

The University of Southern Mississippi
Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage

Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster–Gulf Coast Fisheries
Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Mike Le

Interviewer: Linda VanZandt
Interpreter: Angel Truong Phan

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Louis Kyriakoudes, Director
The Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage
118 College Drive #5175
The University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
601-266-4574

An Oral History with Mike Le, Volume 1043

Interviewer: Linda VanZandt

Interpreter: Angel Truong Phan

Transcriber: Ha Do

Editors: Angel Truong Phan, Linda VanZandt

Biography

Mr. Mike Le was born in 1953 near the town of Rach Gia in the Kien Giang Province of South Vietnam, where his family had a coconut and rice farm. In addition to farming, his father taught martial arts.

Mr. Le escaped from Vietnam by boat with his uncle, cousins, and others, totally fifty-two people, in 1978. After spending five months in Pulau Tengah, Malaysia, he landed in Lawton, Oklahoma in 1979. Soon after, Mr. Le settled in San Jose, California, where he lived for almost twenty years, working in electronics for Motorola for eighteen years. After working a few years at Horseshoe Casino in Shreveport, Louisiana, he moved to Biloxi, Mississippi in 1999. Mr. Le worked on machines in a shrimp factory before beginning to shrimp the Gulf waters. At the time of the interview, he had been shrimping for thirteen years. Mr. Le is the father of three girls.

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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

MIKE LE

This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. The interview is with Mike Le and is taking place on August 29, 2011. The interviewer is Linda VanZandt. English/Vietnamese interpretation is provided by Angel Truong Phan. English transcription of Vietnamese language italicized in parentheses.

VanZandt: Today is August 29, 2011. And I'm here in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. And my name is Linda VanZandt, and I'm here with Angel Phan, who will be interpreting, if you need it. And if you could, state *your* name, please.

Le: My name is Mike Le.

VanZandt: And your last name?

Le: My last name is Le.

VanZandt: Le.

Le: Yeah. First name is Mike.

VanZandt: OK. Mike Le.

Le: Yeah. Uh-huh.

VanZandt: And Mike, where are you from?

Le: I am from Vietnam.

VanZandt: From Vietnam.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: Can you tell us where you were born in Vietnam?

Le: I born in Kien Giang [Province].

VanZandt: Can you spell that?

Le: K-I-E-N.

VanZandt: K-I-E-N.

Le: Yeah. G-I-A-N-G.

VanZandt: OK. Kien Giang. You'll have to excuse my Vietnamese. I don't speak well. (laughter)

Le: Yeah, yeah.

VanZandt: And where is that in South Vietnam? Is it on the coast?

Le: (asking Angel) Rạch Giá. Rach Giá.

Phan: It's near Rạch Giá [city]. A hundred and fifty miles away from Saigon.

VanZandt: From Saigon.

Le: Yeah, yeah.

VanZandt: OK.

Le: After Can Tho(?) [Rach Gia is west of Can Tho.]

VanZandt: OK. On the South China Sea? On the coast? Or inland?

Phan: Nó ở trong đất liền hay gần bờ biển?

(Is it close to land or close to coast?)

Le: Gần biển.

(Close to coast.)

Phan: Near the coast.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: Near the coast, OK. And what year were you born?

Le: I born [19]53.

VanZandt: Nineteen fifty-three.

Le: Yeah, Vietnam.

VanZandt: Can you tell me a little bit about your life in Vietnam, growing up, Mr. Le? What your father and mother did for a living?

Le: Đi làm ruộng, trồng dừa.

(Farming and planting coconuts.)

Phan: They had a rice farm, and they also had a coconut farm.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: Ah.

Phan: And then he was also a martial artist. He taught karate.

VanZandt: Your father taught karate?

Le: (chuckles) Yeah, yeah. (chuckles)

VanZandt: Ah, so you learned karate, too?

Le: Little bit, little bit. Yeah.

VanZandt: Wow, OK. So they had a rice and coconut farm.

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: And was that farm just for your family, or did they sell—

Le: No.

VanZandt: —at the market and to other people?

Le: We sell market.

VanZandt: OK.

Le: They have save for eat and sell market.

VanZandt: OK.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: And did you help on the farm, growing up?

Le: Yeah, yeah, yeah. When I grow up.

VanZandt: What kind of things would you do on the farm?

Le: (Inaudible) rice farm and coconut farm. We do both(?).

VanZandt: Did you climb the trees, the coconut trees?

