

Interview with Dr. Patrick Lam

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Interview # 1: August 14, 2014

Cunningham: Edward Cunningham

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Cunningham: I’m interviewing Patrick Lam. This is August 14, 2014. I’m going to ask Patrick some questions and get his background for the oral history project of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Let’s start off with your date of birth and where you were born.

Lam: Yes, January 20, 1972, I was born in Saigon, Vietnam.

Cunningham: Were you born in a hospital?

Lam: Yes.

Cunningham: Your mother’s name was?

Lam: Sam Thi Phan

Cunningham: Your father?

Lam: Thai Van Bui.

Cunningham: Can you spell those for us?



Dr. Patrick Lam

Lam: Yes. Sam Thi Phan is spelled S-a-m T-h-i, last name Phan, P-h-a-n. My dad's name is Thai, T-h-a-i, middle name V-a-n, last name, B-u-i. It's a little bit different from my last name. When I came to the States, I lost some paperwork and all that. So I went with my aunt and uncle, and I took on their adopted last name, Lam.

Cunningham: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Lam: I have one sister and two brothers.

Cunningham: Where do they reside now?

Lam: They [his sister and her family] live up north, Gurnee, Illinois. My other brother lives in Wisconsin, and another one lives up by Hoffman Estates, Illinois.

Cunningham: Do they have children?

Lam: Yes. They each have kids of their own.

Cunningham: And your mother, where does she live?

Lam: My mom lives with my youngest brother.

Cunningham: That's here in the United States?

Lam: Yes, he lives up in Hoffman Estates.

Cunningham: You spent your first six or seven years in South Vietnam?

Lam: Yes. I was there until toward 1979.

Cunningham: When you there, in South Vietnam, I guess it was North Vietnam or Vietnam?

Lam: It was South Vietnam; it was Saigon.

Cunningham: Did you live in the city, or did you live outside the city?

Lam: I lived outside the city, sort of like a country suburb, but more, you know, very, very country-like.

Cunningham: Did you have an extended family there?

Lam: Yes, I lived with my great-grandfather, my grandfather and my mom and two siblings.

Cunningham: And your father was in the military service for South Vietnam?

Lam: Yes, he passed away in 1974.

Cunningham: This was because of a roadside bomb?

Lam: Bomb, yes. He was on his way back. He normally traveled with the U.S. convoy; he was an interpreter. He was in the military, but he did a lot of interpretation for the embassy. He took a leave of absence to go home to see my mom, who was in labor at the time. So, this time he was traveling by himself. That's when the Viet Cong took him out.

Cunningham: Then your mom and aunts decided that they would like to leave Vietnam?

Lam: Yes. After the fall of Saigon and South Vietnam to the Communists—

Cunningham: That was in 1975?

Lam: Yes. There was no life back there. There was no future for any of us.

Cunningham: What do you mean by that?

Lam: The government took over everything, everything that you had, possessions that you had. They pretty much controlled every aspect of your life, your financial aspect, things that you can say and can do; they controlled it all.

Cunningham: In South Vietnam, did you have any discrimination problems with the North Vietnamese?

Lam: There was no discrimination. I mean, they took over; however, there was a lot of anger toward the government, the North taking over. We were a free country, South Vietnam. Then to convert that into Communism, that was very hard. So, a lot of people either committed suicide or tried to flee the country. That's how that whole concept of boat people started to come around, towards 1979.

Cunningham: Was it difficult for them to seek employment?

Lam: Yes. Everything was pretty much controlled by the Communists that took over. Ho Chi Minh was, at that time, the leader of North Vietnam. So, there was no... You couldn't get jobs unless you knew somebody. There was a lot of corruption. Under that ideal, the communism concept, it doesn't work.

Cunningham: So now, your mother and your aunts decided that maybe you should leave Vietnam?

Lam: Yes, everybody was looking for a way out of that new world that they were forced to live under. By boats was the only way to get out. If you were lucky, before the end of the war, before America pulled out, you were able to go with some Americans to the United States. But if you're there, you're under Communism. I believe it started probably early 1979, people were fleeing the country. They were paying boat captains—these shrimp boats and other boats,

a lot of it wooden boats—pay the captains, and then they would sneak out of Saigon in the middle of the night.

Cunningham: And how did the Vietnam authorities feel about people leaving?

Lam: Oh, they did not like it. They would either shoot you down, sink you, and if you were to get back on shore, you go to boot camp. You'll get arrested basically, go to prison.

Cunningham: So, you actually had to sneak out without the authorities knowing it?

Lam: Correct. That's how I got my last name changed from Bui to Lam. I had to go under a different name, a different last name. Then my mom had to stay behind. She was the oldest. She stayed behind with my other siblings, to take care of my grandparents.

Cunningham: Your mom stayed behind. Did some of the children stay with her?

Lam: Yes, yeah. My oldest brother, my younger sister and younger brother stayed. She was the oldest one in her family, the siblings. All the other aunts and uncles took off.

Cunningham: You didn't leave with your sisters, then?

Lam: I was the only one who left. [phone rings] Sorry about that.

Cunningham: Do you recall... You're seven about this time?

Lam: Yes.

Cunningham: So, you really don't have much recollection of it?

Lam: Oh, I remember a lot of it in my head.

Cunningham: Can you tell me what you recall about that?

Lam: Yes, I remember my mom, the night before I went. I live in the countryside, so I take a trip from the country to Saigon, way south. That's where the boat was at, so I stayed at my grandparent's house. I remember my mom saying goodbye to me. She's telling me, "I'll see you soon. Just you're going on a trip with your aunts and uncle. Behave and we'll see each other again." I didn't know where I was going. I was sad because I was leaving her.

But what really got me was when they took me to... In the middle of the night, it was raining, and we all snuck to this boat, to this harbor. We slowly got onto the boat. That's when I realized that it was going to be a trip. I said "Bye" to her, and I was in tears. Then a lot of people were also there, saying goodbye to each other, because you don't know if you're going to

make it or not. It's pretty much a toss-up, fifty-fifty; either you survive the trip, or you don't.

