find job opportunities and speak their native language instead of assimilating to American culture. Many of them tried to adapt by going to Catholic or Christian church on weekends.

Interviewing my uncle, Thomas Tran, helped me to explore the life experiences of an Asian American in the U.S. The lessons also gave me a comprehensive account of being an American citizen.

TO PHAN

Brian Phan

Gunshots are heard everywhere, announcing the deaths of innocent civilians. People run for the lives as the echo of bombs is ringing in their ears. A mother screams in agony as she witnesses the death of her children before her eyes. This was life in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, and my father experienced all of it. His life is filled with these nightmares and horrors that most people never experience. My father was born on August 20, 1947 and he is now 62 years old. He is the first of his family to come to America only to confront the hardships that got him to get to where he is today. Although he is older, he still works hard and continues to provide for our family.

Growing up in Vietnam, my dad lived in the poor, jungle areas of Hue located between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. My father went to school and studied like any other child growing up in Vietnam. During his childhood, my dad loved to play soccer, and every day after school, he would play with his fellow classmates. Even today, my dad is a devoted soccer fan and watches games when he has free time. Since his home was right next to the river, my dad loved spending his time fishing with the other children. Not only was fishing a source of enjoyment, it also provided food for the family to eat. When I questioned my father about why he doesn't fish any more, his response was that he would love to, but he doesn't have the equipment or the money to buy it. I told him that one day we will go fishing and he can teach me everything he knows.

My dad was the youngest in his family. He had two older brothers and two older sisters, for a total of five siblings. In Vietnam and other Asian countries, it was very common for families to have many children. In America, it is different because it is a lot harder to raise and support a

large family. Even though he was the youngest, he worked just as hard as his older brothers and sisters. He did chores around the house, brought water from the river to the house, and took care of his parents. He said that growing up he had to do hard work all the time, as opposed to my generation of children in America who typically play video games. He also said that the kids in Vietnam had to do everything out of respect for their parents.

As time passed, conflict began between North and South Vietnam. Due to communism, Vietnam was divided into two sides, with the South pushing for democracy and the North supporting communism. In 1968, all men were called upon to fight in the war and my dad was forced to fight against the communists. He witnessed innocent people dying in front of his eyes and families that lost everything. Fighting in the Vietnam War has scarred him for life. To this day, he doesn't forgive himself for hurting other people. He told me that the Vietnamese are peaceful people and do things for one another. The Vietnam War broke that tradition of peace. During his years in combat, he slowly moved up the ranks, eventually becoming a lieutenant after four years of service. As an officer, he became a valued soldier and led battles against the Viet Cong. My dad became a Vietnam War hero and was honored for his bravery.

One of the key factors in the war was U.S. aid for South Vietnam. My father believed that if it had not been for American assistance, a lot more South Vietnamese soldiers would have died. Americans brought supplies and instilled fear into the North Vietnamese soldiers. Although the United States aided South Vietnam for many years, they retreated in 1975 and South Vietnam eventually lost the war. My father believes that if the Americans had continued to help the South Vietnamese, Vietnam would not be the communist country it is today. Soon after the communist victory, my dad was captured and imprisoned. They placed him and many other soldiers in camps far away from any civilization, deep in the mountain ranges. These camps were placed hundreds of miles away so that if anyone escaped, it would be impossible for them to return home.

Life there was horrible and the prisons were far worse than those here in America. Thousands of Vietnamese prisoners were forced to work for the communists. My father worked in the fields, planting crops, cutting down trees, and building houses for the communists to live in. He told me that at times he felt like giving up and dying because life was not worth living if he had to deal with all the suffering. He witnessed many of his fellow soldiers and friends die from starvation; prisoners beaten by guards for entertainment; and prisoners that were shot for not following

orders. My father told me a story about how he and his friends were cutting down trees near the riverbank. At some point, they saw a frog along the river and began to chase it. They chased it because they were so hungry and it was the only source of food that they had seen in days. This is the reality of war; and he hopes that his family will never experience the hardships and evil destruction of war.

While I was interviewing my dad, my mother demanded that I included her in my essay. During the time that my father was in prison, my mother also played an important role in the war effort. She was a nurse and worked in a hospital every day. She was there so much that she lived at the hospital while caring for patients. Everyday she would have to care for hundreds of wounded soldiers to nurse them back to health, so that they could go back to their families. My mother specialized in heart readings and was able to detect heart problems simply by taking a pulse. She learned this skill over four years while working at the hospital. She was praised by many patients and detected several heart problems before it was too late.

