

Xuan Dinh

Interviewed 7/28/2007
By Holli Connell
Midway Village Museum

Xuan Dinh

Holly: If you can state your first and last name.

Xuan: My first and last name? Okay. My first name is Xuan and my last name is Dinh.

Holly: and could you spell it?

XD: X-U-A-N and D-I-N-H.

HC: Again if you could say your first and last name.

XD: Well my first name is Xuan, X-U-A-N and my last name is Dinh, D-I-N-H.

HC: And are you married?

XD: Yes I am. Oh I'm sorry. Yes I was.

HC: Okay. And do you have any children?

XD: Yeah, I had three children.

HC: Three children. And educational backgrounds. From child to now, any schooling?

XD: Well, let me remember that. I am too old now you know. Let's see from the fifth grade to the first grade in my village, in [unintelligible] in [Shantoa] the center of Vietnam. And then I spent about two or three more years over there but after that I went to the south. And I studied, I started from sixth grader in junior cadets and I spent about seven years over there until 1969. I graduated from that school and also I went to the Air Force, the [VNAF]. And then a year after that I, in 1971 I came here to study at Sheppard Air Force Base. And when I came back there I served in the Vietnamese Air Force and at the same time I took classes at the Law University of Saigon.

And when I was on, in the last year of law, and then the [communists] came to the south and the south collapsed I was taken to concentration camp and spent about six years both in concentration camp and on the state farm than I was forced to labor every day without anything at all okay. And about 10 years under probation of communist regime, until the day I left Vietnam.

HC: Wow. Where do you, I'm sorry that was just like, I wasn't expecting that right there, sorry.

X D: That's okay.

HC: Where do you work now?

XD: I am working in Rock Valley College Library.

HC: Okay. And how long have you been there?

XD: I have been working there for five years.

HC: And then where are you from?

XD: I am from Vietnam.

HC: Vietnam. And you mentioned a village outside of Vietnam? Were you...

XD: The Village?

HC: Does it have a name?

XD: That's the..[Lakuei??] village in [Harei??] city. It's the Central of Vietnam.

HC: What did you do before you came here?

XD: Before I came here? In Vietnam? Well it's a funny story. I did a lot of careers over there. You know after I was released from concentration camp I couldn't do anything at all. Because they consider us as just like enemy. So I applied for different kind of job like labor job but never, never accepted. So finally I found myself a job that's suitable, by that time when they have the open policy. I don't remember exactly what year; it's about 1986, something? And then I run a private school by myself. And I taught mathematics and English grammar.

HC: Wow. What made you want to come here?

XD: Excuse me?

HC: What made you want to come to the United States?

XD: Okay. First of all, that freedom. And the reason I came, I come here because by that time we are living under the communist regime. The people over there are just like animals. And they control every thing. Even they still say very good thing about their regime but in fact very, very bad thing happen over there. And especially about the freedom of speech, the freedom of religions, you know I mean the basic rights, human rights. There's nothing there. That make me coming here.

HC: Okay. When did you decide to come? Was there a point, was there a time, was there "I'm doing this."?

XD: Well, let's see. In 1995 I think. By that time there was a policy that anyone who was in concentration camp can apply to come in here. And I applied. By that time. But I didn't have money. So my applications still there but they never issued a passport to me. Until one year after that one of my friends from California came back to Vietnam and see me and he ask me

“why you still here?” A lot of your friends in America now. I say “well, I have no money to pay for them.” Then after the talk you know, before I left his house I, he gave me \$100. “I hope this will help you to get the paperwork everything here.” I took it and you know from that point got I the passport from them and then I came here in 1996. January 28 I remember that day.

HC: The day before my birthday!

XD: Ah!! Okay.

HC: Why did you decide to come to Rockford?

XD: Because one of my friend living here. So he asked me to come here so we can, you know, at least he know something about this town so he can help me with that.

HC: Sure. Wonderful. And did you know anyone before you came here? In the United States or Rockford?