Cunningham: So, your aunts went with you. How many aunts were there?

Lam: Let me see, I have... There were about at least... My mom has eight siblings. Two of my uncles already left the country. One ended up in France. The other one went ahead of us. There were six total aunts and their husbands, my uncle-in-laws, and then other cousins of mine. We all went together.

Cunningham: We hear about this extended family; how were the families? They stuck together pretty much?

Lam: Yes. A lot of us, we inherited our grandparents' and ancestors' property. There wasn't much to buy back then. So, if your parents owned this home, you basically lived with them. Then your grandparents and everything, and then that's passed down from generation to generation. So, in the countryside, I stayed at my great-grandparent's home. Then we just continued to live there.

Cunningham: The family was pretty close?

Lam: Yes, yes.

Cunningham: Now, you got on this boat. What kind of boat was it?

Lam: As far as I know, it was a small... It was a wooden boat. It wasn't a small fishing boat, but it was a boat that approximately, probably, around 100 people were there. There were women, children; a lot of families were there.

Cunningham: Both adults and kids?

Lam: Yes, yes.

Cunningham: Then, did you have any idea where you were going, or what was happening?

Lam: I, myself, I did not know where I was going. I just got onboard, and I came along. I was sad that I was leaving, but, you know... I remember sitting there; I remember a lot a people throwing up when we passed, just a lot of its images. But what I remember the most was during the journey, when we're at sea, we ran into a lot of obstacles that nearly ended our journey.

Cunningham: Can you tell me about the trip? About how long did it last?

Lam: I don't know at the time, but I remember my aunt and uncle telling me that we were lost at sea for about a week and half to two weeks. When we left the harbor in Saigon, they only brought enough water—thinking the trip would take probably no more than a week—brought enough water and dry crackers, just crackers for us to eat. We almost ran out of that. After about a week and a

half, we got lucky, ran into an oil rig. We ran into an oil rig, and then some of us jumped off our boat to be rescued.

Cunningham: Had you run out of food and water at that time?

Lam: They still had some. When we ran into an oil rig—it was an American oil rig—and my aunts and uncle and a lot of other people decided to jump over, to be rescued.

Cunningham: And why was that?

Lam: Because the oil rig could not get involved with taking the boat along, unless it's an emergency rescue. The captain of that boat didn't want to sink his boat; he decided to go further. So, about all of my aunts and uncles and my cousins and about, I would say about five other people that we didn't know, who knew how to swim, jumped into the ocean.

I didn't know how to swim; my cousin didn't know how to swim; my aunts didn't know how to swim, but my grandmother bought us a flotation device, inflatable flotation device, so that helped us save our lives. We jumped off the boat, and the oil rig official waited for our boat, the captain, to go away, out of sight. Then they lowered a crane to rescue us up.

Cunningham: Then you went to oil rig. What did you do on the oil rig?

Lam: When we got on there, it was just so... a lot of emotions. We were so happy; we were rescued. I saw everybody was crying. They gave us apple, a basket of apple to eat and a boiled egg. It was so delicious; I've never had an apple in my whole life. Being hungry at sea, had nothing to eat for over a week, I was munching on this apple and savor every bite of it. Boiled egg, that too, but we couldn't eat... The stomach didn't allow us to eat the boiled egg; it was just... So, we had a blanket that covered us up.

That night, the captain of that oil rig pointed down to the water, showing a lot of swordfish, big, big swordfish. Because the oil rig had a little flame that shoots out at night, to test the oil, I guess, that attracted a lot of fish. They said, if they didn't spray this white chemical out for us before we jumped into the water, we would have been eaten alive, because this is like in the middle of an ocean, big, yeah. So, we saw that like wow. The next morning, they put us on another ship. This is a military ship; this was a Malaysian military ship.

Cunningham: How did they contact them; do you know?

Lam: I don't know. I'm sure they called them up; they have official call. They just rescued us, but they didn't take us to America. They put us... Whoever, the group that we were in, they put us on this military ship, and that ship took us

to another boat that they rescued that was attacked by pirates. Half of the people on that boat were gone.

Cunningham: Were killed?

Lam: Were killed, raped, the women were gone. The only people left were men. [They] had blisters under their feet, because they were forced to stand above, while the women and children were raped and killed down below. So, there were only men left. They put our group on that boat, and then that military ship dragged our boat to that island, Kuku.

Cunningham: Kuku?

Lam: Yes. We were the first boat to arrive there.

Cunningham: How long were you at sea this whole period of time?

Lam: You know, I know my aunt and uncle said about a week and half before we hit the oil rig, and it took us another day or so to transfer from the military ship to a boat and then to that Kuku Island. So, within two weeks' timeframe.

Cunningham: You said that the last boat you got on had been attacked by pirates. Was that a risk that boat people ran?

Lam: Yes. A lot of that, because pirates knew that we took valuable things with us to trade with other countries. You couldn't take currency, because it is no value. But they took a lot of fancy watches, Rolex, jewelry, hidden jewelry, gold and diamonds, things of that nature. So that's what they go after.

Cunningham: Did you have any recollection of this other boat? Was it a wooden boat?

Lam: Just the same as like ours, same size. It's like a little tour boat. You go to Chicago; you see a little tour boat that has the upper deck and below. I remember sleeping below the deck before we transfer over, before we got rescued by the oil rig. A lot of people were throwing up left and right. It just smells horrible below, so you go up and then get some fresh air.

Our boat actually was chased by pirates, but we outran them. I remember being on the bottom when all the men were on top. This is on the original boat. The pirates were superstitious; they believed that if they chase and you fight back, you chant like a war cry, they'll stop chasing you. I remember being down there, and all the men were up there screaming and yelling, and all the women were hiding below. They gave us a chase. I don't know how long it was, but after a while, the chase gave up, and we outmaneuvered or outran the pirates.

