran: Also she wants the children here and us to learn how hard it is for some people and how we shouldn't be like greedy.

[00:21:09]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. And tell me about that. Tell me about you've grown up Vietnamese American, and your mother is first generation to be here. So have you grown up knowing about her struggles, and how is that important to your kind of perception of the world? Yes, I ask you both.

[00:21:32]

Henry Tran: I feel like it was different because we didn't have hardships; it was all Mom. And so we believe that it does change our perspective because what she was thinking was that America's not going to be—it's going to be hard, but it has a great potential for her, and so we think that we have potential here, but like it's not as much potential as what Mom thinks, and so, yes, the hardships, we don't experience them, but we know about them.

[00:22:03]

Alice Tran: Like Henry said about the hardship, but I feel like everyone has hardships, and Mom's just a bit more hardship than— *[Laughs]*. I feel like we should learn about it because we know from Mom's stories that she tells us.

[00:22:24]

Keia Mastrianni: And she shares those stories with you, passes them down so you understand [*inaudible*].

[00:22:29]

Henry Tran: Yes. It's like a lesson every time we do something, or as I'm growing older and ready for college, she does talk more and more and more about lessons and her hardships so that she can pass them on so that I can have that mentality of what it's like to be in a same situation, basically, for not—you know.

[00:22:50]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. And what do you want your kids to know about opportunity and life here?

[*Vietnamese spoken*]

[00:24:04]

Henry Tran: She wanted everyone to know, not just us, but all the kids, is that she wanted to know that parents are there for you, because she didn't have any parents, and she wanted what she had to be the opposite for us. So she didn't have an education, and she wants us to go through with our whole education, and she wants us to have a nice life because she didn't have one. So it's basically helping someone like for future generations.

[00:24:31]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure.

[00:24:32]

Alice Tran: She also wants us to help others and show them what she showed us.

[00:24:37]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. And I want to talk about that because I guess what your mother has gone through is something that is commonly referred to as “the immigrant experience,” right? And not everybody understands the difficulties of moving from another place here. And for her, Lang Van has been a place that she’s offered help to other people who have come over. Is that correct, that she’s—

[00:25:01]

Henry Tran: Yes.

[00:25:02]

Keia Mastrianni: So is that something she intentionally just wants to keep opening a place to be able to offer safe space and employment to the other folks who come from other countries?

[*Vietnamese spoken*]

[00:25:54]

Alice Tran: Some people here who came from Vietnam came to Mom's restaurant, and if they ask for a job, Mom gives it to them and teaches them everything and how America is, and she also wants them to be successful in life.

[00:26:09]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. And what kind of things, I think, do you want to pass on to them? What kind of things did you learn about navigating America, so to speak?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:27:21]

Henry Tran: So she said that some of her life lessons that she brings down is customers, always be nice to the customers, because it's social etiquette to follow what the customers want, and if they do have a job like this, it's going to help them in the future for other applying for jobs or other jobs, and she teaches them that. And she said to always listen to customers because they know about America more than we do, and so she believes that through customers and through her help they will find other jobs too.

[00:28:00]

Keia Mastrianni: And has that been a special part of this experience, getting to know customers, watching their kids grow up, things like that?

[*Vietnamese spoken*]

[00:29:17]

Alice Tran: Mom's very happy when she sees kids that go here and then like years later she sees them going to college or school and living their life, and then coming back here just to see Mom. And then when they leave again, they say they miss Mom, and it makes Mom very happy.

[00:29:34]

Keia Mastrianni: [*Laughs*] Yeah, so it's kind of like a second family.

[00:29:37]

Dan Nguyen: Yeah, that's right.

[00:29:39]

Keia Mastrianni: That's right. Let's talk about—does your husband do a lot of the cooking in the kitchen?

[00:29:45]

Dan Nguyen: Yeah.

[00:29:46]

Keia Mastrianni: And this is kind of a family-run—there's lots of family kind of peppered in?

[00:29:50]

Henry Tran: That's right.

[00:29:52]

Keia Mastrianni: So tell me who is where and who's doing what.

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:30:31]

Henry Tran: So you might translate this both, but she does have her husband down there who cooks, and then she has this man who has been working since she has been working, and they both started together, and she hopes that they both end together, and it's been together forever. So she believes that he is her brother, like as a brother.

[00:30:51]

Keia Mastrianni: Is he Vietnamese too?

[00:30:52]

Henry Tran: Yes, he's Vietnamese too. And she also has her cousin, and recently she just got her niece to come here, and that's the same story as to they came here from Vietnam to get a better opportunity for college, and she's helping them with everything.

[00:31:10]

Keia Mastrianni: That was [*inaudible*] there. So let's talk—we were talking about some of the food. Is this food that you can find in Vietnam? Is it kind of the same food there?

[*Vietnamese spoken*]

[00:32:01]

Alice Tran: What she sees in Vietnam, she brings here, and she also observes what Americans like and adds it to the food.

[00:32:08]

Keia Mastrianni: Cool.

[00:32:10]

Henry Tran: Some examples, too, like yellow pancake and what she saw, like her childhood, what she ate when she grew up was what she brought over here, too, so, yeah.

[00:32:21]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. So tell me what some of the more traditional dishes are on the menu.

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:32:40]

Henry Tran: So like fried rice, that's a classic, and like yellow pancake, and noodles with beef, and lemongrass and stuff like that.

[00:32:51]

Keia Mastrianni: Cool.

[00:32:51]

Alice Tran: There's also some tofu dishes.

[00:32:55]

Keia Mastrianni: Yes, a lot of tofu. *[Laughs]* So tell me what is your favorite to eat here?