Le: (laughter) Yeah, yeah. All the way, all the way.

VanZandt (chuckles) All the way up?

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: How did you do that?

Le: I take my hand and hold the tree and go up.

VanZandt: (laughs) Wow, I'm impressed. OK. And pulled the coconuts?

Le: Yes. (chuckles)

VanZandt: Throw them down.

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: Oh, OK. And what about rice? For someone who doesn't know what it's like to work in a rice field, what is that work like?

Le: Too much story, but I can tell you that now better. They have machine and work in the rice. Before, we work with hand.

VanZandt: With hand.

Le: Yeah. (chuckle)

VanZandt: With like a machete, chopping?

Le: Làm nhiều thứ lắm.

(I did a lot of things.)

Phan: Yeah. So he said that now it's a lot better than then because then they had to use manual labor, which is the hand, whether it be—

Le: Yeah, hand. (inaudible, speaking simultaneously)

Phan: —putting down the seeds and watering.

Le: Now do rice (speaking simultaneously)—

Phan: Yeah. Getting the water.

Le: Better. I take hand, work in the—I don't know how to say it.

Phan: And then the harvest season, they have to do everything by hand.

VanZandt: Right. Everything by hand.

Le: By hand, yeah.

Phan: Now they have machines, so it helps a lot.

VanZandt: Yes. Much easier now.

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: And did you go to school when you were young?

Le: Yeah. I go to school about five years.

VanZandt: Five years, OK. Did you like school?

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: You did.

Le: Before, we're poor. We don't have very much. And we had a farm. Lot of people need to work. And I go to school, and I think grade six, then I stop and work, help my family.

VanZandt: Your family needed you.

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: And your brothers and sisters, too, I guess.

Le: Yes, yes. Yeah.

VanZandt: And we know you are Angel's uncle.

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: Your sister, Lam Le, lives here [in Ocean Springs], too.

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: What about your other brothers and sisters?

Le: Another brother live in Florida, Orlando

VanZandt: Oh, Orlando.

Le: Yeah. And younger live in California, in San Jose.

VanZandt: In San Jose, sure.

Le: Yeah, California. I live over there twenty years in California.

VanZandt: Twenty years?

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: In San Jose?

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: Wow, OK. What year did you move here to Mississippi?

Le: I came [1998].

VanZandt: Seventy-nine?

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: OK. Well, tell me, Mr. Le; growing up sounds like it was busy work.

Le: Ninety-eight.

VanZandt: Oh, [19]98.

Le: Ninety-eight. I come over here about thirteen years [ago], Biloxi. But I come [19]79 America; I come America '79.

VanZandt: OK, in 1979.

Le: Yes, 1979.

VanZandt: Well, just to spend a little more time on your life in Vietnam, what was that like? What were some of your best memories of growing up? Do you have any stories that you remember?

Le: No. But now I like America better than Vietnam.

VanZandt: Oh, really?

Le: Yeah. I leave about twenty-three year old, and I leave in Vietnam.

VanZandt: You were twenty-three when you left?

Le: Yes. When after America, come back in America(?), about three years, and I leave, and I leave in '78.

VanZandt: In '78 you left.

Le: Yeah, I left Vietnam '78.

VanZandt: Well, in 1975—

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: —when South Vietnam fell to the Communists—

Le: Yeah, Communists come over in Vietnam.

VanZandt: Tell me what you remember, if you feel like sharing anything about where you were when that happened, any memories of that April 30 in 1975. Do you remember where you were and what happened?

Le: Go to farm, but the Communists, I don't like it. I don't like Communists. That's why I leave. And we buy the boat, and share the people. And I leave, and I come in Malaysia. I live in Malaysia for five months. And wait United States come with paper over, and then I come America. That's what I do.

VanZandt: So you bought a boat to leave?

Le: No, my uncle.

VanZandt: Your uncle had a boat.

Le: Yeah. My uncle buy somebody else. I go share with, together.

VanZandt: But you didn't leave until 1979, right?

Le: No, I leave in '78. I come to America 1979. April, April '79, I come to Oklahoma, Lawton. Yeah. I have to file(?) the government, sponsor me.

VanZandt: OK. Sponsored you to Oklahoma.

Le: Yeah, I remember. I can remember.

VanZandt: Oh, my goodness.

Le: Yeah, yeah.

VanZandt: Well, in the years from 1975 until you left, 1978, were you worried about being drafted into the [South Vietnamese] Army?

