Denver: VAHF completes interviews for oral histories project, gathers 514 life stories of Vietnamese Americans across U.S.

Since May 2010, the Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation (VAHF) has completed interviews for the 500 Oral Histories Project in six cities across the United States: San Jose, CA; Falls Church, VA; Westminster, CA; Houston, TX; New Orleans, LA; and Denver, CO. The project’s interview phase was funded by the Union of North American Vietnamese Student Associations (uNAVSA), which raised nearly $60,000 for the project. VAHF aims to display its moving exhibition ‘The Legacies of Vietnamese America’ and raise funds for the remaining phases, including transcription and translation of the 514 oral histories and realisation of ‘Viet’s Story’, a documentary, by late 2012. This collection is to serve as a primary source for research and teaching of Vietnamese American history and culture.

Below are selected photos of VAHF’s activities in Denver, Colorado, between July 20 to 31, 2011 as volunteers concluded the interview phase of the project.
Top, the exterior of the Denver International Airport building designed to reflect Denver’s many prized mountain peaks (Internet photo). Below, VAHF volunteers await their ride, from left, Diem Huong Pham, Sacramento, CA; Linh Thi Nguyen and Quynh Hoan Ta, Houston, TX; Trieu Giang Nancy Bui and Hoai Pham, Austin, TX; and Trung Duong Thai Nguyen, Portland, OR. (Photos by Trung Duong, 07/2011)

Interviews with Vietnamese in Denver

Hosted by the Rev. Msgr. Peter Quang Nguyen of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church, VAHF volunteers are preparing documents, above left, and decorating the parish school’s hallway, above right, for the upcoming interviews at the parish at 2200 S Logan St., Denver.

Above left, volunteers take a moment off from their preparations for the interviews to rehearse for the fund-raising show planned for Sunday July 24; meanwhile in the foreground, left corner, VAHF president Trieu Giang Nancy Bui works on interview schedules. Center and right, young VAHF members check and prepare their film equipment.

After the communist takeover of South Vietnam in 1975, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese risked their lives in search of freedom. Many thousands more, who had fought or worked for the former South Vietnamese government and were imprisoned for years in forced-labor camps, later resettled in America. There are now more than 2 million Vietnamese Americans. The 500 Oral Histories Project’s goal is to collect their life stories as primary sources to create an archive of the history of Vietnamese American immigrants – their family history, childhood and experience during the various wars in Vietnam, their life after 1975, their search for freedom and resettlement in America. The collection will be available for academic research and teaching on the Vietnamese American experience. Please scroll down to the end of this report for more information.
Above left, the Rev. Msgr. Peter Quang Nguyen welcomes VAHF volunteers, from left, Linh Thi Nguyen, Nancy Bui, Diem Huong Pham, Quynh Hoan Ta, My Ngoc Nguyen and singer Ngoc Long Tran of Austin, TX, who came to help with the fundraising show. A majority of the volunteers, ages from the late 50s to 70, have retired and most have become grandparents. Above right, the Buddhist Rev. Thich Tri Vien, sitting, shares a snapshot with VAHF volunteers after giving his oral history.

Some of the more than 50 people who have come to share their life stories for the 500 Oral Histories Project. Above left, Dong Suong Nguyen and her husband Le Doan before their interview, conducted by volunteer Quynh Hoan Ta, and recorded by Roger Le, VAHF Web site manager. Dong Suong is Amerasian, or “Con Lai,” and endured harsh discrimination in Vietnam, as did thousands of other Con Lai. She emigrated with her husband in 1990 via the U.S. Homecoming Program for Amerasian Children – those fathered by Americans while stationed in South Vietnam before 1975 -- and both have become successful entrepreneurs. Center, Me Khue Dang, sitting, and her two grandchildren before the interview with My Ngoc Nguyen, to be recorded by Nam An Hoang, the Canada-based project director. Above right, VAHF member Paul Khang Nguyen interviews Dr. Thang Dinh Nguyen of the Washington, D.C.-based Boat People SOS, a member of the Coalition to Abolish Modern-day Slavery in Asia, as Hoai Pham checks the image on the camera screen.
Above left, VAHF volunteers share a snapshot with interviewees Kieu Loan Tran, standing second from left, and Hoan Nguyen, sitting left. These two women have prepared and brought delicious Vietnamese food, center, so volunteers would not have to go out during their one-hour lunch break. Above right, volunteers share a meal with interviewee Hieu Van Le, who was imprisoned 25 years by the Vietnamese communist government for having participated in “counterrevolutionary” activities after the 1975 Communist takeover, a crime considered more serious than having fought against the Communists during the Vietnam War.

