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| Metadata Field | Description | Data Entry |
| Title | Title of Document | Transcript\_Sheila\_Hill\_With\_Tam\_Do\_20230125 |
| Accession Number | Catalogue Number of the File | (Administrator Only) |
| Interviewee | Name of Interviewee (SURNAME, given name(s), middle initial) | Tam Do |
| Interviewer | Name of Interviewer (Surname, given name(s), middle initial) | Sheila Hill |
| Interview Date | YYYY/MM/DD | 2023/01/25 |
| Interview Date (non-preferred format) | E.g. November 13, 2014 or MM/DD/YY | January 25, 2023 |
| Collection ID |  | (Administrator Only) |
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| Series |  | (Administrator Only) |
| Summary | Brief summary of the interview session (Copy and paste from Form 13 – Session Summary) | Tam Do begins the interview discussing his early life in Saigon, Vietnam and what it was like growing up during the Vietnam War in the 1960s. He outlines his move to Canada with his wife in 1984, the various provinces they visited, the challenges he faced learning the language, and what their first winter was like here. Tam then goes on to describe his life and business in Richmond, his humble beginnings operating a Mac’s Convenience Store, and then owning several Chevron gas station locations across the area. He concludes the interview with his charitable contributions to the community, and what he wishes Canadians knew about the immigrant experience. |
| Keywords | Keywords indicating interview subjects (Copy and Paste from “Keyword” section of Form 12 Interview Summary.) | Saigon, Vietnam, War, Escape, Ocean, Indonesia, Oilrig, Rescue, Refugee, Ottawa, Winter, Snow, Canada, Surrey, Toronto, Ottawa, Richmond, English, Language, Community, Business, Mac’s Convenience Store, Franchise, Investment, Chevron, Employment, Immigrant, Finances, Charity, Donation. |
| Subject | Subject headings applicable to the Interview. The OHC uses Library of Congress Subject Headings. | Immigration, Vietnam, War, Escape, Indonesia, Rescue, Refugee, Winter, Canada, Ontario, British Columbia, Richmond, Language, Community, Business, Investment, Chevron, Employment, Finances, Charity, Donation. |
| Duration | Length of Interview Session (if applicable) hh:mm:ss | 00:29:05 |
| Interview # | Number of the interview (interviewees according to date) | 1 |
| Session # | Session # of the recording (X of all interviews in the session) | 1 |
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| Restrictions | Details regarding any restrictions on the file’s use (as outlined in Form 6 –Consent) | N/A |
| Rights | Release Information regarding copyright and access through the repository (as outlined in the Release Agreement) | All rights given to the interviewer (Sheila Hill) and the Oral History Centre |
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| Language | Language(s) of the Interview or Document | English |
| Type | Document Type. E.g.: Oral History Interview, Conference Proceedings, Presentation, Sharing Circle, etc. | Oral History Interview |
| Repository | Location where the project/collection will be stored. | The Oral History Centre |

**Transcription Legend:**

. . . = Ellipses used to indicate where an interviewee does not complete a thought.

[?] = Used to indicate indecipherable words or unknown spelling of words.

START OF TAPE PART ONE OF ONE

[00:00:09]

SHEILA

My name is Sheila Hill and I’m the Curator of Exhibitions at the Richmond Museum. I’m here with Tam Do on January 25th, 2023. So, thank you so much for joining us to do this oral history, and happy Lunar New Year.

TAM  
Happy New Year, Sheila. My pleasure to be here with you.

SHEILA

Thank you. Maybe we can start at the beginning. Can you tell us where you grew up?

TAM

Yes. I was born in Saigon, Vietnam. To be exact, I was born very early in the ‘60s. So, I was raised in the situation of the country, the war. I’ve seen a lot of stuff. People shooting on the street and stuff like that. Then in 1975 when the war ends, the Americans withdraw. We weren’t able to stay in the city anymore, so we had to go to the village to live because everything is confiscated. So, since then, I continued my school and I grow up.

My parents passed away a few years after that. My parents passed away when I was fifteen years old. We lived by ourselves, with four of our brother and sisters. We struggled really badly. Sometimes we’d go to bed without food. It was tough. It was tough, those days. You know, to make the story short, in 1983 my girlfriend and I – at that time I dated my wife, [who] was at that time my girlfriend – we decided to leave the country. The world is so tough, but we were lucky that we rescued . . . I mean, we left the country in the middle of the night in a little boat. We escaped. They call us Boat People. You heard that, right? Yeah. After seven days and seven nights in the ocean, we did not have enough food or water or anything like that. We had to drink our own urine to survive. At the end we were rescued by an oil rig in the middle of the ocean that belonged to Indonesia. They rescued us and they brought us to the refugee camp in Indonesia. We stayed there for fifteen months. We didn’t know what to do. We didn’t know where to go. Refugee camps were the worst place on earth at the time. I mean the UN support so many people, [but] they wouldn’t be able to support them all. They just give us some food to survive. They dig the ground to get the water. They dig a well to get the water out and stuff like that. It’s tough, but we were lucky to be accepted by the Canadian government. They brought us to Canada in the late – we arrived in Ottawa in late 1984 in the middle of the summer. Winter, actually winter (laughs). You know, I remember one night, I got up from my hostel, I think on the fourth floor. We stayed in a little room, and then in the morning we looked down. We said, “It looks so weird. So different. What happened here?” Every car carried a pile of white stuff on the roof. We didn’t know that it was snow.

