

TRANSCRIPT

Multicultural Midwest Oral History Project

Interviewee: Minh Tran

Primary Interviewer: Janet Hohenstein

Secondary Interviewer: Ashley Kallod

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Where: Minnesota State University Moorhead, Owens Hall, room 207,

H: Okay, go ahead.

T: I started working at the American Embassy in Saigon, Vietnam in 1956...for ten years, so '66 I was drafted into the army. So...so I spoke English...I...read a lot of magazines, U.S. magazine, the news brief that told what's going on in America since that time.

H: But you were not a U.S. citizen?

T: I was not a US citizen. I was not, yet. I am now.

H: Yes.

T: So, I came here in...I came to Webster, South Dakota in ...July 1979 as a refugee from Vietnam. I...I was a...one of the boatpeople, if you probably heard. We escaped Vietnam by boat. So we were called boatpeople. I came here in July and to Webster, South Dakota and there were ten of us in our family. So we were sponsored by a small community, kind of 2,500 population. Five small churches in Webster, South Dakota. And then a few months later the sponsor, the pastor of the Lutheran church there, found a job for me working at Lutheran Social Services. I actually started working there for two

months...with the local plumbing and heating contractor. Kind of a temporary job before moving on to a real job.

H: And that was in Webster, South Dakota?

T: That was in Webster.

H: Okay.

T: I worked in there because I know plumbing and heating. And then...at the time, there was a lot of refugees from Vietnam...boatpeople coming. Ten thousand per month, ten thousand different boatpeople coming per month. So I thought that I...there was need for me to be involved with refugees...so...the pastor of the local Lutheran church contacted Lutheran Social Services in Minneapolis. And they said to just bring him here, so, we came there and I had a short interview and then a few months later I was offered a job to go to Moorhead, to start an office in Moorhead. And I came up here on December 3, 1979. I have been living there since, since that day.

H: In Moorhead?

T: In Moorhead.

H: So, and you've just retired from Lutheran Social Services about...

T: I just retired...effective January 1, 2002.

H: Oh, just recently, okay.

T: Just recently.

H: Okay. What type of duties did you do when you worked at Lutheran Social Services?

T: I kind of had two or three hats. The main job was the coordinator of the Lutheran Social Services refugee and immigration services department. And another job is that I...I was represented to the Lutheran Social Services that was accredited by the

Department of Justice Board of Immigration...what it mean is that I am certified to do...to be, to be a an immigration practitioner, helping people. Not a lawyer, but capable to do the work that would be legal to get their...to use their immigration benefits, to apply for their relatives to come here...to sponsor them, things like that.

H: When you say apply for the relatives to come here, what...what as far as having Lutheran Social Services help them bring their relatives over here, is that what you're saying.

T: Yes. They can come here as refugees. They came here leaving their wife and their children...there, so we can help them apply for their spouse and their minor children, minor unmarried children to come here and join them as refugees. Once they become a citizen, then they can apply for their spouse and children and their parents to come here as immigrants. Refugees and immigrants are a little bit different. Immigrants, they have to sponsor them, they have to sign an affidavit of support saying that I will take care of them soon as they come here. Refugees they...their relatives come here and they can ask local group of volunteers or local sponsors to help them. Usually through Lutheran Social Services if they are coming to Moorhead.

H: Lutheran Social Services...when they...when you worked at Lutheran Social Services and you helped out the immigrants and refugees and helped to bring their families here, how long did it normally take, that process?

T: It's usually a few months. My main job at Lutheran Social Services was to help refugees to...to learn English. Referring them to a local English as a second language class. Helping the children to enroll in local school, and helping them find jobs. Helping them learn...the culture. Helping them learn how to wear warmth in the winter. Most of

them never saw snow before when they came here before. I never saw snow when I came here, that's the same with me. So, learning how to dress warm is also part of learning. Part of adjustment for refugees. Learning how to drive a car. Driving a car, buying a car...buy insurance for the car, things like that.

H: How would you...say, what would you say is the biggest struggle for someone coming here, what's the hardest thing to cope with?