Cunningham: Do you know what ever happened to the original boat?

Lam: Yes. When we got on the island, weeks later, we heard that some boats were found. A lot of people were already dead; they ran out of food. There were stories of cannibalism. So, half of the group that remain on that boat died. And then where they ended up, we don't remember; we don't know. But we're glad that we jumped off, otherwise we would have been victims too.

Cunningham: Why were the others hesitant to jump off, to go to the oil rig?

Lam: Because they were afraid. They didn't know. They rather be on the boat than in the water. A lot of them didn't have flotation devices. So, those who jumped off were... We jumped off as kids, because we had flotation device from our grandparents, who bought it. She told us she had a dream days before we took off, sneaked out, that she was supposed to get flotation device. So, she went ahead, and she bought. She had money, because she hid the money.

When the Communists took over, they came into your home, and they would take jewelry; they'd take all possessions, valuables that belonged to you. My grandmother hid them in the walls and underground, so she had money to buy us tickets to go on these boats.

Cunningham: Do you have idea how much it cost?

Lam: Oh gosh, that I don't know.

Cunningham: Then you come up to this island, Kuku.

Lam: Kuku, yes.

Cunningham: You were the first boat there.

Lam: We were the first one there.

Cunningham: Who told you to go to Kuku?

Lam: The military, the Malaysian ship, drag us and put us on that island. They drag us; they couldn't come close, but they drag us. And when we got near that island, they said just continue that path. When we got there, I remember all of it. I remember it was getting dark, and I remember getting into the water. It wasn't deep for the adults, but it was deep for me. So, they would slowly toss us off the boat and then put us on their shoulder and took us on beach. I remember it was a brand new beach, all white. There was nobody on that beach.

Cunningham: Any homes or houses or any buildings on the beach?

Lam: Nothing on the beach. It was a small island.

Cunningham: You got off on the beach, and there you were. What did you do after that?

Lam: When we got there, I remember sitting together. Whatever belongings, clothing we had, we sat together in groups on the beach and put things on top. We had some plastic sheets inside, put up a shelter for overnight. I remember the next day, the adults of the group that made it there kind of divided up the tasks, sort of like a survivor thing, you know. This group does this; this group does that. So, people were going up there chopping up trees and branches to build huts on the beach.

It started from the beach; we started building huts there, toward the bottom, to the base of the mountains. The beach was divided in plots, depending on the size of your family. So, you'd get this; if you had a bigger family, they'll divide it and have two plots. Then you build, and you live kind of just right next to each other. You could see your next door neighbor, because these are just branches and sticks that goes into the sand. They built huts around that. Just to live off the sand, you built kind of a base, and then you can sleep on these branches.

Cunningham: What did you do for food?

Lam: I don't know how the communications between the locals were, but somehow the locals came by. When we first came, we had to get fish. There were animals on the island; there were lizards. Some of us had to catch a lizard and eat that. There were a lot of little fish that's on the island. We even caught a stingray. It wasn't big, but it was enough to feed the group. We would eat whatever we could until the locals came.

So, the local Indonesian... That I don't know how long, but I imagine probably within days, the local Indonesian came. Then people were able to barter with jewelry, whatever valuables they had for the local currency. And then they started buying tools, things like that. They even bought a fishing boat, a small one.

One of our refugees became an official fisherman for the island. He would go out in the morning, catch fish, come back in and trade it with us. Those of us who couldn't go out there, we started doing things here, building things and trading with him. Soon we had a bakery that was fresh made bread. Our people went island hopping to buy resources, to buy flour and rice and things like that on the island.

Cunningham: How did they have the money to do that?

Lam: It was from jewelry, from the possessions that they took with them. Like my aunt and uncle, they would have Rolex watches. They would have gold hidden in their pocket or in their pants, somewhere, [so] they were able to do that.

Cunningham: They were trading on whatever they got out of Vietnam?

Lam: Yes, yes.

Cunningham: When you say Rolexes, I look at them as pretty expensive watches.

Lam: Yes.

Cunningham: How could they afford that?

Lam: That's why, only people that had money that [had been] hidden away were able to pay for these trips to go. If you were poor, you would not be able to, because you would have to pay the captain to give you a spot on that boat, because the captain of the boat, he took a risk. He's taking a risk leaving the country. He's got his boat there, and I'm sure he's got ways of paying people to get out of there. So, it's all about money, just like the Titanic. You had money; you were able to pay yourself onboard. If you didn't have money, then you're pretty much out of luck.

Cunningham: How many people were on the first boat?

Lam: The original boat we were on?

Cunningham: Yeah.

Lam: As far as I can remember, my aunt and uncle said was anywhere between eighty to 100 people on the boat. So, we were packed pretty close, pretty tight.

Cunningham: The people who jumped into the water for the oil rig, how many were there?

Lam: It was just my aunts and uncle and cousins, them and maybe...I believe about five other people that we didn't know, at that time.

Cunningham: So very few.

Lam: Very few that were able to swim without the flotation device. The rest had to stay; they didn't have a choice.

Cunningham: So that boat went on its way, and it was later captured by—

Lam: We don't know what happened. We heard that it ran out of food. A lot of people died, because they starved to death. They were very unfortunate ending for them.

Cunningham: So, it was really a fortunate decision that you and your family made.

Lam: Yes. My uncle, he was a very well-educated man, so he could speak English. He was talking with the oil rig captain, and that captain of the oil rig says, "We could not rescue you unless it's a rescue mission. We can't just take you on board." He told the captain of our boat to puncture the boat. But we believe

that the captain had jewelry hidden in it, so he didn't want to puncture the boat.

A lot of stories you hear where they get lost, because they don't have a good compass to guide them. So, they get lost. That's another reason why they die, because they get lost, and they're at sea; they run out of food. Some got lucky, go straight to where they wanted to go.

Cunningham: Then the second boat you were on, not the Malaysian one, but the second one?

Lam: The boat that they put us on?