SHEILA

That’s funny.

TAM

Yeah, it’s so funny, right? It’s so cold, you know, coming to Canada from the other side of the world. In Indonesia it was really hot. We didn’t have enough clothes. When we arrived at the airport, they gave us a jacket to put it on but it’s still not enough. That’s how we came to Canada.

SHEILA

That is quite the story. How did you manage ending up in Richmond?

TAM

Well, I moved to some places before I came to BC. From Ottawa, I lived there for a year, then moved to Toronto. In Toronto, I worked different jobs. In the winter of 1990, I came to Vancouver to visit my cousin. It’s a far cousin, not a very close cousin. That was in the end of October. In Toronto, it was really cold at that time. I came down here, people were still wearing shorts on the streets. How come the weather is so much different? Right? In Vietnam, if you want to move from city to city, they have a government permission. If you don’t ask permission and you move without permission, you can be jailed. In this country, you can move anywhere. And then I thought, “Okay, I’ve got to move to BC.” So, that’s how I decided to move to BC.

SHEILA

Good decision.

TAM

Yeah. From BC, I stayed in Surrey for a few years and I started my small business, and then I headed up to Richmond.

SHEILA  
Wonderful. Apart from the weather, did you speak any English when you came? What was different?

TAM  
That’s one of the hardest things in those days – that I didn’t speak any English when I came to the refugee camp. In Vietnam, my mother sent me to school learning French because in that generation it was a French colony, right? So, they were speaking French. So, they bring us to the school for French. I came to Ottawa, I remembered a little bit but English is zero. So, I started learning every day, every day. I tried harder and harder, every day to learn little by little.

SHEILA

It’s a difficult language.

TAM

Yeah, Vietnamese and English is totally different. It’s very hard.

SHEILA

Yeah. Were there other things you noticed that were so different?

TAM  
You know, the culture is also quite different. The weather, definitely. You come in and you see a lot of people so friendly, so helpful. That time, my kids, we went to the bus and the bus driver left his seat to carry my baby cart, this little chair, into the bus. I was amazed at how people were friendly, how people were helpful. The love of the people here, you know, it’s unbelievable.

SHEILA

That’s great. That’s really nice to hear. What was your first impression of Richmond when you came?

TAM

You know, I came to BC, as I told you, the city is beautiful, nice and clean, the view of the mountains with ocean, everything, and the food is amazing as well. I did not go out very much to eat because of my budget. We tried to eat at home, mostly. We tried to cook. We tried to save money. Even though, you know, once in a while we go out, we really enjoy.

SHEILA

Yes, the food culture has really improved over the years. Definitely. Can you tell us how you built your life here, your business?

TAM

I don’t know if you believe, but I really believe in miracles. I really believe in God. So, whatever I have I really thanks for what I have, right. I came to BC, here, I have a little money. We worked hard in Toronto for a few years and we saved up. I came here and I went into the Mac’s Convenience Store business. At that time, they just needed a little money for investment. So, I was lucky that they applied, I mean, accepted my application, and gave me an opportunity to operate one of the Mac’s Convenience Stores with a little investment. So, I worked hard. I worked like six to twelve midnight every day. I hired only one person who do graveyard. My wife and I, we worked so hard for like ten years straight. No day off. From there, I saved money and I had two stores, two Mac’s Convenience Stores. We started with a very small store and I built it up, built it up, right? Then, one time, a couple people from Chevron, they stopped by my store, I mean, they stopped by my store and had coffee many times. They’d see how I was operating my business. They’d see my business and said, “Tam, are you ever thinking about going to a bigger business?” I said, “I’d love to but, number one, is I don’t have much money. Number two, it’s very hard to get into gasoline business. Truly, really hard to get into business.” They said, “Okay, you apply to it, put your name down, and you might have a chance.” Those people from Chevron had opportunities in early… late 1990 to 2001, 2002. So, I was lucky to be accepted by Chevron. So, I left Mac’s Convenience. I started working in one of the smallest stations in Surrey and I proved myself. I can work, and I work hard. You work hard, you be honest; people see that. When they see that, they gave me an opportunity to operate at bigger stations. From there I do a lot of stuff for Chevron, training people for them; I helped them do other things like rebuild stations that are run down. Finally, I ended up in Richmond. They offered me the biggest station on Bridgeport, Number Five with the Triple O’s.