XD: Well, before coming here I had an American girlfriend. She's in Texas. Because I came here to study in 1971. And she would like to be my girlfriend at that time you know and she asked me to take her back to Vietnam but I say no. It's war time over there. You cannot live there without that's, you know, environment so. But also I had a lot of American friends here and that made me upset when I was a concentration camp. Remember about one of my friends here and especially at that time I dream of the lawn in here you know. Because under the communist regime nowhere they you can see the lawn. They just plant some kind of vegetable or whatever for food you know. No lawn like this. I dream about that lawn if only I can see them one time that I can die it's okay. You can see that. So a lot of people living here they don't know that this is heaven. They never recognize that one. You know?

HC: The lawn. So many people complain about mowing it! And you dreamed of coming to a lawn! I love that. Okay. How we've talked about this before, but if you could just describe again, how long did it take for you to make arrangements to come here and what was involved?

XD: Okay. I think I was lucky because by the time I get interview, I got interview with American delegation over there. At that time they already normalize the relation between American and Vietnam over there. It's difficult. And I was, I think my family was the first one when they got interview. Because usually everyone just get about 10 or 10 minutes or 15 minutes then got out of the office and you know the results. But my family got about 40, 45 minutes. And because of the translator I think she was the security from [inaudible]. And she asked me “were you in America?” “Yes.” “Can you speak English?” “Yeah, sure.” “So go ahead and speak English to her.” And I said “sure why not.” And you know I spoke English with the one who interviewed me and then she asked me if anyone in my family could speak English and I said “yes.” And she asked everyone in my family she interview in English. All of us. Although my, our English not as good as American people here but you know at least she could understand.

HC: Did you teach your family English because of your schooling?

XD: Yeah.

HC: Okay. And your family, and the family that was being interviewed, what did that consist of? Who was there with you being interviewed?

XD: My wife, my three children.

HC: Okay. Sorry continue then. So once you've done the interview, in English, which was probably pretty interesting....

XD: Very interesting you know, because once she asked me about everything I didn't have any at all. You know why she asked me about the paperwork. I said well the paperwork that the police, they already took it from me. And this is the copy. And she asked me about the, she asked me why, why you want to come to America? I said it because I need freedom. And asked me if they do any bad thing over there for our family. I said yeah sure you know they forced me to labor without nothing. Paid nothing and then when my children go to school and they say because your father was working with American side so they give a bad, very bad point to you know our children. That main even our children's study very good, very smart, but still get low points. You see. But anyway, I think I was lucky because most of my children, they were very smart. Even in that condition they still got you know rewards and everything. That mean very, very tough for them.

HC: One: of the questions I think we answered, have you been to this country before?

XD: Yeah. In 1971 to study management and analysis because at that time I was an Air Force officer.

HC: And how... did you come alone when you came to America or did you come with people that you knew?

XD: You know when, what time?

HC: Oh I'm sorry. When you came over to the United, not with the Air Force, but in 1996.

XD: 96? With my family. Yeah.

HC: And how long did it take to make the arrangements to come over here? Like once the paperwork went through and you were coming over, did you have to make more arrangements?

XD: No. Just after the interview they say okay to our family then everything just go you know about three months. Very fast.

HC: Okay. And how does you travel here, airplane...

XD: Airplane. We traveled from [unintelligible] in Saigon to Thailand, to Bangkok Thailand, and stayed there over there for about 10 hours or something like that and then to Seattle Port and from Seattle to I think O'Hare and from O'Hare we took another plane to Rockford. See...

HC: Fun! So you actually flew right into Rockford interesting. Let's see... what was the journey like, like on the plane who did you meet, what did you say, did someone travel along with your family or you just like "See Ya!"

XD: Well, you know, I don't know how to describe my emotion by that time when I, the first time when I see the foreigner because you know that's the, the time that I can speak English again you know. Because in Vietnam if I speak English to foreigner they consider me as an agent of CIA. And in fact they kept check on me until the last day I left Vietnam. There's a one, he's major in communist army, kept track on me all the time. And it was his wife who told me about that. You see how nice because you know a week before I left Vietnam I made a small party and I invite everyone in our [quarter] area to come and have dinner with our family. And also before I left Vietnam I had to give the government our house so they can sign the paperwork for us to go to the airport otherwise they didn't.

HC: Okay so you gave over your land and house?

