

Nga Van Le Interview

Where were you born?

I was born in Vietnam, in Saigon, Vietnam.

What was your name when you were born?

It's the same name Nga Van Le, but in Vietnam you call it Le Van Nga. In the United States, it's different than our country. In our country we call someone by the last name first.

How old were you when you left your country?

I left my country when I was 49 years old. I go in 1953, but I come in 1982.

What was your occupation or line of work when you lived in Vietnam?

Before I was in Vietnamese Navy, but I'm retired from navy in 1967 and I work for American company in Vietnam. It's name is RNKBRG and I was superintendent in the break room (?).

I spent 15 years in the Navy as an engineering officer. I had training in the United States in 1961. I've been in the United States in 1961 for training in San Diego, California.

What was your reason(s) for leaving Vietnam?

Because after 1975 when the Communist take over from South Vietnam, so I have problem and because I was navy so my children can not go to school, can not have job because I was in the Vietnamese Navy in republic camp fighting the communists. And they try to control me so that I can not do nothing. They come to check me every two or three days, they knock on my home at night to make sure I'm home. So sometimes they knock the door loudly and ask me some questions like "How long have you been in school?". Just no reason to ask but they want to check up on me to make sure that I'm home. I try to escape in Vietnam in 1978 and get caught. Me and two friend of mine (he's army officer), we collect money and we build a boat to try to escape. But on the way I go to look to the boat because one of my friends, he take the boat out on the shore and he's waiting for me because I don't know about the checkpoints. There can be checkpoints from home to the barge so when I try to have transportation with them over there I get caught. About three months in jail. I need to make a commitment to say "I'll never escape again" so they release me. So after that I try and I try about five or six times and in 1982 I make it.

You left your family there?

Yeah because I only took two sons with me because one was eighteen and the other was twenty years old. And they wanted them to join the Communist Army so I take them with me.

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My wife and seven children were left behind. I didn't want them to go at the same time because if we get caught we lose the house because when we left, they take away the house right away. If we get caught we come back home we don't have a place to live. So I told my wife to let my younger children stay there and let me go first.

My family and family joined me in United States in October 1990. When I arrived in United States, I need to make paperwork to for them to come down here. But they don't let them go. You see, for the visa I was waiting, waiting for long time and at the same time, I need to work, I need to pay for airplane ticket for them to come so I'm working hard.

Only my wife and four of my children was unmarried so they go at the same time. And I have one son and one daughter – they married – they come different. And I have one daughter she's a Catholic nun – she don't want to go – she want to stay to help the Vietnamese people down there. But when I made paper work for all of them to come down here, even she don't want to go, but I let her choose. All of my children want to come here, but eventually she say "I need to come" and I say "Okay, if you want to come, I'm ready".

So you left Vietnam and went to Malaysia by boat and then how did you get to the United States?

They took us to the island they call the _____. It was far away from the mainland and they bring all the refugees down there. And I was there for about two weeks and the American came for interview and I tell them I was Vietnamese Navy, but I have been in United States to train with the US Navy in 1961. They ask me, "When you were there, did you know someone?" and I said "Yeah I remember one family that I know in United States". They ask me to write the address, but I don't remember ZIP code, but they tell me "It's all right, we'll send it". But 1987 when I come to United States already, I go down there to visit the family and I drive down to Wukeegan, Illinois. I went to school down there. That family, every weekend they come to pick me up to go have dinner and stay with them on the weekend. And I come to visit and they told me story; "When you was in Malaysia, I know." and I say "How do you know?" and they say "The American Embassy call me and ask if I know you and we say 'yes'". That family, they said I had gone to school in 1981 and they check it with class number I have and they call American embassy to give information. So they approve me to go to United States.

And so you left Malaysia by plane?

No, from Malaysia I go to Philippines. Step by step. They have one refugee processing center. And so they want to take them for the orientation for the life in the United States. So when I was there I was assistant teacher at school, I have certificate. I wanted to go from there to United States, but they say "You can speak English so you can stay here". So besides this I was a neighborhood leader. One neighborhood is about 3,500 people. They have about nine neighborhoods and I was leader there. In daytime I have job as assistant teacher but at nighttime I work four hours a night as neighborhood leader. My

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life busy because I'm trying to do something for home. My boys had to teach English. It was in Batan.

It took six months to plan and three months to finish it. As you know I go every day. Today I left because before we go we need to police commissary and when we go back, we need to check in with them. Today I leave early in the morning, but the next day I leave at night to be different. Because they move the checkpoint everytime. Sometimes they anchor here, other times they move to different place so it take me three months to find out where [they moved it].

How did you get to Arizona?

When I was in Des Moines I couldn't find job. It's cold too. But I tried to rent a place for my two sons to live in and go to school and I couldn't find job. So I try to move and my sponsor get mad. He wanted me to stay with them there, but I say to him "I can not find job!" He say "No, you still on welfare for 18 months. You no need to worry". And I say "I can not live on welfare. I need to make money to supply my family."

When did you learn to speak English?

It was no problem because when I was in Navy I was engineering officer. In case something's wrong, I need to show people how to fix this or that. So I have time and I plan to learn English, but I have a problem; at that time they don't have book from English to Vietnamese. They only have English and French. So I learn English from French English because when I was young I learned French. Now I forget French. So I learn by myself. I learn France- English. Now they have Vietamese-English but before they had French-English but that's okay – I learn it. And when I learn and when the United States Navy went to train some navy and they call me to take a test and I passed! They send to me to school over there [The United States], and I go to school over there. So that's in 1960.