SHEILA,  
Oh, yeah.

TAM

That’s the first one I took in Richmond in January 08, 2007. Now I have all the Chevrons in Richmond, five of them.

SHEILA

Wow, congratulations. That’s quite the achievement.

TAM

Thank you.

SHEILA

You were saying that you have quite a few employees.

TAM  
Yes, yes. In Richmond, the City of Richmond requires a hundred percent full-serve. Then I have the restaurant, convenience stores. So, we need a lot of employees. That’s why I have, like, over 150 employees. One time I had almost 200 employees.

TAM

Yeah. Right now, average, I have around maybe 140 to 150 employees.

SHEILA

And you were telling me where you recruited them from.

TAM

You know, I gave a lot of the people who have losses or are less fortunate. The people that other companies don’t hire them. They would either be the slow or the older, right? I give them a chance to start. They’ve never been employed before. So, I just hire them, give them a chance, and they’ve been working with me for like six, seven years. One guy’s working with me since 1991. Even now, he’s still working with me. My employees, like, fifteen, fourteen, fifteen years. One of the managers just retired after fifteen years of working for me. He’s retired. Right now, I see a lot of long-term employees working for me. Another thing, I hired the students that came here for study and the government allowed them to work twenty hours a week. They need the job to support their school. So, I gave them a job to work with us. New immigrants as well. When people, the newcomers, they want to start to get some income, that’s why I hire them. Of course, I hire local people first but local people, they don’t do the minimum wage jobs, right?

SHEILA

Mhm. You just talked about Chevron giving you this opportunity but have you had support from local organizations or the larger Vietnamese community?

TAM

No. Actually, in return I support them instead of they support me.

SHEILA

That’s great. Can you tell us about that?

TAM

I do a lot of fundraising. Most of the Vietnamese organizations, when they organize a fundraiser, they invite me and I do it or lead the program for them, or I emcee for them, or I do fundraising for them. With me, the Vietnamese community here, most of them, they know me. I support them in different ways. I put my hands on and support them, and support them financially. Paying back to the community is one of the things that I love to do, especially the Richmond Hospital. If you go to Richmond, you’ll see my wife [Monika Ngoc Phi] there with me in the hospital [recognition of donors].

SHEILA  
Oh, that’s great! I’ll look for that next time I’m there.

TAM  
Unfortunately, my wife passed away in 2020.

SHEILA

I’m sorry to hear that.

TAM

She was a lovely woman. She was really, she was by my side for thirty-seven years, and fine. Then suddenly she found out that she got lung cancer, and then she passed away. It was really tough for me, that time. She was the one who always encouraged me, more and more, to give money away – to give money to this organization, this organization, BC Children’s Hospital, Vancouver Hospital, Richmond Hospital. She’s the one who encouraged me to do a lot of this stuff.

SHEILA  
I’m so sorry for your loss. It’s huge.

TAM

Yeah. It’s huge. It’s huge.

SHEILA  
Yeah. But you have a son?

TAM

Just one.

SHEILA

Just one?

TAM  
We had a son. He was born in the refugee camp in August 1994. We struggled.

SHEILA  
Right.

TAM

It’s so hard, that time, because we didn’t have any plan, and there’s no . . . at the refugee camp it’s very tough, right? And the baby was born there too. I had to work so hard. I had to wash clothes by hand, I had to dig the ground to get the water to do cooking. It’s terrible. I went through all that, you know? After I went through all that, nothing is harder.

SHEILA

Yes, it gives you perspective. Doesn’t it?

TAM  
Yes. Nothing is harder right now because of that. Every hour, what’s money for me? I work every hour, right?

SHEILA

And you give away a lot of this money but, you know, a lot of people work towards a goal. Do you have a goal that you’re working towards?

TAM  
The goal of, we’re talking about, “Oh, people said that, oh, I have to be at a meeting there, I have to register that.” I never thought of that. I just thank God to give me health, to give me, the ability to make money so I can use that money to support others. I just pray for my son for the same thing. My son, he has that mentality as well. We don’t really want to be millionaires to show people that we’re rich. I’m not that kind of . . . I don’t want to be that.

SHEILA  
You talked about having people help you when you arrived and welcoming you to Canada. I was wondering if there’s anything that you wished Canadians understood more about – about immigrants, or migrants, or even refugees, and how to help them receive these people.