T: I think that mandatory adjustment is very important. *(pause)* Most refugees they...they came here from a refugee camp. Why are they in the refugee camp? Because of the persecution...in their home country. Either they are victims of war or victim of persecution or victim of torture. And they ran away, they end up in a refugee camp that was administered by a second country. Second country, somebody said I was in Vietnam but I ran away, I escape in boat, that is why I end up in Malaysia. So I end up in a refugee camp in Malaysia. We call that a second country. And then we had to go through the process, we waiting in crowded refugee camp. Not much food, water, things like that. Then we went through the process of being interviewed, applying to go to a permanent resettlement. And then as soon as they come here they have a roof over their head, they are safe, they know that they...they have friends here, they know they have their sponsors here, they know they have Lutheran Social Services. Or in the case of other organizations, like Catholic Charities, Church World Service, those are the agencies that help refugees. Right now, they are safe. Then they begin to remember their home country. Their friends, their relatives. So it's a lot of adjustment going through, and I...before I came here, I had spent a year and two months in jail. And...I...when I came here I thought it was very easy for me because I spoke English, because I have worked

with the Americans, so I thought. But it was not, it was not, because when I came here, I...I...(pause) I thought I get out of prison. I thought I was safe. But then at night you get nightmare. So, it was not easy. It's not just me, but for other people, too.

H: Nightmares of what you had been through or nightmares of what you were going to be going through, changing cultures?

T: No, nightmare of...nightmare of...see I found myself in the dream that I was still in prison. One day I found myself, the last day of the war, I was running to the airport just in time to see the airplane taking off. I tried to get out of Vietnam, but nightmares like that. I began to talk to my friends, and they have the same thing. But I think a year and a half after that, after being here, it's gone.

H: Do a lot of people still have nightmares, do you think even if they've been here for say ten, twenty years, do you think they still have reoccurring...

T: It depends up to...it depends on the circumstances. I know in Fargo-Moorhead that many, many Vietnamese refugees, not only Vietnamese, but other refugees from Africa, like Sudanese, the lost boys of Africa, they went through a lot. You heard about that. So, I'm sure that they have that...they got nightmare, too. Many Vietnamese refugee, a number of them had spent three, four, five, even ten years in concentration camps. And I spent only a year and two months. So I was lucky.

H: Are you familiar with the Civil Rights Report in Moorhead that they've done?

T: Somewhat from the news, yes.

H: What do you think the community could do to make the citizens of Moorhead more appreciative of its cultural diversity?

T: I think the community has done a lot. Has done a lot...I think the local government, the city, the human rights committee...the new mayor and, and I think, I think we need to keep more people working together, that's the main thing. Most of the problem I think stems from lack of information. Misinformation. I have found some of my American friend who thought they know me, they have no idea who I really am. And even they have a lot of misinformation. There's some fears, too. And if we could have a chance to learn about each other, getting to know each other more, that would help.

H: When you say lack of information, do you...do you mean lack of information to the people who were in the community?

T: Lack of information about the people in the community of other people. Who are they?

H: Who are the so-called immigrants?

T: Yeah. And the other thing, it's a two way street. Immigrants when they came here, they are eager to learn a lot. But the also came here with some preconceived notion what America's about. Many of them came with a lot of preconceived notion.

H: And then do you think when they get here, so they say their bubble's been bursted? And it's not everything they thought it would be?

T: Yes, and I think, you know, in my work with refugees at Lutheran Social Services, Especially congregations, local congregations.

H: So the churches, church communities have been a lot of help. All of the different churches, like Presbyterian, Catholic, Baptist, all of them?

T: Yes.

H: Do they come forward voluntarily, or do you have to put out a plea for help?

T: Both.

H: Both, okay. And when they volunteer, what type of duties do they do to help out?

T: Oh, many things. We usually offer an invitation. We ask them, what can you do?

Volunteers come in different sizes. We need volunteer to drive refugees to medical appointment, we need volunteers to enroll the kids in school, we need volunteers to enroll the adults in English class. We need volunteers to help them get jobs. Things like that, many things. But the main thing is, based on my experience as a refugee myself, but also as working with refugees is...refugees feel strongly and really appreciate the kind help but also the friendship. The support from their friends, their American friends, and that help them a lot with the new beginning here.

H: They feel more comfortable in the community.

T: Yes.

H: When you work with Lutheran Social Services, do you only work with Vietnamese refugees, or do you work with all?

T: I work with all. When I began to work I was...I was working with Vietnamese, but there was a lot of Vietnamese coming in. And then I began to have a few refugees from Ethiopia...Kurdish refugees, that was back in the early eighties. And then when there was the Solidarity Movement in Poland...Eastern Europe began to change, then we began to have refugees from Poland, to have members of the Solidarity Movement that came here. Came straight from jail to here. And then we have Hungarian refugees, we had refugees from Czechoslovakia, and lately, we have a lot of refugees from Somalia, from Sudan, and Bosnia, yes.