XD: Yes. That's their requirements. Because you are living here and you are, you was you know something, whatever, and then you had to sign this one give it to us and they said that they would manage our house, our property. That's what they said but in fact they took it and sold it to another one.

HC: Now what did you bring with you? Did you pack? What did you bring?

XD: We brought with us just clothes, something like that. Nothing else.

HC: Did you have bags of stuff?

XD: Yah.

HC: Or a suitcase?

XD: A suitcase. Each of us. With you know some clothes that our friend give us.

HC: And so when you got on the plane, you actually talked, spoke English to the stewardess and thought wow look at me.

XD: Yeah oh yeah you see!

HC: that's exciting! Let's see... in your stop in Taiwan did you...

XD: No, no in Thailand, Bangkok. Then from Thailand we stopped by Japan, Kyoto or Tokyo, I don't remember. But the newest airport over there. And then from that to Seattle.

HC: Any of those stops did you actually transfer to another plane, did you spend some time in any of these locations? Especially like, in Seattle?

XD: Just like in Thailand, we stopped there for 10 hours to transfer to another airline. Then, when we stopped by Japan, we transferred to another airline and Seattle we transferred to another one. And then O'Hare.

HC: What did your family think when they got out at Seattle and they were transferred, were they like "wow" . . .

XD: Wow, everything you know big for them but for me I used to that size and so, okay. Good to see all of this again.

HC: Let's see... did... how did you get settled when you first came here? You said you came to see, came to see a friend who got you here. What happened when you got here then? How did you get settled? You were picked up at the Rockford Airport?

XD: Yeah. He picked up us at Rockford and then I stay one night over his house, before that he already had contact with the church you know and they get some, an apartment for me. And everything so the day after that I went to the apartment and then lived there and it was nice because the government give us I don't remember, eight months or one year of food and...

HC: Rent? Like foods and...

XD: Rent, the food, though what they call?

HC: Utilities?

XD: Yeah. Whatever. Just like public aid you know. They give us like that one.

HC: Sure. Yeah.

XD: And we just took it about three months. After three months we, my wife and I found a job you know and we called them to cancel all. Because it's interesting, one of the ladies asked me why. I say, well because we just got a job so I just want to let you know that cancel please. This just use it for anyone else who need it. And the answer is, wow will you please say it again! I said would you please cancel my...

HC: Public aid or...

XD: Yeah or whatever. I don't remember now. But she says you surprise me. Why? I never, I never heard anything like this before. People are always asking for more and more and you are asking for cancel. I said well because we got a job now we don't need that anymore. Save it there for someone else. And you know what she said because you are so good, so we continue to

offer you Medicare for the whole year and also if you have a car you need to fix it or something just bring your car here we it's better we give you a check to fix it.

HC: Wow. That's wonderful. That's a great, that's great. When you give you get. Okay. Did you know any of... let's see... now we get that answer. Did you know anybody... is anyone you knew when you came here, especially in Rockford, were they from your country or were they from even your village and your community? From Vietnam to here?

XD: Yeah, I, I have known a lot of people around here that from Vietnam, not from my village.

HC: Sure. But not from Vietnam. Let's see... what is your current living arrangement? You had an apartment that was set up for you the first year that you got here.

XD: Not first year but first six months.

HC: Six months. And did you stay in that apartment you and your family?

XD: Yeah. But after six months I change to another apartment. Because I found another apartment that more convenient, cheaper and also...

HC: You got a job...

XD: I got a job. And I continued to go to school to get some, I mean I, at that time what... the setup machine, Mills and Lathe and programming something like that.

HC: And where did you work?

XD: The first year I worked for... I can't remember that name right now... but that company for the first year and after that I apply for another job at Ingersoll. And I worked for Ingersoll almost from four years and a half until the day they sold you know and they laid off all of us. Then I came back to the school again and I spent about three years, two years and a half, to study and I graduated and got another associate it here. And then I applied for another job until now.

HC: And what are you currently doing? At the library?

XD: Library. I am working in serials. I am responsible for periodicals, microfilm, or something like that. Helping people. And interlibrary loan.

HC: And... let's see... did or does, and this question you might have to reword for me... did or does your visa limit you to the kind of jobs you can do? Are you, you're not here on a visa though is that correct? Are you on a Green card or a visa or are you becoming a citizen?