Cunningham: Yeah. Was that about the same size?

Lam: Yes, sir. It was the same size.

Cunningham: How many people were on that?

Lam: I don't know, but there were maybe about no more than twenty, when we hopped. Twenty of them were mostly men. There were tortured and had blisters on their feet, telling the story [of] how they got there.

Cunningham: And Kuku, I think you originally told me that it was sort of a fun time?

Lam: It was. For me it was. I think, once we were there, it was like...I remember growing up in America, watching Robinson Crusoe on the island. For me, it was fun because I lived on a farm. I was very self-sufficient. I didn't have my dad, so I grew up and learned how to fend for myself. So, I clicked in right away. I went fishing; I caught bluefish along the shore and learned how to clean them and cook them. It was just a fun time for me, go around the island, look at streams up in the mountains. There were monkeys there, too, lizards and all that. We got to see just the wilderness basically.

Cunningham: For water, were there streams coming down, fresh water?

Lam: Yes, fresh water. One of my other uncle-in-law...One was very fluent in English; the other one was an engineer. He was a civil engineer. He married to my aunt who's my second aunt. He's the one that has the last name that I have now. I went with him. He adopted me. But he's a civil engineer. Actually, they created a system, a water system, from mountain, using bamboo and just wood to transfer the fresh water down to the beach for us to use.

Cunningham: Did he split the bamboo up and make a little trough?

Lam: Yeah and chop trees up and then made a pathway and guide the water in and just an irrigation system. They were able to get it down to the beach.

Cunningham: Did other people come to the island?

Lam: Oh, a lot, a lot, yeah. I don't know how long we were there until more boats came, but I can't imagine more than a month, probably weeks. More boats came, and at the end, when we left there, there were about at least 600 or 700 people on that island. It was pretty packed.

Cunningham: When you got there, the maximum, you were about sixty people or so?

Lam: Probably less, because it was just our group and then the fifteen, twenty people that survived that other boat. So, we were a very small group. And then soon news traveled that, hey, there's this island; there's people there; there's refugees. So, more boats came.

They had horrible stories of cannibalism, because people starve, and they have nothing to eat, so they ate those who died, instead of throwing them overboard. But we heard stories like that. We were very fortunate that it didn't happen to our group.

Cunningham: Did the Indonesian authorities check on you?

Lam: Yes, after we got acclimated with the island, the locals, they had authorities come by, check on us. Soon we built a helicopter landing pad for organizations to come in to drop off canned food for us, also, because we were just eating all fish, on the island. So, there were canned food that dropped off, sardines, canned food, and there were Spam. Spam was my favorite canned food. I love Spam, because after eating fish for so long, it was, "Ugh." So, when Spam came, it was like a big, big thing. It was like filet mignon for us with Spam.

[An] organization—I don't know which organization, is it the United Nation or the Red Cross—they brought medication on board, helping us, and they started processing paperwork for sponsorship throughout the world. People ended up going to Canada; others—a lot—wanted to go to the U.S., of course. Those were the main ones.

Cunningham: Somehow, from there you went to Singapore. Is that right? How did you get authority from someone to go Singapore?

Lam: Before we got to Singapore... I don't know how the whole process of paperwork, but there were a lot of people coming in, and they were doing paperwork for us. You had to wait for your turn. It was like a lottery. Every week they draw, and whatever family gets to go. There's a set of priorities they set.

Let's say, if you had someone in your group that was sick, they need to be evacuated or needed to be seen by a hospital, they have seniority. Elders get to go first. So, if you have an elder person in your group... If your grandparents are with you or your dad who's old, he gets to go; you get to go

with him. The healthy one stays behind and go last. Before we got to Singapore, they put us on another...it's like a cruise ship.

Cunningham: How did you get to Singapore?

Lam: By boat. But we had to go to another island to stay there for about a month or so, for the next stage.

Cunningham: Do you remember the name of that island?

Lam: Yes. I believe it's spelled G-a-l-a-n-g, Galang.¹ That's an island where you get to the next stage of your journey. And then you stay there until more paper gets processed. Then your family name gets called, and then you go; from there, we go to Singapore, again, another boat.

The trip gets shorter and shorter, because we stayed more than a month at Galang. From Galang we went to Singapore, and that was less than a week stay. And then from Singapore, you had to wait for another paperwork to process. Then you go from Singapore; that's when you go straight to the U.S. or to other countries, whoever sponsored you.

Cunningham: In order to get to the U.S., you had to have a sponsor.

Lam: Yes, sir.

Cunningham: This was part of the immigration policies.

Lam: Yes.

Cunningham: Who was your sponsor?

Lam: My sponsor was my uncle-in-law's dad. He's my aunt-in-laws'; her father-in-law went to the U.S. before the end of the war. He was with the military. He was a Navy SEAL [SEa Air and Land], Vietnam Navy SEAL.

Cunningham: But he was Vietnamese.

Lam: Yes. But he came to the U.S. way before the end of the war. So, he already had his life settled in the U.S. He was the one who sponsored all of us; all my aunts and uncles he sponsored.

Cunningham: What did he do in the U.S.?

Lam: He was an entrepreneur. He lives in Port Arthur, TX. He had fishing boats, so that was his business there, and he owns apartment buildings; he rented them

¹Galang Refugee Camp accommodated Indochinese refugees from 1979 to 1996 on Galang Island in the Riau Islands of Indonesia.

out. You have to have enough wealth, enough money, to sponsor. So, he was the one that sponsored us.

Cunningham: How do you sponsor someone? What did he have to do?

Lam: You have to show you have enough assets, enough money, enough to... If they [the person you've sponsored] get sick or something, you would be able to provide medical care. The rest of it, I don't know, probably more paperwork and so forth. But you have to have a U.S. citizen, of course. And then you have to be show that, again, you're able to afford sponsorship.

Cunningham: He was a U.S. citizen?

Lam: Yes. Port Arthur is where he lived.