H: Did you find a language barrier then when you had to work with people from other countries?

T: Yes there is a languages barrier, but you work with refugees sometimes there's some kind of...understanding. Some kind of language, you don't have to speak that language, but you could see what they mean. You work with many volunteers, they say the same thing. You don't have to speak Bosnian to work with Bosnian refugees. Some of them do come with some English. Some do, and then you have to work with volunteers, too. If you volunteer, you have former refugees that came her long ago, and they come out and they say we will help you. That's the same question that was asked of me after I began to serve non-Vietnamese refugees. So my answer at the time, I said well, if other people who will not speak their language but who could still work in their benefit, I think I can do it. I will try.

H: I think...do you think you can almost read it in their eyes and in their face what they're, you know what they're needs are. Like you said, what could be their facial expressions or is it just because you know what they went through and that's what they need?

T: I think it is kind of...both.

H: Have you ever felt discriminated against in the FM area...since being here?

T: One time.

H: One time?

T: (*laughs*) One time. I was driving by the high school and there was this kid, I think he is about sixteen, or fifteen. I think he...he call me a nigger. That's the only time.

H: And was it a white kid or a ...

T: White kid, yeah.

H: White kid, okay.

T: I kind of felt sorry for him.

H: Yeah. You almost wonder if, why. Why that came out of him. If it's...

T: I think like I said before, either...misinformed, fears, or maybe some bad influence.

There are a lot of politics, immigration politics in the world now, and you see, if you follow the news in France. Just a few days ago, the right wing party...came in second.

That was a big surprise there. Because the fears that immigrants came and cause a lot of violence, crime, things like that. A lot of ideas. And a lot of misunderstanding.

H: Do you think we as a community could do something better or...to for education.

After reading the Civil Rights Report, you know they say that the education system could be better. We could bring more teachers in of different cultures to help the kids feel more comfortable. Do you think that that needs to be looked at?

T: Well, as I said earlier, I think Moorhead in particular has done a very good job. In Moorhead there is a non-profit organization called Cultural Diversity. It used to be Cultural Diversity project but now they have a different name [NOTE: *Cultural Diversity Resources*]. And not in every community do you have that kind of...so I think there's a need of better relation need, a better thing in home. A need of more education.

H: Do you think that goes the same as for...employment?

T: Yes.

H: Do you think we need to better educate the employers, or the community?

T: I think...yes. Yes in the way that in my work of twenty-two years at LSS, part of my job is to find employment for refugees. And employers who have had immigrant

working with them, they are very comfortable hiring immigrant worker. But the one who has never had anyone who is different, who is a immigrant work with them, they...they seem to be confused or they seem to be...what say, what way...how do I know for sure that this person will be a good worker. So I think that that's very important.

H: So you think that we need to teach the employers that there's nothing to be afraid of, that you should hire. Once you hire you'll feel comfortable and...and their fears might be language barrier, or...

T: Right. And one of the best ways to help employer understand is that to have other employers who have had to work with employers who have not.

H: Get them together so that they can talk to get rid of the fears that they might have. I noticed I think in that report that Crystal Sugar is the highest employers of immigrants.

T: In the Fargo-Moorhead community here, Fargo Assembly has a lot of refugees. Those companies that...they have a lot of refugees there when they need worker, they put a sign up that said, you have your friends, you have your relatives, bring them here. We need ten workers, we need fifteen workers. Hotel, local hotel here, and then in Pelican Rapids. Pelican Rapids there is the turkey plant. At the turkey plant they need workers all the time. They need hands, a lot of immigrants. Because there are certain jobs people born here do not want to take. And then Marvin Windows up north by the Canadian border.

H: Is it Warroad?

T: Warroad, yes. Marvin Windows they have about two hundred or three hundred Laotian workers there.

H: When refugees come here and you worked with them at LSS, do you, if there's jobs up in Warroad, do you tell them that and say that there's jobs up in Warroad? Or do you...

T: No, we do more than that.

H: You do more than that.

T: We do more than that. We got to...kind of give them an orientation and training.