During our Denver tour, several community members invited us home for dinner so their families and friends could hear more about the project.

**Exhibition of ‘The Legacies of Vietnamese America’**  
& Fundraising Cultural Show

On Sunday August 24, VAHF volunteers conduct interviews in the morning and spend the remainder of the day working on the exhibition, “The Legacies of Vietnamese America.” Above left, volunteers put up the boards for the exhibition. Right, the guests join in the ribbon cutting ceremony.

The exhibition includes a main panel showcasing selected interviewees with their photos and quotes from their oral histories, and two smaller ones displaying selected photos from previous interviews on one and, on another, the listing of various sponsors and organizations that have assisted and/or partnered with VAHF’s 500 Oral Histories Project. The panels, designed by the The Good Art Company of Austin, can be folded and packaged in pouches for easy moving. Alongside the panels depicting the ongoing 500 Oral Histories Project, there are also boards displaying selected documents from other VAHF collections, such as the Friends of Political Prisoners Association Collection, among other themes.
Volunteer My Ngoc Nguyen poses by the main exhibition panel featuring 18 Vietnamese immigrants of diverse social backgrounds and ages, each carrying with him/her an unforgettable, some incredibly tragic, story of their journey to freedom, making the Vietnamese American experience unique.

Along with the exhibition, a cultural show also takes place. Above left, VAHF president Nancy Bui thanks the Vietnamese community in Denver for the support and hospitality toward VAHF members and volunteers and the 500 Oral Histories project. Center, the Rev. Msgr. Quang Nguyen welcomes guests and speaks of the importance of such an archive for younger generations. Above right, VAHF adviser Minh Tho Khuc from Virginia joins in the celebration. Mrs. Khuc was president of the Friends of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association, which for 30 years since the late 1970s has been lobbying the U.S. government and Congress to help release and resettle more than 10,000 former political prisoners and their families in America. The FVPPA also helped with the resettlement of more than 70,000 Amerasians in their fatherland.
Above left, the Rev. Thich Tri Vien addresses the audience. Center, volunteer Quynh Hoan Ta, also a singer specializing in traditional Vietnamese music, in traditional outfits, sings an excerpt from the *ca trù*, also known as *hát ả đào*, “Hồ Hồ Tuyết Tuyết.” Despite her illness – already scheduled for a heart valve-replacement surgery in early September – Quynh Hoan nevertheless joined the VAHF delegation for the Denver tour. Her performance number turns out to be one of the best thanks to its traditionally cultural theme. May she have a successful surgery and a speedy recovery. Right, Ngoc Minh Su, second from left, offers to buy the two paintings donated by artist painter Luyen Phuoc Duong of Houston, TX, for auction.

While in Denver, VAHF president Nancy Bui and Diem Huong Pham, a radio reporter who has volunteered for her third tour with the project, appear on two radio talk shows at Radio Vietnamese Overseas – Denver. Toward the end of the Denver assignment, VAHF members and volunteers meet with Fountain Valley, CA-based Viet Face TV’s correspondent Trong Thang Ngo for a report on the project. Above left, Nancy Bui talks about the oral histories project; center, Diem Huong Pham shows photos of some of the individuals interviewed for the project; and right, interviewee-turned-VAHF-member Hoang Nguyen tells of his enthusiastic support for the project; he couldn’t resist signing on to take part in the project’s next phases, transcribing and translating the oral history files.
Catholic Deacon Phi Hung Dang and his wife Duc Quy Ho, above left at left corner, are wonderful hosts to VAHF volunteers and members during their stay in Denver. Above right, the VAHF delegation share a farewell snapshot with Father Quang Nguyen in the courtyard of the Our Lady of Lourdes parish. These hosts have filled VAHF delagation members with warmth, love and wisdom, making our stay in Denver even more meaningful and memorable.