Cunningham: You said he was a Navy SEAL at one time. Was he a Navy SEAL in the U.S. Navy or the Vietnamese?

Lam: I believe he was a Navy SEAL for the Vietnamese, the South side. But he left to come over.

Cunningham: Then he applied for citizenship and got it?

Lam: I don't know how he did that. But he was in the U.S., obviously, before we—

Cunningham: How many people did he sponsor, your whole family?

Lam: He sponsored all my aunts and uncles, including me and cousins. I had six aunts, five of them married—the youngest one was too young—then all the cousins. So, it was me and several other cousins, young ones. We all ended up in Port Arthur. He had apartments we could live in, so we didn't have to pay rent at the beginning. When we went to Port Arthur for the summer, before we got there, we had to go from Singapore to San Francisco.

Cunningham: What did you do in San Francisco?

Lam: That's where, I think, it's the entry point.

Cunningham: How did you get to San Francisco?

Lam: I believe it was airplane. And then from airplane to a small airplane to go to Port Arthur, Texas. But I remember when I got to San Francisco, it was cold. Because you live in the tropics, you know, San Francisco is like "Whoa!" So, they gave us a jacket, clothing from the church, donation, a lot of that.

A lot of sponsorship also came from the church. I think, anybody coming to the U.S. for political asylum of some sort, that's what it was for,

based on political asylum. I don't think, without the church, without the kind heart of the charity work, we would not be here today.

Cunningham: What were the requirements for political asylum? Do you know?

Lam: Well, being oppressed by the country. We fit the criteria at that time, the end of war, and people couldn't live there. I think, if America didn't get involved, I wouldn't be here. I know a lot of lives were lost also, so we are always grateful for Americans for sacrificing so many of their own lives, their own children, to help us.

Cunningham: How long were you in San Francisco?

Lam: I don't think it was long; it was very short. I remember when I got there; it still lingers in me. I got a plate of rice with barbeque chicken. I've never had barbeque, anything. We didn't know what barbeque was. But a whole drumstick of barbecued chicken. It was so good.

You know, back home, growing up under Communism, you have a whole family of thirty to forty people, you share one chicken. That chicken, everything's eaten on that chicken. You get the bones used for soup. Every piece of meat on that chicken, you mix it with salad, and you eat and spread it out for the whole family. But coming to America, you have a whole chicken leg to yourself. It was just so good. We were very blessed, very fortunate.

Cunningham: And then you went to Port Arthur? How long were you in Port Arthur?

Lam: I believe we stayed there for several months. Then my aunt and uncle decided to go to Chicago to relocate so that they can get an education, because Port Arthur is mostly fishing industry. There wasn't a lot of colleges. So Chicago... At that time, I think Chicago already had a good group of Vietnamese immigrants, who already arrived there before the end of the war, also.

My aunts and uncles were able to contact some Vietnamese locals in Chicago, from churches and so forth. They were willing to help us out, looking for a housing project and stuff. That's when my aunts and uncles decided to just go to Chicago to start a new life. They went to college while I was staying home.

Cunningham: How old were you about then?

Lam: I was between eight and nine, because the whole trip took about probably eight to nine months from Vietnam.

Cunningham: And then you started going to school?

Lam: I started going to school. I didn't know a word of English, and then I started picking up. As a kid, your mind is like a sponge; you absorb everything. I wish I could do that again. Yeah, I grew up here. I grew up mostly up in Chicago. We lived in this real rundown neighborhood, couldn't afford anything fancy until years later.

Cunningham: Rogers Park?

Lam: Even before Rogers Park too, yeah. Rogers Park is when I was high school already.

Cunningham: But as a young kid, you went to grade school in Chicago?

Lam: Yes.

Cunningham: What did you think of the grade schools in Chicago?

Lam: I was scared; I was scared to death. I didn't speak a word, and these kids were picking on me. I saw kids with white hair, American kids. Vietnam, it was all black and brown hair. You see kids with blue eyes and a different color and African American and all these kids. I didn't speak a word, so they were picking on me, a lot of bullying.

Cunningham: How did the teachers—

Lam: They very, very kind to me, very welcoming. They knew I was just coming over, after the war. There were some teachers that I wish I could stay in touch with. But they took very good care of me.

Cunningham: They helped you out?

Lam: Yeah, help you out with the language. We had to go ESL [English as a second language] second language courses and stuff. It was hard, but you try to do the best you can with what's given.

Cunningham: Gradually you started to speak English?

Lam: Yes.

Cunningham: Then you went to high school?

Lam: Went to high school. I went to different elementary school. I went to different high schools, because I moved, lived with different aunts and uncles. One aunt—

Cunningham: Why did you do that?

Lam: Because one aunt and uncle, they had more kids, so they move on. Then, after staying awhile with them, they wanted a little more flexibility. So, then I

move to another aunt and uncle, which has better school system. Then I just kind of bounced out from there and there. So, I went to three different elementary schools and three different high schools. I never made a lot of friends, because every year you kind of relocate. But every time I relocate, it's just a better school system.

Cunningham: Were there many Vietnam refugees in these schools?

Lam: Not a lot. There were some, not a lot back then.

Cunningham: That must have been pretty rough on you.

Lam: It was; it was. I remember my ninth grade at this high school; I believe it's Sullivan High School, Rogers Park. My uncle bought me a brand-new bike. I parked with a chain; I put a chain on it. On the way out, all these kids were jumping on my bike. They couldn't get it out. So instead of leaving it alone, they destroyed it, because they couldn't get it. So they were obsessed with it, jumping. They bent all the rim and stuff. All I could do was...I stood there and tried to ask for help, and there was nobody. They walked away laughing and stuff.

After that, that's when I told my aunt and uncle. They transferred me a different school. That's when I went to...From there I went to Palos Hill, went to Stagg High School, I believe, in Palos Hill, which is very nice, very affluent community, compared to Rogers Park. So, I joined sports. I played tennis; I loved tennis. I joined swimming a little bit. Then after a year there, then I went to William Fremd High School in Palatine, Illinois; that's with another aunt and uncle, my youngest one; that's my youngest one.