Le: No, no. They don't catch me because, you know, I have big family, and I know somebody else. They can't catch me. But after '75, I get to trouble. I get go (speaking Vietnamese).

Phan: Yeah, yeah.

Le: After '75, I go work somebody else, and the Communists tell me (inaudible) how everything, you know, whatever they need.

Phan: Yeah. They had assigned work for them to do. And he was drafted to do that.

Le: That why I don't like it.

VanZandt: Ah. What kind of work was it?

Phan: Some people were drafted to teach. Some people were drafted to—

Le: Everything (inaudible). I don't know. I don't like it.

Phan: —do labor, janitorial stuff.

Le: They tell you work, what kind. You don't like; you still work.

VanZandt: So you used to be able to do what you wanted to do on your farm. And now you had to do what the Communists told you to do.

Le: Yeah, yeah.

VanZandt: Did they take your farm away, your family farm?

Le: Yeah, (chuckles) yeah, of course. Because people leave(?) it, you know.

Phan: Yeah.

Le: I had big garden before, but now they take it (inaudible). You know?

Phan: Yeah. He said he had a big garden and everything, and they took a lot of it away. And then they actually even took *him* away from his family to do the work that they wanted him to do.

VanZandt: Um-hm.

Le: They say they make it even, but no, (chuckles) not even. Yeah, a lot of people leaving; they don't like Communists.

VanZandt: So people began leaving, 1975.

Le: *Yeah, yeah*, a lot. A lot of people died in the ocean.

VanZandt: Yes, yes.

Le: A lot I know. After my boat, I go island, and about after my boat go in island, about four or five boat sink in the ocean.

Phan: Lúc đó cậu Ba đi có dặn vợ con không hay đi một mình?

(Did you tell your wife and your children, or you left by yourself?)

Le: Đi có một mình.

(I went alone.)

Phan: What I asked him is, when he had left Vietnam, (brief interruption, loud noise nearby) did he go with his family and his children, or he left by himself?

Le: All the cousins.

VanZandt: That's what I wanted to ask about. How did you decide to leave in 1978? And did you *tell* anyone that you were leaving?

Le: I have my uncle, lived in Saigon, they come by the boat, and all my cousins go together. I think about, my boat go about fifty-two people.

VanZandt: Fifty-two people on your boat?

Le: Yeah, yeah.

VanZandt: Your family, too? Your parents?

Le: No, not my family, my cousins; all cousins. My family is still in Vietnam. My mom, my dad, my sister, brother, still in Vietnam.

VanZandt: You were the only one from your family.

Le: Only me, only me.

VanZandt: Did they know you were leaving? Did you tell them?

Le: No.

VanZandt: OK. Why couldn't you tell them?

Le: I can't tell them, because you know, it's hard to say. They don't like it. You tell somebody else; they cut your neck. (Inaudible) you die. That's true. Before, too hard. Not now. Now, you know, you can always stay America. Lot of people America in Vietnam. I go three years, every time, three years, I go stay.

VanZandt: You go back.

Le: Yeah, I go back see my mom and dad, my family.

VanZandt: That's good. So it was—

Le: Two thousand seven, two thousand eight, two thousand nine, I come Vietnam.

VanZandt: That's wonderful.

Le: Yeah. Two thousand ten, I (inaudible). Yeah.

VanZandt: OK. That's so good. I know they're so happy to see you.

Le: Yeah. My dad's eighty-six now. My mom seventy-six, seventy-seven.

VanZandt: How has life been for them since you left?

Le: Huh?

VanZandt: How has life been for them?

Phan: Sau khi cậu Ba qua Mỹ thì gia đình cậu Ba sống ra sao?

(When you came to America, what kind of life did you and your family live?)

Le: The Communists (inaudible), food, whatever they decided. I think two thousand five, two thousand six, and (inaudible), they change, new law.

VanZandt: Changed new law in 2006.

Le: Yeah. Before I leave, my family can buy nothing.

VanZandt: Ah.

Le: Yeah. They took everything. They took my boat, and cannot sell coconut, nothing, you know. Can't give the people eat much(?).

VanZandt: What did your family do to survive?

Le: Just stay over there (chuckle) and wait new rule; that's all. (chuckles) Yeah. And now it still same(?).

VanZandt: Still the same? Not getting better?

Le: No. Now better.

VanZandt: Now better, yeah.