[00:33:00]

Henry Tran: I like pho the most.

[00:33:02]

Keia Mastrianni: You like pho?

[00:33:03]

Henry Tran: Yeah.

[00:33:03]

Alice Tran: I like fried rice.

[00:33:05]

Keia Mastrianni: You like the fried rice [*inaudible*]. [*Laughs*]

[00:33:08]

Dan Nguyen: Yeah, I like everything. [*Laughs*]

[00:33:10]

Keia Mastrianni: I love it. I love it. What—I guess I just kind of want to know what you see for the future of Lang Van and also what you want people to know about Vietnamese culture. We talked about this last time, the difference between kind of growing up in a place that wasn't as favorable to opportunity, but you still want to bring your culture with you because it's still your country. So how do you want to represent that? I guess how do you carry that part? How do you want to share that? Sorry.

[*Vietnamese spoken*]

[00:34:50]

Henry Tran: So she said that even though there's not many opportunities for her, it's still where she grew up, it's where she had her persona, and basically it's what shaped her to be who she is, even though it wasn't her cup of tea, basically, and so she wants to show what Vietnamese culture is like, only show the good parts of Vietnam instead of the bad parts.

[00:35:16]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. And tell me about finding a home in Charlotte. How has Charlotte become your home, I guess?

[*Vietnamese spoken*]

[00:36:09]

Alice Tran: She finds Charlotte peaceful and quiet. She also finds the jobs here easy, and everyone has opportunities here. And it's like it's a place that Mom enjoys, basically.

[00:36:25]

Henry Tran: It has a balance of everything, from weather to the peacefulness. She likes peaceful, but she kind of likes a little chaos up in there too. So like Charlotte is like a balanced area for her.

[00:36:38]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. And have you found a community, a Vietnamese community to kind of be with as well?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:37:15]

Alice Tran: Some of Dad's friends traveled from Vietnam to here, and they're enjoying here at Charlotte with their families, and it's happy, and they're all like talking and—

[00:37:30]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. I mean, there's a fairly large Vietnamese community here, and so, yeah.

[00:37:37]

Henry Tran: Oh, I was going to say that was like the old generation. And so like her niece and everything who like just recently came here, that's like the new generation, and

she hopes that one day they end up being like her older generation, of like people who came here who have a stable job now and has a family.

[00:37:54]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. And does—I mean, I think that everybody who works here at Lang Van, you teach them about taking care of customers and how to do it that way, your hospitality. So are you hoping to pass that tradition on to keep Lang Van the iconic place that it is?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:38:59]

Alice Tran: Once she turns old, she wants all the lessons and the things she taught to the people here to spread on and take over Lang Van, because she doesn't want the Lang Van to stop because it makes people happy. And then if it doesn't stop and the customers are still happy, it will make Mom even more happier when she's old.

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:39:36]

Henry Tran: She tells them every day that she loves her customers, and so that she wants the lessons to stick into their head, because she doesn't want to lose Lang Van's

name, basically, like she doesn't want to lose their glow of what their perception of Lang Van. So she loves her customers.

[00:39:53]

Keia Mastrianni: And are you two—I mean, are you two proud of this restaurant, too, because, I mean, it's very well known all over Charlotte. People love it.

[00:40:02]

Henry Tran: Yes.

[00:40:06]

Keia Mastrianni: I don't know.

[00:40:07]

Henry Tran: Yes, I am very proud, because I've been through all those lessons, too, and I think that it's like a ground for me to help people, because I've worked in this restaurant before and I've heard of all the lessons. So, yeah, I feel like it's going to help me in the future, whether or not I stick around in this restaurant.

[00:40:23]

Alice Tran: Also, this place, every time I go here, it's like happy because every time I'm behind the counter, we always joke around and mess with each other, and it's like it's not sad if you're here. You're just happy. *[Laughs]*

[00:40:38]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. And I think—I think everybody needs to have a restaurant education. For me, like I've worked in restaurants for over ten years. That was something that I did. But it's so important to learn that exchange. I think everybody in life should work at a restaurant at some point. *[Laughs]*

[00:40:57]

Henry Tran: Yeah, it does help you with every side of the life you're going to be living, because you're going to move and like it shows like how to help with people, how to socialize with people, and how to work fast pace, so it does help you in all aspects of life.

[00:41:14]

Keia Mastrianni: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And you make sure you put them to work a little bit so they learn.

[00:41:18]

Dan Nguyen: Yeah, that's right.

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:41:41]

Henry Tran: So she said that the first time she worked, she brought me along, and I was only three, and since it was very hectic back then, like a lot of customers were coming in,

she would put me to work. And I don't think it's bad like child labor or whatever, I don't think it is, but like she did show me the ropes of it and like it went through my head and just—yeah, till this day I still know some lessons from her.

[00:42:10]

Keia Mastrianni: And is there anything else that you wanted to share that you want people to know that I didn't ask about?

[Vietnamese spoken]

[00:43:01]

Henry Tran: She said it's all about the customers. She wants the customers to know that she loves them and that she wouldn't be anywhere without them, and she wants her workers to know that the customer is always right, and that you should help the customer, and then you can, in turn, like learn from your customers too.

[00:43:25]

Keia Mastrianni: Anything else that you two want to add?

[00:43:27]

Henry Tran: No, I'm okay.

[00:43:28]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. I'm going to record thirty seconds of like room tone and we're done.

[00:43:34]

Henry Tran: Thank you.

[00:43:36]

Keia Mastrianni: Thank you so much.

[00:43:36]

Dan Nguyen: Thank you.

[End of interview]