XD: I am an American citizen. My whole family.

HC: Your whole family. And when did you become a citizen?

XD: Right, five years after we came here.

HC: And did you go through like class, paperwork and then a ceremony? How did that work?

XD: We just applied for the US citizenship and then we just learned about some question about that because it was very, very easy for us to know everything. Just, you know American history we already learned that when we were in high school and especially read about three branches you know it's something like that. It's very popular all over the world you know. So nothing.

HC: You just knew it like that! Let's see... where you see yourself in five years?

XD: Excuse me?

HC: Where do see yourself in five years?

XD: In five years? Where? From now or what?

HC: In life, where, here, physically. What do you see yourself doing and where will you be in five years?

XD: In five years? Okay. You know that, if you know that before we came here there's no Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Rockford. And after we came here and we asked our my friends and our community then we collect money and we build Vietnamese Buddhist temple here. And my job is now is to try to help people and also to help our community in here to make it better and better. So in five years I can see that I still in Rockford and helping people doing whatever they need that I can do for them. And also we try to transfer on our knowledge and Vietnamese culture onto the younger generation so they can continue to keep that one and mix with American culture so we enrich American culture here. And also we try to maintain the moral and civic order the young generation to keep its better and better in here.

HC: Quinn was telling me about what the Buddhist, what the temple is doing, the Vietnamese temple and it just sounds so wonderful. She's like, were teaching Vietnamese language with those who were born here and we have a service but we have Sunday school, she called it. So it just sounds so wonderful. And so when you hear of people coming from Vietnam over here, do you try to then make relationship with them to be a part of the temple as well? Like if you've heard coming to Rockford may be another family that was coming over here? Would you try to bring them bring them into that community? As like as an immigrant?

XD: In fact we try to help anyone that needs and we don't convince them to become Buddhists. Never. Never. We just convince them to do the right thing, to do the good thing, keep their religion. You see? We never convince people to become Buddhists unless they want. They ask me, okay now I want to become Buddhists how can I do something like that? Then I can help them. Otherwise we just encourage them to do the good thing, avoid doing bad thing, purifying their mind everyday to make everything good to create the heaven right here. Right now. That's what we need.

HC: Yes it is it is. Your knowledge of English, how does it affect you and your family when you first came here?

XD: Well I tell you what; I think that's the best we have. We consider. We don't need money we don't need anything else except knowledge. And especially living in America we need English to contact with people. And with that we can do everything. We've got everything.

HC: Are there any other organizations or community that groups you belong to besides the Vietnamese temple? Is there anything else?

XD: No. I don't think so. Because with us the Vietnamese Buddhist temple just a place to help people to make people better and better. And that's what we need, we don't need anything else.

HC: Okay. How did it feel to come to a foreign country?

XD: Excuse me?

HC: How did it feel to come to a foreign country when you got here?

XD: For me? Well, because you know that we were in Vietnam just like the bottom of the hell. Okay. So any, any kind of foreign country with us consider heaven.

HC: I'm not to get anything bad out of you about America I can tell that one right now you're all over it. Okay. How did people treat you when you arrived here?

XD: They are so nice. Yeah they were so nice. And they've been so nice to me. And so far you know wherever I live people around me become my good friends. Even that's American Mexican or whatever. They become my closer friends immediately.

HC: I can tell that you make it very easy. Were there any people that you didn't get along with in your neighborhood or ever felt unwelcome once you had been here for awhile? Anything like that.

XD: Not so far.

HC: Not so far. Okay. And our last question, it's a group of questions, but it's a reflection. What did you think about the country before you came and has your ideas changed on that?

XD: This country? Or my country?

HC: This country. Like you had been, you've been saying you thought of it as heaven. Have your ideas changed at all?

XD: Well still America where I living now. Still the heaven. Because people who living here, they may make it different but for me it's still heaven. And I've tried to help people to improve their knowledge about the life about how to contribute themselves to the community. Do not ask

the community what the, the community do for them. Just ask them what they haven't done for the community? Continue to provide for community to do their parts to keep it better and better and you know that heaven or the hell just come from your mind. If you do the good thing this thing will be heaven. If you did a bad thing it could be the hell immediately.