Le: Now better than before, way better.

VanZandt: Good.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: Better for your brothers and sisters.

Le: Yeah. They all family, they all eleven kids, they have family.

VanZandt: Right, children.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: When you left, Mr. Le, tell me about that escape, if you would. For people who don't know what that was like. When you left in 1978—

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: You got on [the] boat with your cousins—

Le: No, no, no. My cousin have the boat.

VanZandt: Yes.

Le: And I go with them.

VanZandt: Yes. Tell me about that journey, when you left.

Le: Too *hard*, too *hard*. We have small boat, and go leaving in the ocean, wait(?) big boat, go on (brief interruption, loud noise) big boat, go Malaysia, five, six days.

VanZandt: Were you picked up by a big boat?

Le: Yeah, yeah.

VanZandt: By a U.S. boat?

Le: You go small boat, and wait the big boat come. Too hard. (Inaudible) feel like my mom, born again.

VanZandt: Mm.

Le: Lot of people *die*.

VanZandt: Um-hm.

Le: Too *hard*. Lot of ocean, no legal.

VanZandt: Very dangerous on the ocean.

Le: Yeah, yeah.

VanZandt: But you got on a bigger ship, took you to Malaysia?

Le: Yeah, yeah.

VanZandt: Was that a U.S. ship? Do you know? Australian?

Le: No. The people in Vietnam (inaudible).

VanZandt: And how long were you in Malaysia?

Le: I have about four, five month.

VanZandt: Five months, OK.

Le: Yeah. I live in an island.

VanZandt: What was that like?

Le: Kuala Lumpur. The island they call it Pulau Tengah.

VanZandt: Do you know how to spell that, the island you were on?

Le: I forget. (chuckles) I don't know, but they call it Pulau Tengah, Malaysia. And I wait United States come interview me, and go to Kuala Lumpur and wait to airport, and come to America.

VanZandt: So when you found out you were coming to America, what did you think? What went through your mind?

Le: Good.

VanZandt: Good?

Le: Yeah. When I have interview, American young [man], they tell [spoke] Vietnamese language with me. Yeah. Interview me and tell me go out, fifteen minutes come back, and paper. They tell [spoke] Vietnamese, too. Yeah, yeah. Too young. That why I have (inaudible) I know we can come back Vietnam. Yeah, come over.

VanZandt: You knew that you would be back.

Le: *Yeah.* But I come America; six, seven years, I did come back. After left(?), some people they come.

VanZandt: When did you first get word to your family that you were OK in America? Was he able to communicate with them?

Phan: Lúc cậu Ba qua Mỹ rồi thì lúc nào cậu Ba mới liên lạc được với gia đình?
(*How long did it take you to contact your family after you came to America?*)

Le: (chuckles) Can't say nothing. Can't write letter.

VanZandt: Can't write letter?

Le: Yeah. No mail in Vietnam. Can't speak in phone, too.

VanZandt: So how long was it before they knew you were OK?

Le: Long time. I think long time.

VanZandt: Years?

Le: Yeah. No, long time. More than year. But they have the people, they come back and forth; they tell. They tell (inaudible) because I come in Malaysia, I have my friends. They come back, and they tell I still alive. I live in Malaysia.

VanZandt: Ah. So they knew you were in Malaysia.

Le: Yeah. They know me still alive, but that's all. They don't know I go away somewhere.

VanZandt: You didn't know where you were going to end up.

Le: Me, either, yeah.

VanZandt: When you came to America, where did you end up here? In California?

Le: No, in Oklahoma City.

VanZandt: Oh, Oklahoma first. Oklahoma City?

Le: Oklahoma, Lawton.

VanZandt: What did you think about America when you first got here?

Le: Very good. We like it. I like it.

VanZandt: Not cold in Oklahoma?

Le: Cold. (chuckles) Very cold. When I come in April 15, lot of storm.

VanZandt: Oh, yes.

Le: Big storms. The house and the wood(?), I work in the (inaudible) about two, three months.

VanZandt: Two to three months you worked?

Le: Yeah. Then to file government, I have an uncle in California, took me back to California, San Jose. And I have a job.

VanZandt: What did you do in San Jose? What was your job?

Le: Electronic. Electronic.

Phan: Electronic.

VanZandt: Electronics?!

Phan: Electrician, yeah.

Le: I work eighteen year, Motorola.

VanZandt: Motorola?! You worked for Motorola.