‘The Legacies of Vietnamese America’
at uNAVSA’s 8th Conference in Downtown Denver

On July 29, VAHF showcases its exhibition “The Legacies of Vietnamese America” at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Downtown Denver where uNAVSA is holding its 8th annual conference. This year’s conference theme is, coincidentally, “The Blueprint of Our Legacy.” Last year, in a campaign called “Chapter of Us – Vietnamese American History: Told by the Old, Preserved by the Young,” union members from 119 universities across the United States and Canada raised nearly $60,000 for the 500 Oral Histories Project, enabling VAHF to complete the interview phase within just a little more than a year. Above, the exhibition is displayed at the Hyatt Regency Denver.
Above left, volunteer Diem Huong Pham inspects excerpt documents from the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Collection now housed at the Vietnam Center, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX. Above right, the VAHF delegation members, sitting, share a snapshot with young VAHF/uNAVSA members, from left, Hoai Pham, camera technician, Paul Khang Nguyen, uNAVSA liaison officer, Le Nguyen, director of the 500 OH Project, and Roger Le, VAHF information technology manager.

VAHF members and volunteers join uNAVSA members for an evening gathering. Above left, Paul Khang Nguyen, fifth from left, presents the project to the 500 uNAVSA members who helped raise funds for the just completed most important phase – the collection of the oral histories. Foundation president Nancy Bui also expresses her appreciation for the union’s enthusiastic support without which, she says, it would have taken a decade to accomplish VAHF’s task. Not only that, VAHF has exceeded the goal with 514 oral histories, Nancy Bui declares to an eruption of applause from the youthful audience.

Above left, a folder with 75 transcripts from the 514 oral histories. Right, the cover of the uNAVSA conference program book, with the theme “The Blueprint of Our Legacy.”

A glance at VAHF activities

The 500 Oral Histories Project began in 2008 at the same time with the course on Vietnamese American culture and history sponsored by the Asian American Studies Center at the University of TX in Austin. This course is now a requirement for students pursuing a bachelor’s degree in this field. A recorded oral history of a Vietnamese immigrant must be completed as a final for this class, which will be added to the 500 Oral Histories Project, a joint effort between the center and the Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation.

In addition to the oral histories, VAHF is also working on a documentary, “Viet’s Story,” to introduce to the public one of the important chapter of American history; Chapter of the Vietnamese American. For your reference, an 11-minute introductory video about the oral histories project is available at http://www.viddler.com/explore/VAHF/videos/1/.
It is estimated that the entire project will cost more than $200,000. In past years, VAHF has conducted fundraising with modest results. However, in its last summer’s conference the Union of North American Vietnamese Student Associations chose the project for its annual fundraising campaign, “Chapter of Us – Vietnamese American History: Told by the Old, Preserved by the Young,” providing nearly $60,000 to finance the interviews conducted across the United States.

VAHF has also received pledges from community members to raise funds for the completion of the project, including transcribing, translating, editing and archiving the oral histories.

The 500 Oral Histories Project is the foundation’s third collection since its formation in 2004. The first collection consists of documents and photos of the 1975 evacuation of refugees from South Vietnam to Guam, donated by the government and University of Guam and the U.S. military bases in Guam in 2006. The Families and Friends of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association Collection constitutes the second collection, completed in 2008 in cooperation with the Vietnam Center at University TX Tech in Lubbock, TX, available online at http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/vahp/fvppa.htm.

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