HC: That's very true. Has your move here turned out like you thought it would?

XD: Yeah. You know what the last thing living in America is you can see whatever you will be in the future. You can see that.

HC: What has been, I know we've kind of said this, what has been the best part of what you've done coming over here, what's been the best part?

XD: My part or what?

HC: Yeah what's been the best part of coming here?

XD: The best part of coming here? As I told you the best part of coming here is that you can do whatever you want to be. If you have ability to do so.

HC: What has been the hardest were the most disappointing part?

XD: So far I haven't seen anything like that.

HC: Do you miss anything from your former home?

XD: Well, I miss a lot of my friends the friendship over there and I miss my country sure. But when I just talk about the way that communist regime treat people over there then everything disappear. Now I just want to try to do the best that I can so I can support the people over there. And I will do the best I can to help them get the human rights and to build our country better and better without communists that's what I want.

HC: Have you gone back to visit since you moved here?

XD: Yeah. I think three times.

HC: Three times.

XD: Yeah but at every time I came back there it was nice to see my friends again but I just want to get out of that as soon as possible because of the way that the police and the government over there treat the people.

HC: Were you there for to visit family?

XD: Yeah. I just came to visit my family and my friends and my students over there.

HC: What you like to do for fun?

XD: For fun? Well if I can do anything that make people happy that's my fun.

HC: Has there been anything difficult to adjust to while living here in America or Rockford?

XD: I don't think so. At least for myself.

HC: And were you at all nervous about thinking to move here and settling down? Before, in Vietnam, were you nervous about it at all?

XD: No. The reason is because the way use to live under communist regime so we consider always that we be ready to move anywhere. Anywhere that grass can grow we can live that's what I think.

HC: And for your children, what you want them to know about your culture of your homeland?

XD: I want them to know most of Vietnamese culture and to get along with our moral civic that mean respecting people, helping people, doing a good thing, not doing any bad thing at all. Always consider about people's happiness do not consider about yourself because it that the selfish way. And if, the more you consider about people's happiness the more, the happier you are. That's the way we do.

HC: How old are your children?

XD: They are 34, 27, and 23 I think.

HC: And you said you were married? You're not married anymore?

XD: In fact I still have a wife and children but since I became a monk I give up everything. I give up everything. Now that mean even they are my wife or they are my children but because I'm a monk I never got back with any relation with them. Then I consider them just like any member of our temple.

HC: And today lives in Rockford with you?

XD: Yeah. And you see the hardest part of being a monk when you were married, that mean they know that you are husbands or wife of this one or this one but because you're a monk. So you give up everything. And you have to use your mind to control everything. And if you become a good monk or a bad monk depends on what you control. And that's the best part in Buddhism. That mean no one control you at all. You control yourself. And if everyone can do that we can make this world heaven here.

HC: Everywhere can be heaven.

XD: Yeah. Everywhere.

HC: How do you feel, two more questions, how do you feel about the current debate in this country about immigration and immigrants?

XD: Well I think first of all, in order to come here you should have a permit, permission from the government just like your house okay. If you get a very big house and someone have no house just come to live because you love them you let them live there. But what happened if they lived there for a while and then they say oh this is my house and then they went more and more and then ask you to give them a part of that one. What do you think? Without your permission? Any country anywhere should have their own law. You have to follow the law. Just like when I, we come here, we had to speak English. We had to learn how to speak English. I cannot come in here and ask you, you have to speak Vietnamese. You have to learn Vietnamese order to talk to me. No.

HC: Okay. Good answer. And then what year were you born? And when's your birthday?

XD: My birthday is March 3.

HC: And what year were you born?

XD: In fact I was born in 1950.

HC: 1950? Good. Well that's it. Is there anything that you want to add to your interview, just a reflection on anything you've said or an elaboration or add any stories that you want to put in?

XD: No because I am here for interviews so it depends on your question okay. Anyway I just want to tell people that this is my advice. Knowledge is power. Try to get as much as you can. Improve yourself every day. And once again, in order to create the heaven anywhere, you should avoid doing any bad things. Try to do every good thing, even if tiny thing. And always purify your minds. That's it. That's what my last message.

HC: That's perfect. Thank you.