TAM

I remember when I came to Canada there were a group of Vietnamese who came here first. They contacted us, came, and they just gave us a list of things that, you know, things you should do and there’s a phone number that if anything that you need, just call this number and we will arrange people to help you, especially if you have a baby. So, stuff like that. I was lucky that there’s nothing too hard for me to handle. So, mostly, I handled it myself. I don’t really call that number for help, or anything like that. But, you know, for the new immigrants they really need that support. I mean, sometimes, when they come from the other side of the world, they come here, and they know nothing. So, if we have their own . . . Most of them, they don’t speak English. Right? So, we need that community of people who are here before them. So, as I said, we have a list and a phone number for them to be handy, just in case if they need help. If there’s more people willing to help, that’s better for more people coming. These days, it seems like everybody’s so busy and they’re not really willing to help like people thirty years ago. I can see the love is kind of dried out, year over year. I told you that the bus driver left his seat to help my baby. I don’t see that very often. So, I know there’s still a lot of love from this country. Of course, right? A lot of people open their heart to bring new immigrants to their house to support them. Things like that but, they’ve got lots of scares. Lots of bad people are taking advantage. So, it makes people think twice when they help.

SHEILA  
It’s unfortunate.

TAM  
But, you know, if we think that way then we will not provide the support to the people who need it. So, we have to change it to think a little more positive to help people.

SHEILA  
What other changes have you seen over the years? Have you seen the Vietnamese community, for example, grow? What changes have you seen?

TAM  
You know, I just came from California over the weekend to attend Lunar New Year. I can’t imagine how big the Vietnamese community is in the United States, in California. In Vancouver here, we have a lot of Vietnamese are very successful. The Vietnamese community are . . . I don’t want to compare with other communities but I can see that they work hard, and they . . . A lot of people are very successful.

SHEILA  
Well, that’s wonderful to hear.

TAM  
Yeah. You know, like last year when I did the fundraising for Vietnam, last year we raised $250,000.

SHEILA

Generous as well as successful.

TAM  
Yeah. They’re very success and they’re willing to give back to support for the good. I’m very proud of that, but there’s a lot of bad people, too. There’s lots of bad apples out there taking advantage of the government subsidies. They take advantage of many things, but there’s a lot of people that are really good. They work hard. Very successful.

SHEILA  
That’s wonderful to hear. About change over time, when you came to Canada you knew very little about Canada. How has your view of Canada changed over time as you have learned much more and become Canadian?

TAM  
You know, when I came to Canada I didn’t know much, to be honest. So, everyday we learned more and more. It’s not much changed, though. Our principles are still there. It’s a loving country. The people here they . . . Even the new immigrants, they come here, they learn the way the Canadians are, and they change their mentality. They change the way they’re living, and they open their heart. It’s still going. It’s not just, you know . . . but one thing that I noticed is that the majority of the people are more and more from overseas than a real Canadian. I remember one time, I talked to one of my friends and they said – that was around in the middle of ‘90, ‘95, ‘96 – he e said, “You’ll see, in another twenty-five years, you’ll see this country change a lot. The migration will be minority,” but it’s not twenty-five years. It’s only five years after that [laughs]. You know, I hope that the people who come in here, they learn from the people here, right, and they will change the way they live, they will change the way they think, right, so they will make the country as great as thirty years ago.

SHEILA

Oh, well, that’s good. It’s nice to hear. What future do you see for yourself, and your son, and family?

TAM

You know, myself, I’m going to be retired soon. I want to retire in the next couple years. In the meantime, I don’t work much. Most of the work that I used to do, my son is the one to do it. My son took over. But my son, for my son’s future, I want him to do whatever he loves to do, but I want him to raise his kids the way that I raised him. Right? So, you give back. That’s the thing. When you give back, you feel, like, so happy. You feel grateful. I have two grandkids. A boy and a girl. They’re twins. Yeah. They’re so beautiful. That’s what I want him to do, is to raise his kids the way that I raised him.

SHEILA

That’s lovely. That’s lovely. Is there anything you would like to add to this interview that you haven’t been asked?

TAM

Well, you know, people ask me that “Hey, why do you give out too much instead of you saving for your grandkids?” I told them, and I said, “If you want to give them the money, that’s not as good as you give them an education.” Right? To train them how to use the money wisely, instead of give them a lot of money. So, if we give the money away, we’re going to receive more in return. That’s what, you can go on vacation, then good for you. I don’t need that. I came from the scratch. Right? Right now if I go to Safeway I buy a little bread. That’s good for my lunch. I don’t need to go to have an expensive meal. I don’t need that. The money, for me, I cannot, you know, I don’t want to waste so much money because of that. A lot of people need a lot.

SHEILA

Thank you so much for coming and doing this oral history with us. We really appreciate it and have learned a lot.

TAM  
You’re very welcome. It’s my pleasure.

SHEILA  
Thank you.

END OF TAPE PART ONE OF ONE

[00:29:05]

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)