Cunningham: How come these aunts and uncles were so...Were they doing this with other people, too?

Lam: No. The reason is because...Let's say they got married, and then their husband happened to have a job in a different town. They had to go with their husband, so wherever I went...My youngest aunt, who didn't get married when we were on the island, she then got married. Her husband is an engineer, and they moved to Hoffman Estates. There's better school there, so I went from Palos Hill to Hoffman Estates.

Cunningham: I grew up in Hoffman Estates, which is...I think I mentioned that to you.

Lam: Yes.

Cunningham: Then you went to Harper College?

Lam: Harper College, yes.

Cunningham: How did you afford all this?

Lam: I borrow loan.

Cunningham: Did you aunts and uncles help you out?

Lam: They me helped a lot with providing a roof over my head, food and everything else. I borrow loan for tuition and books and so forth. Everybody needs somebody, and I had my aunts and uncles help me out all the way, until I sponsored my mom and my brothers and sister over.

Cunningham: Tell me about a change of name? Your original—

Lam: My original name was—this is going to be funny—My original name is P-h-a-t. It's pronounced "Fāt" in Vietnam, but in America, it's pronounced "Fāt," P-h-a-t. So, I had to change when I became a U.S. citizen, because I didn't want people calling me "Fat." The kids were making fun of my name when I was in school. A bunch of kids called me "Fat" all the time.

My last name's supposed to be Bui, B-u-i. But I went with my uncle-in-law; his last name is Lam. They had to adopt me under their last name, so I had the name Lam. If you put Phat Lam together, it doesn't sound very good (laughing). People were making fun of my names. So, I changed it. I dropped the "h," and when I became a U.S. citizen, I changed it just to Pat, Patrick. So, it became Patrick Lam.

Cunningham: When you were going through this process of changing your name, was that at the same time you were becoming a citizen?

Lam: Yes. Right before you became a U.S. citizen, the judge asks you, "Do you want to keep that name? Is there a certain name you want to change?" So, I was able to do that.

Cunningham: How old were you when you became a U.S. citizen?

Lam: Oh, wow, my goodness. It would have been in my teen years, because you have to be, I believe, at least five to ten years [in the country] to become a U.S. citizen. I was a green card.² I was an alien, a resident. I had a green card for years, and then you have to wait for your turn to be called. I believe it was ten years before I became a U.S. citizen.

Cunningham: So, you would have been eighteen, nineteen?

² Green card is a colloquial name for the identification card issued by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to permanent residents, who are legally allowed to live and work in the U.S. indefinitely.

Lam: Yes. I was in my high school years when I got that. So, you go there, and you go to the big room with all the immigration, laws.

Cunningham: Was that a big deal?

Lam: It was a dream come true, another stage in my life. I'm a U.S. citizen now. This is my home. I always try to teach my girls that Vietnam is my birthplace, but America is my home, and America is your home now. Without America, we wouldn't have a life today.

Cunningham: You've gone to Harper College.

Lam: Yes.

Cunningham: And you graduated.

Lam: Yes. I took a pre-med course. Then I graduated, and then I went to university to get my biology degree.

Cunningham: University of Kansas?

Lam: Yes.

Cunningham: How long were you there?

Lam: I was there for three years, with transition. I started out with an engineering [major] because all my uncles were engineers. I didn't like engineering; it's just computer and all that stuff. So, I decided to go into the health field. When I got into it, I liked it. I took pre-med, so it took me an extra year to finish, because you switch, and you have to take prerequisite courses.

Cunningham: How did you pay tuition there?

Lam: More loans. I worked in the summertime to make the money to pay for my rent and stuff.

Cunningham: What did you do in the summertime? What kind of jobs did do?

Lam: I worked, oh my gosh...My first job was at Leona's Pizza. Leona's Pizza's up in Chicago, and I think it was \$2.35 an hour. I was making pizza.

Cunningham: Hmm, you'll get rich off of that.

Lam: (laughs) Yes. My paycheck was like \$60 after a weeks' work or something. But I was making pizza. Then, when I went to high school, I was still just working, just getting part-time jobs during the summer to have some money to spend. And then, college, I had to borrow my loan, maximum, to slide.

Cunningham: Your aunts and uncles, they didn't charge you rent, I assume?

Lam: No, no, they were like family to me. A lot of my cousins, I'm closer to my cousins than my siblings, because I was away from them [his siblings] for ten years, until I saw them again.

There was a strange reunion, because, "So these are my brothers and sisters, hmm." I looked at my mom, it's like... We didn't have that connection for ten years. Throughout the ten years that I was in the U.S., before I sponsored them [his mother and siblings], my aunt and uncle made me write letters in Vietnam to them. That's how I'm able to still speak the language and write the language, not perfect, but I can still do it.

Cunningham: You said you sponsored your mom and your—

Lam: Yes. After I became U.S. citizen, with the help of my uncle, I sponsored my mom, my two siblings, and then my brother, my oldest brother, who also, a few years later, left on a boat. He survived his trip. He went to Germany, instead. Because I couldn't sponsor him at that time, he went to Germany. So he was there. He spoke fluent German, and then, because he's blood relative to me, I was able to sponsor him over, as well.

Cunningham: Over here?

Lam: Over here to the U.S.

Cunningham: He's in the U.S. now?

Lam: He came over under political asylum, because Germany at that time was still under, I guess, Communism, before the wall was knocked down. So, he came over.

Cunningham: When you say you sponsored your mom, that would be saying that she could live with you, or you could support her?

Lam: Yes, because you're allowed to do that if you're a relative, if your immediate relative. Same thing with people, like say, if I was here now, and if I had my immediate relative in Vietnam, I could sponsor them, because they want the family together. It's immediate family; you can't sponsor a cousin or your aunts and uncles, but your mom or dad or children you can sponsor.

Cunningham: Where does your mom live now?