Le: Yeah. I work in the system, terminal.

VanZandt: Oh, so smart.

Phan: Working as an electrician for Motorola in California.

VanZandt: In California.

Le: I work eighteen year.

VanZandt: How did you learn to do that?

Le: I have uncle and friends. I learn America. They have friend. They told me what to do, so.

VanZandt: Um-hm. Was that good work? You liked it?

Le: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

VanZandt: Yeah. Big company. So how did you end up here in Mississippi? What brought you here?

Le: Because I have family in San Jose. And I have my girlfriend. We break(?) and I come Biloxi.

VanZandt: What year did you come to Biloxi? Do you remember?

Le: Nineteen ninety-nine.

VanZandt: Ninety-nine. OK. So you've been here about twelve years?

Le: Yeah, twelve, thirteen years.

VanZandt: Why did you decide to move to Biloxi?

Le: I have my sister.

VanZandt: You were with Motorola in California.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: And you left your job?

Le: Yeah. When I get laid off, 1997, they tell me go back to, move back to Dallas and (inaudible), but I have family and house in California. I can't move. That why I got laid off.

VanZandt: You got laid off.

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: So you decided to come here where you had family, a sister.

Le: Yeah. I come over here—no I come Shreveport. In Louisiana, Shreveport? I work in casino, Horseshoe, about three and a half year.

VanZandt: Two and a half year, in the casino?

Le: Three and a half year, yeah.

VanZandt: Louisiana.

Le: Louisiana, yeah. I live there three and a half years, and I get too old now. I can't work in the casino, and I work in the shop.

VanZandt: Fast life.

Le: Too long. That's why I decide work to ocean.

Phan: Huh, interesting. You said the ocean, you said it's more peaceful? Cậu Ba nói làm ở biển khiến cậu Ba thanh tịnh hả?

Le: Yeah, yeah. We can pass the time. We do just sail. But I seen the work, company, long time. If [you're] over fifty, they don't like it. Too slow. (laughter)

Phan: That's interesting, very interesting that after the fast pace in working for a company for eighteen years, and then moving to Shreveport to work for Horseshoe Casino, he said that's such a fast pace, and he's getting older.

Le: I come Biloxi. I work the company, the machine, about four year, too.

VanZandt: In where?

Le: In Biloxi.

VanZandt: OK. Where in Biloxi?

Le: Yeah, Biloxi, yeah.

VanZandt: Doing—fishing?

Le: No, in the Schwegmann shop, machine.

VanZandt: Oh, machine shop.

Phan: Machinery.

Le: Yeah. No, Schwegmann store. You know, big store.

VanZandt: Oh, *Schwegmann's* [Grocery Store]!

Le: Yeah, yeah.

VanZandt: Ah, I've heard of Schwegmann's.

Le: I watch, and the people working for me.

VanZandt: Working for you.

Le: About thirty people.

VanZandt: OK. There was Schwegmann's in Biloxi?

Le: Yeah, they have.

Phan: Yeah.

VanZandt: I didn't know. I knew New Orleans.

Le: No. Biloxi, they have it. (speaking Vietnamese)

Phan: Oh, he worked for a shrimp factory.

VanZandt: Shrimp factory.

Le: Yeah, yeah.

Phan: Yeah. I guess when he decided to come down here to have a more peaceful life, and he settled here, he worked for a shrimp factory before owning his own boat.

VanZandt: Were you peeling shrimp? Or what did you do?

Le: No, machine.

VanZandt: Machines. Yeah.

Le: And people working with me, throw in the tank, and they go up in the machine.

VanZandt: OK. So your electronics background helped you with the machinery, yeah.

Le: Yeah. (laughter)

VanZandt: Easy.

Le: Whenever you have money, you can do everything that's good, you do. I do that.

VanZandt: Um-hm. So how did you like it, moving here to Biloxi? Very different from California.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: From big city to small town.

Le: Yeah, small. Biloxi's small but no choice. Money, that's all. Have family in here. We work in the ocean. I leave California. I no choice.

VanZandt: No choice?

Le: Yeah. I think too old. They don't hire me. More money.

VanZandt: You've been happier here in Biloxi.

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: And shrimping? How many years have you been shrimping?

Le: I think about thirteen years.

VanZandt: Thirteen years.

Le: Yeah, thirteen years.

VanZandt: Did you have your own boat?

Le: Yes. I have my own boat, but my boat sink 2009, December, yeah.