What is this like to be working in America? Going there, go to work on time. And ask questions. If you don't understand, ask questions. If you got hurt, even if it's not painful, report. We have refugees who got hurt and they...some refugees, many refugees, they do not want to report. They don't want to report that they got hurt because they think that they will lose their job. And then also because they think, oh, it's nothing. But then when they go home the next day, it's getting worse. So we say, always report. Report to your supervisors. We do a lot of training...even use people who are already working to help them. Volunteer from the acting committee. What is it to work at Marvin Windows, what is it like to work there at Fargo Assembly, or Windows Company, or Integrity Company? We prepare them for that, but we want to make sure that they learn some English first because...do to not be able to speak, understand English could be a problem. Problem not only understanding supervisor, but also for safety. It's very important. So, in Fargo-Moorhead there are English as a second language taught locally here every day.

H: Where is it, Moorhead Adult Community Ed., is that where they go?

T: Yes.

H: Is that in the Townsite Center still or is it someplace...

T: No it's, right now it's at...the daytime class is at the Voyager school...Voyager school. The evening class, two days, two evenings a week is at the Senior High School.

H: How many people, if you know, would you guess...are currently enrolled in the education, in the English...

T: I have no number for Fargo, but Moorhead, I think they have probably about thirty, thirty to forty.

H: How long does it take them to go through a program like that? Is there a certain time limit for them, or...do...do...is it work at your own speed when you're comfortable enough? Do they get a certificate?

T: (laughing) I don't think I can answer this one. You may want to talk them. But they are receiving some assistance from the county, there was a...there was a time frame. Now see, after three months, then they have to move to the next phase, and then the job phase, and then like that. If you...if they are not on social service. I think as long they want to English, they can, they can.

H: Is there a cost for that?

T: Nope.

H: No cost.

T: No.

H: Is that provided through the school district then, or is it through the Moorhead community? Who...who pays for the teachers there? Are they volunteers or do you know?

T: The money, the funding came from...I think came from the ??? CEP, and also...also the school district.

H: Does it go through the summer time, too?

T: They usually have a break during the summer. I can't say how long. Maybe one or two weeks or something like that.

H: What advice would you give to someone coming to America for the first time?

T: Be patient. (*laughs*) Be patient, that's all. Because, well like I said before, people came here with a lot of preconceived notions.... Be patient and work hard, that's it.

H: Patience is a virtue.

SIDE TWO

H: Let's see, last question: what advice would you give someone coming to America for the first time. You said patience. In your own words how would you explain the Midwest?

T: You know, I am surprised it is called Midwest. I would call it Northcentral because Minnesota is just between and because Minnesota is so far North. But Midwest is okay.
(*all laugh*)

H: Well, what we've learned in our class is Midwest is constantly changing. So it fits the need. The term always fits the geographical term as the time and the need need it. So it's constantly been changing throughout. It used to be the Midwest was Kansas and Oklahoma, that was it. And now it's kind of grown east, south, north, south. So it's kind of constantly changing. Let's see, if you could change one aspect of your life in the Midwest, what would it be?

T: I would change the winter. (*laughing*)

H: The winter! Oh, I'd love to! (*laughing*) What would you think a perfect winter would be, or a perfect season?

T: Well, in the years I've been here, there was one winter that was not that cold. But, I like to savor this. We all complain how cold it is. But without the winter, we would not be happy that spring is coming. It would be, it would be...dull. So we have winter so we appreciate spring and summer.

H: True.

T: And we like...we like the fall, too. We like to see the color changing, and the leaves are falling. So, that's part of life I guess.

H: And if we didn't like it we could move, right? (*laughing*)

T: Yes, that's right! (*laughing*)

H: So we just like to complain I think. I like, I like that answer about the spring. That's nice. What were some of the main lifestyle or social changes when...when settling into the Moorhead area? What were the biggest changes for you in being here? Or weren't there any?

T: Not so much.

H: Did you have to...food?

T: Food. I had tried lefse. But I have not tried lutefisk.

H: Yeah, well I don't blame you there. I'm Norwegian and I don't like lefse.

T: Food is a way to learn other cultures, too. It's a part of learning.

H: Did you see in the newspaper there...I just noticed in Saturday's paper or Sunday's paper, Sarajevo is opening a restaurant?

T: Yes.

H: I think that's one the community is...needs to do. I was talking the other day and saying years ago we had one Mexican restaurant. That was it. And now it's slowly

grown, but we still don't have the diversity like the Minneapolis area. We could use more of that. And also stores. Asian market and stores where people can get other products.

T: Right. The Fargo Moorhead area is...I've been living here for 23 years and we've become more international.

H: Why do you think that? Why do you think we've become more international?

T: Partly because of business. Minnesota, North Dakota, we want to do more business.

H: So do you think of the Fargo Moorhead area as doing something to bring people in?

To open business, are they putting out any incentives?

T: I don't know.