Lam: She lives up in Hoffman Estates with my younger brother, yes.

Cunningham: You sponsored your brother, who lives in Hoffman Estates, too?

Lam: [I sponsored] all of them. The youngest one lives in Hoffman Estates. He's got his own family now. My sister has her family now. She lives in Gurnee,

and my oldest brother lives close to her, too, by Wisconsin, Kenosha, Wisconsin.

Cunningham: What do they all do?

Lam: My sister is an accountant; she used to work for Arthur Andersen. You know, that company that went belly up, because of a couple people? She worked, then they let her go. She went to Deloitte and Touche [LLP]. She worked for a couple of years. Then she had children, so she decided to stay home. She's still doing taxes at home for us.

My brother, he has his own—

[interview was interrupted by one of his children] I'm sorry about that. They're probably getting bored out there.

My brother, he enjoys culinary, so he wants to open his restaurant. But he works for a hearing-aid company, a pretty popular one, up there. My youngest brother, he's a electrical engineer. He worked for ComEd, Commonwealth Edison, in Chicago. And now he went to the private sector, worked for a private company, as well.

Cunningham: It sounds like they've done well. You went to Kansas, got a B.S., and what did you do after that?

Lam: After that, I applied for medical school. I was on the waiting list; somebody beat me to it. So, there was another option that I could get the training, the basic science, overseas. So, I went to school at Saba University, S-a-b-a, Saba University School of Medicine. That's in Netherland, Antilles.

A lot of Americans go over there to go to school. Over there, how it works is you go two years of basic science, all textbooks. Once you're done, then you come back to the States. You do your clinical training in the U.S.

Cunningham: Where did you do your clinical training?

Lam: I did it at Louis Weiss Memorial Hospital; I did it at Jackson Park Hospital; I did it in Greater Southeast in Washington, D.C, and then, I believe it's Western Missouri Mental Health Center, back in Missouri.

Cunningham: Were you looking at any particular specialty?

Lam: Yes. I wanted to go into psychiatry. I liked that. And then I ended up just finishing up my M.D. and settled for family medicine. After I worked for just several years, I decided this is not what I liked to do, because of the politics of medicine and all that stuff. So, I went into research. Then, when I finished up my medical training, I met my wife at the time she was finishing her pharmacy degree.

Cunningham: Where did you meet her?

Lam: At Louis Weiss Memorial Hospital, where I finished up my last year.

Cunningham: And where's that located?

Lam: That's up, right off Lake Shore Drive.

Cunningham: Oh, in Chicago?

Lam: Yes, by Lincoln Park.

Cunningham: How did she get there, if she's Vietnamese?

Lam: She's Vietnamese, yes. She came over, same thing as sponsorship, but she flew over much later.

Cunningham: So, they loosened up; she didn't have to sneak out?

Lam: There was no more sneaking out. She had someone sponsor her from here, and then she came over with her mom and dad. She flew over.

Cunningham: What year did she come?

Lam: I believe it was in the '90s, mid '90s, when she came over. She's very intelligent, as far as books. She's got a photographic memory. Pharmacy was her field. She's very studious.

Cunningham: That's where you met her?

Lam: Yes.

Cunningham: And you got married?

Lam: Yes.

Cunningham: In Chicago?

Lam: Yes.

Cunningham: And then, what did she—

Lam: After she graduated from Northwestern University, by Lombard [Illinois], the Downers Grove, Lombard area, she got an offer to go to Walgreens, here in Chatham [Illinois]. So, Walgreens had an offer there, and they recruited her.

I had a research position also, so I came over; I decided to go with her. I was still doing work, back and forth, at the hospital in Chicago. But I pushed back and out, so I didn't have to do so much.

After we were married, we got our first girl. So, it made sense that one of us had to stay home. We didn't want to both work like crazy and left our little girl. So we were taking turns, and I took the opportunity just to do part-time work and then stay home with my girl. Then I found a research position here, also.



Dr. Patrick Lam and family

Cunningham: So, now you're working with an assisted living home here in Chatham? Can you tell me how you ended up getting that job?

Lam: Yes. I always had been wanting to do something in the health field, but not in the hospital setting, something where it's more flexible, [where] I could spend more time with patient residents. I saw a sign put up in front of my subdivision that says, "Future Assisted Living Facility."

Cunningham: Where is this subdivision?

Lam: This is Breckenridge subdivision, right in Chatham. This sign was right across the street, just literally a couple blocks away. I took an opportunity; I call up one of the owners, Mr. Glen Mathias. I submitted my application. I didn't hear

from him for a month, then all of a sudden I got a call from him, saying that he's interested in meeting up with me, with my medical background and my training. He liked what he saw. There were a few other people also competing for the position. But again, I was very fortunate. I was blessed that I got the position, and I've loved it ever since. I really enjoy working with the patients.

Cunningham: Did you work up there originally, or did you come down here?

Lam: I worked up there originally. You mean with the new company?

Cunningham: Yeah.

Lam: Oh, no, no. I was already here, and then the company came. I came right over; I was right there, and I started working here, right in Chatham. The parent company for the Villas of Holly Brook is Unique Home. That's in Charleston, Illinois. The owner, the founder, is Mr. Reggie Phillips. He's actually running for state rep [representative] right now in District 110.

Cunningham: Really?

Lam: He's probably going to get it. He's traditional, very traditional American. He's all about hard work; you have to earn a day's work.

Cunningham: What is your function in this job that you're doing now?

Lam: I am the executive director for Holly Brook. We recently sold that building to Meridian Corporation. So, I continue my passion with the original owner, Mr. Reggie Phillips. I like the family-owned and operated philosophy. I like his philosophy.

Cunningham: And you get along with him?

Lam: It's all about the residents; it's not all about the dollar. Of course, you have to make money, but if residents need something, he'll be able to offer that.

Cunningham: Is it fully operational now?