VanZandt: December 2009, your boat sank.

Le: Yeah. Yeah.

VanZandt: What happened?

Le: Sink. The water come. I go in the boat. Somebody ride in the boat. They don't know the water come up. Then they let me know the water come up.

Phan: Cái pump bị hư hay bị người ta ửi vô tàu?

(The pump was malfunctioned, or people slammed into the boat?)

Le: Không. Accident.

Phan: Không.

Le: Yeah. I think(?) by accident.

VanZandt: Accident.

Le: Yeah. Cậu Ba đang ngủ, phần nó lái mình không biết.

(I was sleeping. Other people were driving the boat, so I don't know.)

Phan: Oh, he had a co-captain that was driving his boat, and an accident had happened, and water got into the boat, and it made the boat sink.

VanZandt: I bet.

Phan: That was probably a scary moment. Cậu Ba có sợ hãi không?

Le: Cũng sợ. Nhưng cậu Ba phải ráng sống thôi.

(Yeah, I was scared. But I had to survive.)

Phan: Yeah. He said it was a scary moment, but he had to strive to survive during that moment.

Le: Yeah, I had to and (inaudible).

Phan: He had to climb the—

VanZandt: Climb?

Phan: What is that? Cậu Ba hải leo lên cây dầu.

Le: (speaking Vietnamese)

(I had the rig out there.)

Phan: Oh, OK. You know how they have the oil rigs out there?

VanZandt: Right.

Phan: He had to cling to it and climb it.

Le: (speaking simultaneously) Yeah. Because water, lot of storm. Storm.

Phan: Yeah.

VanZandt: During a storm.

Le: Yeah.

Phan: So whenever his boat had sink, there was no one there.

VanZandt: Yes. So you were *on* the boat when that happened.

Le: I ride(?) the boat. When I go to, it happened. I ride the boat. I captain. I owner, too.

VanZandt: You were the captain. And you swam to the rig.

Le: Yes. (laughs) Yeah.

VanZandt: Mr. Le, my goodness.

Le: Yeah, that why I (inaudible). If I save money, [stay with the boat], I die.

Phan: He said that he just let the boat go, and he just needed to survive, so he swam away from it.

VanZandt: Yeah. You had to save yourself. Save yourself.

Le: Yes. Save the whole boat and three people were with me.

VanZandt: Were they OK, too?

Le: They OK, too.

VanZandt: Good.

Phan: Wow.

VanZandt: So your boat was lost.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: You weren't able to get it back.

Le: No.

VanZandt: So what happened after that? What did you do for a living after you lost your boat?

Le: (chuckle) Qua đi làm với người ta thôi.

(I was working with other people.)

Phan: After that, he went on other people's boats. You know, he lost his boat, so.

Le: My friend, they have the boat.

VanZandt: They were lucky to have you.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: So you were captain [of] other boats?

Le: Yeah, just friends. We work together.

VanZandt: Did your boat that you lost, were you able to recover any insurance on it?

Le: No, because we pay off in 2005. We pay off. After 2005, they don't sell insurance. We own boat. We don't owe money [to] the bank. That's why they don't sell it.

VanZandt: OK. So you had to start over again?

Le: I hurt(?). I hurt(?). But I wait, and I better. I feel better.

VanZandt: Yeah. You felt better.

Le: Um-hm.

VanZandt: Then [Hurricane] Katrina happened in 2005.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: Were you shrimping during Katrina?

Le: Yeah. After Katrina, then I go (inaudible).

VanZandt: Today is six years since Katrina.

Le: Yes, yeah.

VanZandt: Can you just tell us briefly about where you were during Katrina, and what happened to you?

Le: Cậu Ba trốn trong.

(I was hiding.)

Phan: Cậu Ba có đi chung với tàu của cậu Ba không?

(Did you go with your boat?)

(some Vietnamese spoken not transcribed or translated in above passage.)

Le: Có tàu mà.

(There was a boat.)

Phan: OK. He also went to—

Le: I (inaudible) my boat. And we go—

Phan: —(speaking simultaneously) the place, Cowan-Lorraine.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: Cowan-Lorraine [Lorraine Cowan Road]. Back Bay?

Phan: Back Bay?

Le: Yeah, yeah.

VanZandt: OK.

Le: (chuckle) I live over there about two month, in Back Bay.

VanZandt: Two months.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: On a boat?

Le: In the boat. Can't leave and go out.

