

**Student Handout**  
**Oakland Museum of California**  
**'What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era**  
**Lesson Plan #3**  
**Coming to Terms: Stories of Southeast Asian Political Refugees**

**Oral History**

**Lam Nguyen**

**Lam Nguyen came to California in 1989 with his mother. They live in a Vietnamese enclave called Little Saigon in Orange County.**

*Interviewer: So now, why don't we begin by having you tell us your name, and tell us what you do.*

Um, I'm Lam Nguyen. Um, I'm a producer/director. I do a lot of, um, Vietnamese, um, concert, and I shoot on video and release on, uh, DVD on video distribution, all, uh, over the world where the Vietnamese community are.

*Interviewer: Mm-hm. What uh ... did you grow up in Little Saigon, and uh, tell us about it. What's it like to grow up as a Vietnamese-American, either in Orange County or somewhere, wherever you grew up.*

Um, I came in America in 1989, uh, *[Inaudible]* ...

(OFF-MIC)

I came to America in 1989, uh *[Inaudible]* programs, and um, I have spent six months in Bataan, Philippines, for, um, education, like new life in America, and I got sponsored to Little Saigon, and I ... so I live in Santana *[?]* And growing up in Little Saigon, it's like ... um, the language ... the Vietnamese language is something like ... you hear it around you all the time, and ... and ... and it's ... it's a new word that I didn't know what *[Inaudible]* in Vietnam all about. I ... I don't even know the Vietnam flag look like when ... when I was in Vietnam until I went to America. I ... I know ... that's a Vietnam word happening *[Inaudible]* that's something I didn't learn when I was in Vietnam. It's something like I study about Vietnam history, about this dynasty. Talk about Ho Chi Minh, how he fight against the French, but they never talk about the war between South Vietnam and North Vietnam. So to me, it's a new discovery for me like why I'm here, and what make me here because something I don't know. They never tell me until later on I figured out like starting high school the Vietnam War and I studying on my own about the Vietnam War, and that's why I understand why I'm here. And, it's just, for me, come here as a refugee ... somebody not Prisoner of War, but pretty much like my fam ... family, you know, having live for better economy, a better way of living, not under ... cause my dad is, uh, one of former general. He, uh, he got executed in 1980. So, I cannot go to government, uh, college. I can go to high school. When I finish with high school, I cannot work for government work, business, whatever, office—I cannot do anything of that. So that's why my mom decide to go to America, and that's ... it's ... growing up in Little Saigon, it's just like another country, the country where everybody has the same sorrow, where



everybody carry that same scar, everybody have something that they relate to, and they can fear for each other, and that's how the community developed. And it's just amazing how that's happened.

*Interviewer: How ... how American do you feel? I mean, do you feel sometimes a big conflict between the ... in a way you started as a Vietnamese in Vietnam ... you came to America and live in a Vietnamese-American world of refugees, and yet, around and permeating that world is America. So, what's that like?*

Come to America ... I mean, when I get to Am ... when I get here, the ... the community already developing themselves. But, of course, surrounding it is America culture ... everywhere you see is American, but, um, there's no conflict between that, but a lot of problem come into the parent decide how their children going to be. Are they going to be Vietnamese, are they going to be Vietnamese-American. Some of the family decide like, you know, then will talk to their children, speak to them with Vietnamese only English [?]. So ... so, I'm lucky that my mom—I mean, maybe my mom don't speak English that much, that's why she speak Vietnamese to me all the time, but I ... I came in America—I don't see American have anything that give me conflict on anything like that. For me personally, I feel like I came here when I was [*Inaudible*], I don't know anything much about Vietnam. I don't understand much about the language, and now I have to accept another language. I have to forget my Vietnamese, and start with A-B-C again. So, I ... I decide to ... to keep my language a ... at least. You know, where I come from, I have to know my language, so I ... I ... I chose to speak my language first, and then American come later. So, during my high school years, I got torn with that, because I ... I told myself, okay, I got to speak Vietnamese, I ... I got to learn my language, have to [*Inaudible*] my language. So, I didn't ... I didn't really concentrate on study the language, so, I don't think much about what's going on around me. Yes, so growing up in the community with surrounding all American culture, you know, everywhere you go, but to me, it just ... I get ... I accept that I'm here, so I have to see that as another ... I have to observe and get myself into that.

*Interviewer: And, do you think that music has become a big way of ... for people of all ages, including young people like yourself to stay in contact, just as you tried to hold the language, does the music help young Vietnamese to stay in some kind of contact with their culture?*

Yes, um, Vietnamese ... a lot of Vietnamese- Americans today, they can read the language, but they cannot write [*Laughs*]. A lot of them learning reading by singing Karaoke—cause they just look at the word, and they recognize the word, but tell them to write, they cannot write. And, as you know, the language of Vietnam, they have, like, sign, like question mark on the top. Um, the Vietnam ... the ... um, the music is ... it's ... it's like a Bible, as something you listen every day to remind that's your language, and ... and a lot of ... a lot of theme of the music that's ... that's carry a therapy that's something for your sorrow, your ... your ... your pain. So, a lot of music they write about like, you know, why you're here, the [*Inaudible*] of 1975, and the story like, you know, they miss like, you know, the Saigon City used to be. So, that kind of music is ... is surrounding all of my generation, my mom's generation, and that's something that's ... that ... that is play a very important role to ... to keep the language in ... in ... in this country.