By the time my father was released from prison, the war had taken a huge toll on everyone. He had been in the camp for seven years. During this time, Ronald Regan became president of the United States and he allowed prisoners of the Vietnam War to come to America. My parents received the opportunity of a lifetime, and in 1991 took a plane and arrived in Houston, Texas. At that time my sister was four years old and I was an eight- month old baby. Later, we moved to California because my dad had friends here.

Curious, I asked why we were the only ones that could come over. My dad's response was that only soldiers that were imprisoned and fought alongside the Americans could come over. Due to immigration laws, his sister and brothers were not allowed to come over and we were all alone in America.

Many people tried to escape communist rule after the war. There were many stories of people that tried to escape by boat, only to drift off at sea. Many of them risked everything just so they could come over to America. These "boat people" would often die at sea from starvation or disease. My dad also emphasized how pirates would take advantage of these stranded boats to rob refugee of their meager possessions. The people who traveled by boat hoped that they would land in a country nearby where someone would rescue them and bring them to the United States.

Even though he misses his family back in Vietnam, he feels that he will never go to visit. When asked why, he simply stated that because we left such a bad place, he had no desire to go back. Even though Vietnam is his home, it is also a memory that my father wants to forget.

I also asked him more personal questions about his life in America and being an Asian American. My father told me that the main problem he has had is language. Although we have lived here for almost twenty years, my dad's English is still very poor. Upon arriving in America, he wanted to adapt to this new lifestyle, but found it hard communicating with Americans. While I was growing up, my dad would attend English classes in local community centers. These centers would help immigrants learn English and teach them American history. These classes were very difficult for him and even though he practiced English daily, it was still very hard for him to become proficient. He finally stopped taking classes because the classes interfered with his work and time at home with his family. He decided that he would rather work hard and care for his family, so that one day they might be successful and complete the dreams that he could not.

As the interview continued, I asked him how important education is to him. He glared at me because I already knew that answer. To my dad, education is the greatest thing any human being can receive. You can be poor and living in the streets or rich and living in a mansion, but if you are educated, none of that really matters. He told me that we came to America because it was a place where anyone can be whatever he wants to be. Because of this, he strives to provide his family the best opportunity for education that we can possibly have.

People assume Asians are very smart people and always excel in academics, but really the only reason why Asians excel is because of the strict emphasis on education that our parents enforce in us. My father tells me that school always comes first. If he had the chance to go to school he would, but since he is the family's only provider, he must work so that his kids can be successful. After hearing this, I found myself even more proud of my father. He has sacrificed a great deal, and without him, we would not be in America right now.

I have lived practically my entire life in America and have been influenced by the culture here. My father on the other hand, says that he will always be Vietnamese. No matter how Americanized he has become, he will always have roots in Vietnam and that heritage will always be part of his life. Even though he is an American citizen, he still practices old Vietnamese traditions, stays true to family values, and teaches his

children the values of being Vietnamese. Although life in Vietnam was, at times, cruel and harsh, it made him the man he is today. Although we live in America, we do not really celebrate American traditions. Growing up, we never celebrated Christmas nor have we ever had a typical Thanksgiving feast.

Over the years, my family has moved several times and has interacted with people of other races. Surprisingly though, my father claims that he has never experienced racism. Shortly after arriving in America, the only employment my parents could find was work in sweatshops, making clothes. They worked with many other immigrants, including Latinos and Whites. He said that they were all the same. They all came to America for a better life and it made no difference what color they were. They were all Americans, and that is what counted. I, on the other hand, have experienced racism while growing up in East Los Angeles. When I was in middle school, I was the only Asian American at a predominantly Latino school. I was bullied for being Asian and harassed daily. It was an experience I will never forget.

Finally, I asked how he would compare Vietnam with America. He responded by saying that Vietnam is nothing like America. America is a great country that has done so much for him and his family. If it wasn't for America, he probably would have died in the war and lost his family. This entire interview was a good experience for me because I learned a lot about my father. Growing up, I never really talked to him or had much parental guidance in my life. My parents were rarely home because they had to work from 7 AM to 8 PM. I always blamed my parents for not being there for me, but now I realize what they sacrificed for me to be happy. My father is the hardest worker I know. Even today, he works from early morning until late in the evening. Even though he has been through a lot of hard times, he feels that America still has much to offer. He still strives to fulfill the American dream and in some way has almost accomplished it. His hard work is slowly paying off. My sister is enrolled in medical school and I am now in college. My father's legacy will forever be with me and I will one day pass it on to my children and future generations of my family.

SU AND MAI THAI