VanZandt: Because the [draw]bridge was not open.

Le: Yeah, yeah. The water go up in the tree, the (inaudible) tree. And (inaudible) look down here, but when Katrina, the water go up half tree.

VanZandt: Halfway up the tree.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: And you were in a boat—

Le: I in the boat.

VanZandt: —with other people with you?

Le: My boat, it's about thirteen people in the boat: my girlfriend, my mother [of my] girlfriend, my brother-in-law—

VanZandt: When did the Coast Guard come to help you? Did the Coast Guard come help you after Katrina?

Le: No. After Katrina, yeah. After. They give the food.

VanZandt: They gave you food?

Le: Yeah. Water, everything.

VanZandt: Was your boat OK?

Le: Yes, yes. Everything is OK. But 2009, I have trouble. I lost my boat.

VanZandt: You lost your boat.

Le: Sink.

VanZandt: It sank.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: What happened then?

Le: Storm, too.

VanZandt: Another storm.

Le: Yeah. The weather go up in the boat too high, then I don't know what happened. Water come in the boat.

VanZandt: Were you on the boat?

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: Oh, my goodness. Did you know a storm was coming? Or it just came up quickly?

Le: They come up quickly. That's why I don't know. They say storm, but not strong. When I come there, it strong, and can't hold it.

VanZandt: Were you able to stay on the boat, or did you have to swim?

Le: No. I think come under (inaudible) in the ocean.

VanZandt: Oil rig, again. [repeating story told before]

Le: I [stay] about one day, and the helicopter go get me, go to—

VanZandt: A *helicopter* came—

Le: Yeah. (chuckles)

VanZandt: —to get you?

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: Oh, my goodness.

Le: And two people. Me and two people were with me, and we go to Louisiana, in Empire. Empire, there, helicopter go there. And they take me go Louisiana.

VanZandt: Mr. Le, you've lived—you're like a cat with nine lives. (laughter) You have survived so much in your life.

Le: Yeah. That why I'm too old.

VanZandt: Too old for that.

Le: Yeah, too old.

VanZandt: What would you tell people who wondered how you survived through that?

Le: They tell me go on another side, but I think I promise I go and (inaudible), and they have light(?) and everything. When you go over there, over there they have light(?) and everything, you can go. Another go to my boat, (inaudible). They don't have light in that. That why I decide I got my boat, go to another (inaudible), wait to helicopter about one day. Then they come and get me.

VanZandt: OK. Angel, do we have a few minutes?

Phan: We have a couple of minutes and then—

VanZandt: Just a couple of minutes to wrap up, OK. Mr. Le, can we ask you about the oil spill, then, that happened April 20 last year, 2010?

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: Tell me about how the oil spill affected your life.

Le: I think a lot of oil spill in the ocean. But it (inaudible), not work good in the ocean now.

VanZandt: Were you shrimping last year? Were you preparing your boat when the oil spill happened in April? Were you getting ready to go out shrimping?

Le: Yeah, yeah.

VanZandt: Looking forward to a good season?

Le: Yeah, but some people good, but some people don't have much shrimp, you know. That why we're in trouble.

VanZandt: You're in trouble.

Le: Yeah. I saw a lot of fuel up in the ocean.

VanZandt: You saw a lot of fuel, oil spilled?

Le: Yeah, yeah.

VanZandt: Where was that? Do you remember?

Le: *All* in the ocean. We go to Louisiana, go to Mobile, and Florida. That way. They talk on the CB speaker, and I hear about it. Too bad.

VanZandt: Have you been able to go out shrimping since the oil spill? Have you been out?

Le: No. I go to catch the oil. I don't go to shrimping.

VanZandt: You go to Texas?

Le: No. I go catch the oil. That's all.

VanZandt: Ah, you've been helping with the cleanup.

Le: Yeah, up, yeah.

VanZandt: Ah. Was that with the Vessels of Opportunity [program]?

Le: Yes, yes. Yeah, I had to [go to] school. (Mr. Le leaves to get ID badge.)

VanZandt: Sure, you can get it (referring to the badge). Oh, I see. You're bringing your—ah, this is your badge, your identification. OK.

Le: (inaudible)

VanZandt: Here's your name. (reading badge) "This is to certify that Mike Le has been instructed in HAZWOPER?"

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: HAZWOPER [Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response], forty-hour training, BP post-emergency specific, Gulf cleanup."