Lam: Holly Brook, the one that we sold, it's been operational under me for over a year and a half now, going on two years. I left there to Reflections. Reflections is memory care facility for Alzheimer's dementia. It's going to be operational in about a month. We've been working very hard to get it up and running. We already have about twenty people really interested in moving into the place. There's definitely a need for that, with the baby-boomers that you have.

Cunningham: Just some general questions... The head of this project asked me to ask you this. What do you think of the current immigration issue? I don't know if you want to talk about that—

Lam: Sure, sure. Dealing with Mexico and all that? I think it's being abused a lot by the people outside the country. I think America has a kind heart, a big heart; you open your door for us. People see that, but they don't appreciate that. They take advantage of that, take it for granted. I will forever be in gratitude for the Americans to welcome us into your home, and we should respect that. But a lot of people don't respect that. A lot of people come in and want to change the rules, make it the way they like it. I wouldn't want somebody to come into my house and tell me what to do in my house, under my roof.

So, yeah, I think it needs to be looked at, needs to be corrected. I know that we have to rescue those people that come over, just like what you did for us. But what they are doing right now is just abusing the system, and I think that's wrong.

Cunningham: I guess the question is, how can we resolve it now? It has it gotten so out of control; how do you do it?

Lam: Yeah. That's a question that I would love to ask our politicians, the one's we voted up there to help us. What are they doing about it?

Cunningham: Your reaction to being in America, you're pretty enthusiastic about that?

Lam: Yes, yes. It is a dream come true for me, a lot of people. It's a privilege to be in this country. A lot of people died, sacrificing for the freedom that we all have now. I try to teach that to my girls, that this is as close as you come to heaven, because America is the best place.

You go to other countries, it looks nice, because you're a tourist. You live in this little resort or something like that. But behind all that, there are so much more corruptions, so many more corruptions that everybody puts America under the microscope.

But we're the land of the free, freedom of speech. That's why people [leaders] get into trouble, because you get to see everything that's going on behind closed door. But other countries, things are worse. You can't speak up against an official; you're done the next day. You won't live to see it if you do anything, say anything bad about a president of those countries. So, America, there is the freedom.

But with that freedom, there has to be responsibilities that come with that. People don't see that. They abuse their freedom of speech, and that's sad. People, I think, should appreciate what they have, should appreciate what your generation has put the lives [on the] line, with the wars and all that, to give us this blanket of freedom that we live under, that we can sleep peaceful at night.

Cunningham: Tell me a little bit about how you survived in Kuku, the food. You fished; you caught lizards and roast them over the open fire—

Lam: I wasn't much on lizards. (laughs). I was afraid of lizards. There were people who were braver than I was who had lizard. But after that, fish was the main source of food. It was abundant. It was clean, delicious and they come over to the island the whole time. You can easily catch them. You go out there with a net, throw some bait in there, and you scoop them up. So, fish was the main source of our diet. I love it.

But then Spam came along, and Spam was my favorite. You slice thin, and you sprinkle some salt and pepper. The best part is you eat with fresh baked bread. We had locals, our people, the refugees, they had skills that they knew. We had a bake shop, right there. Everything was baked fresh every day, dumpling, all that stuff; it was delicious. It became like a village, a fun, fun village.

And then soon we get fruit, apples and oranges coming onto the island. They were expensive, so my aunt and uncle with all the cousins, they would buy one apple and slice it thin, thin, very thin pieces. We just kind of savor off that little flavor of apple.

Cunningham: Did any of the people in Kuku starve or have any problems?

Lam: At the end, I think I heard, when they shut down the island, there were diseases, because of the sanitary. There's no sewage system. When it gets congested, where we go, there's trash and there's problems like that. So, disease started to come up, malaria and diarrhea and all sort of stuff. They came, so they shut down the island, from what I heard. I can imagine that too, because when I left, it was pretty congested with people.

Cunningham: And when you left, did it seem to be growing, getting bigger? Were people making their own huts and houses?

Lam: They still have to share the lots. The island, the beach, was only so much. So, it got packed pretty tight at the end. But the best part was at night, when you sit there, and you hear the waves coming in, and you look at clouds, and you start counting the clouds, making shapes out of it. It was very peaceful.

Every night I would go with my aunt. She's the youngest one; she was not married at that time. She's the youngest aunt; she was number nine in my grandparent's family, and she was like a sister to me. At night I would walk with her along and just look at shops, because we built shops. There were ramen noodles; there were Kung [Kung Pao] noodles and stuff like that. Noodles were another good thing to...Noodles you can eat with anything. You could cook fish and then pour the noodles in, instant noodles. You go to shop to buy those things. So, yeah, it was a very, very interesting...It made me who I am.

Cunningham: It sounds like you've had a really interesting life. Unfortunately, it hasn't all been great, but you've had an interesting life.

Lam: Yeah. It taught me how to value what I have right now, and I try to instill that in my girls, that you appreciate the things that... You don't get water in your home. [Here] you just turn on the knob, and there's water. You have to get a bucket, and you have to go and get it, back home.

Even before I left Vietnam, everything was cooked with wood. We didn't have electricity. We had lanterns, things like that. Until much later, it was brought in. But I learned how to cook in Vietnam before I left, just starting fires. So, I was an expert in making fires. I didn't have a problem on the island. I put wood together and things like that, and you build a fire. But that came natural to me. I grew up in that environment.

Cunningham: Are your little girls now in school in Chatham?

Lam: Yes. That's the one reason why we moved to Chatham, very good school district, compared to Chicago. The crime rate is very low. The people are just very, very nice, very welcoming to us.

Cunningham: How old are your girls?

Lam: One is ten and the other one is seven.

Cunningham: They're very cute, too.

Lam: Thank you.
They took after their mom; they took after their mom

Cunningham: They're just dolls. I guess that's probably about all the questions I've got. I'll probably have some more later.

Lam: Sure.

(end of transcript)



Patrick and his daughters, Melodie and Isabella, with the interviewer, Ed Cunningham, during Patrick's interview in 2014.