Some technical words I don't know, so at night I go to library I borrow for English and I look up what English names are called. When I went to school in United States, we have test every week I have [to memorize] 100 [words], but I only have 50. And when I come over here, daytime is nighttime. At night I'm awake so I'm studying so I know English name. But after three or four weeks I go to 100 [words] every week. But the first week was difficult.

Why did you choose to come to the United States?

Because I can not live in Vietnam. They [the Vietnamese government] don't let them go to school, but they let them join the Communist Army. But all of my children, the young ones, they don't let them go to school. Because they can not go to public school, they go to teacher in their home. So we pay them to watch over my children. In 1981 I don't have relation between here and Vietnam. You know that it take three months to get a letter to Vietnam because they check every letter from my wife's side. So you know how I do it?

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Because my daughter is a nun, the monastery for here is in France. And in France she has a nun sister there, so I try and send letter to the nun and she send it because from France to Vietnam is easy – they do not check. So we do that way. So I make money and I try to buy something like toothbrush and toothpaste. I send it to my wife like a gift but my wife she keep some to sell to make money to live. We can not send money. And they tax too. It so easy to take it too, so we give some to the custom.

What is your life like now that you live in the United States?

It feels so much more better – I feel free because over there you can not move. Before you move, you need to go to police station to visit someone else. They ask you the reason, what for, and to report when you arrive there. The government watches me. One time I got caught when I escaped. When they take over they say that all of the servicemen need to report for re-education camp even if you work American company. With classification as “superintendent” I need to report. But I no report and hide identity. So they ask me “What are you doing?” and “What is your classification?” I say “I am seamen” because I hide my identity and they say “You work for American Company. What is your rank or classification?” But later, they caught me and say “We like to know from 1945 until now where you were and what you doing in every year”. When they kick the Chinese out of Vietnam in 1978, the Chinese and the Counsel asked me to go with them but because my wife, I can not go. The Chinese man he come to say “Mr. Le, you go with me. I let you take two children with you and I can give your wife five pounds of gold to live. But that is not enough. But later, when they come to check me out, I think after that you’re better to go by yourself because if they put my in family, my family stay home. So after 1978 my wife agree to let us go with Chinese. But every time it is to go, they don’t get you and you need to pay for them. But you know, me and my wife have nine children and everybody say “No, you need to go together”. And we can’t.

What type of work did you have since coming to the United States?

Well when I first come to Des Moines, I couldn’t find a job. I had to move, but I didn’t know where to move. So I hear that you can have a job in Texas, but I don’t know where. So I buy the map of Texas and I close my eyes and I pray. I turn the map around and around and around and put my finger down. I open my eyes and I see Brenham. So I go to Brenham. Brenham is close to Austin. But when I go to Brenham I don’t know nobody so I go to phonebook and look for Vietnamese name. I call them and the man says he’s navy. I don’t know him and he don’t know me, but he’s navy. And he says “Okay, you can come live in my house. Tomorrow we can go to look for job”.

I work with that company but many companies need unskilled labor and I’m not unskilled labor. They pay very low wages – I think about four dollars an hour – but they say if you want to work unskilled, you can . I agree with that.

But when I buy a car, I go to take driver’s license test and I get license, but you know how I have money to buy a car? When I arrive there the Social Service they give \$300 for each person, so the three of us mean \$900. But they give me only \$300. I pay \$100 for

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the rent and \$200 for food. And I say I need a car. And I go to my sponsor and say “I need to buy a car” and he say “How much money you have?” and I say “\$600” and he say “No! That’s for your food not to buy car!” And he say “You need to prove you buy food so I can give you money.” So I ask everyone who go shopping to give me receipt so I count \$600 and I give it to me. Six hundred dollar car I buy without insurance and I drive from Iowa to Texas, but when I go back I have only \$100. So only enough to buy gas and chip. When I make the journey there I have only \$40. When I have job, they tell me that I need to have insurance so that I can drive. So I go up to one man and say “I want to buy insurance.” He say “For six month, 90 dollar” and I say “Thank you, I no buy.” And he say “Why you can not drive?” And I say “I want to buy but I have only \$40.” But the man he tell me “Okay, I’ll sell you \$18 for one month.”

When I come from here, I work for BGT products. I work as machinist.

What is your favorite memory of Vietnam?

When I got to Malaysia I shock. You know, I had to no money. When I arrived to United States I had no money. They gave me \$300 dollars, that was all.

Were you excited to get your citizenship?

Yes, because when I have the citizenship I am citizen. With resident alien, it is different. It takes more longer than when you get citizenship. When I got this one in 1988, I got my family in 1990. But I supposed to stay in Texas and not move down here. But because my family come here, my two sons her live here and he come to me and say “Dad you need to move down here, because if you live here, you’re family won’t be in Texas and they’ll miss you.” I think about the future for my son, not for me because if he move to Texas, he won’t find job so I say “If you need to move in Arizona, I quit job and come down here.” And I come here in April. During the May, I’m look for job but no job. I don’t know why they say assembly pay six or seven dollar an hour but I say “It’s okay, I’m working.” He look back and see that there [Texas] I was working about ten dollar an hour so they don’t hire me. I accept the job for ten, so he think I won’t work for him for long. So I’m lucky to find machinist and I go to interview and they hire me.

How long did you work as a machinist?

I work as machinist for seven years.

Do you want to stay in the United States?

For sure. I want to visit my country but because I don’t trust the communists – how I escape from them – no I come there they’ll put me in jail again. But my wife, she homesick and she want me to go with her but I say “You go by yourself” and she say no. I hope to go to Vietnam one day, but when they have no communist.