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: So you took a class to learn how—

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: —get certified, OK. And so what was that like? Were you going out to where the boom was? Laying boom?

Le: Yeah. We had the boat, go to boom, try to get the oil(?).

VanZandt: Trying to collect the oil, contain it.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: How did you feel about that work? Were you happy to have that job?

Le: (laughs) It OK. Not happy.

VanZandt: Yeah. How long did you do that work?

Le: I think about two month.

VanZandt: Two months?

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: And then they didn't need it anymore?

Le: They didn't need it. It just stopped.

VanZandt: So do you think there's shrimp out there now to be caught?

Le: Yeah. Some people go, but not too many. Not too many.

VanZandt: Not too many? What's happening? Why do you think that is?

Le: I think there fuel, lot of oil, and some [shrimp] die. Go up (inaudible). Five, six years, ten year, more, maybe come back.

VanZandt: You think it will take five, six, maybe more years to come back?

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: What would you like to do in the meantime? Do you think about doing another job?

Le: I think I decide, I go to school, and sometime (inaudible) go to school.

VanZandt: You're going to school?

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: To learn what?

Le: Everything. Sometime (inaudible), sometime English.

VanZandt: Ah, good. I saw your English book. I need one to learn Vietnamese.

Le: (laughs) That why I (inaudible).

VanZandt: That's good, Mr. Le.

Le: Yeah. I teach that last week.

VanZandt: Ah. You're teaching some?

Le: No.

VanZandt: Ah, you're learning it.

Le: *I* learn it.

VanZandt: *Then* you can teach it.

Le: *I* learn it. (smiles)

VanZandt: (laughs) Then you teach Vietnamese to me.

Le: They have the dictionary. This is dictionary.

VanZandt: I saw, yes. Well, do you think about using other skills? You're very good with machines; you worked for Motorola for a long time. Do you think about another occupation other than fishing?

Le: Yeah, yeah. I like it better.

VanZandt: You like fishing better?

Le: No. I like when I work on computer, with (inaudible). Not hard for me

VanZandt: Not hard for you. It comes easily.

Le: Yeah. If you work on the ocean, it's so hard. More money, but work too hard.

VanZandt: More money, but you work too hard.

Le: Too hard. Sometime, some day you can't eat, work all day, all night.

VanZandt: And when you bring your catch in, who do you sell to?

Le: Factory.

VanZandt: Straight to the factory.

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: Do you keep some for your family, yourself?

Le: Little bit.

VanZandt: Little bit, not much.

Le: Because we go whole year. We don't keep longer. Seafood [don't] keep longer.

VanZandt: Doesn't keep long.

Le: Not well.

VanZandt: Do you have children?

Le: Yeah. I have two.

VanZandt: Two children.

Le: Yeah, two.

VanZandt: How old are they?

Le: Older, same Angel.

VanZandt: Same age as Angel?

Le: Yeah, same age. I have younger, about twenty-one year old.

VanZandt: Twenty-one; boy or girl?

Le: All girl.

VanZandt: All girls.

Le: Yeah. I have one daughter in Vietnam that have two; my daughter have two boys, in Vietnam.

VanZandt: In Vietnam.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: Well, if your children's children's children listen to this fifty years from now, or a hundred years from now, what would you like for them to know about your

life? Or any words of advice you would like to give them? What would you say to your future family who might hear this?

Le: Say, I have three daughter; that's all, no boy.

VanZandt: No boys.

Le: I don't have boy. Have three girls; that's all. (inaudible)

VanZandt: What do you hope for their future? What would you like for them to do?

Le: Now, in Vietnam they married.

VanZandt: They're married.

Le: Yeah, have two kids. And another one, they live in Jackson.

VanZandt: Oh, Jackson?

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: Ah, Mississippi.

Le: Yeah. I have two (inaudible).

VanZandt: So you get to see them more often.

Le: Yes. They come see me July 4, they come over.

VanZandt: Hm, July 4.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: What do they do?

Le: They do nail shop.

VanZandt: Good. Mr. Le, is there anything that you would like to share? You've had an amazing life. You've lived through a lot, seen a lot, good and bad.

Le: (chuckles) Yeah, yeah. Right, right.

VanZandt: And you're a real survivor.

Le: Yeah. I have a lot of trouble. That's why I have girlfriend. We (inaudible).

VanZandt: (chuckles) Well, I hope things get better for you.

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: I hope it will be a good year.

Le: Yes, yes.

VanZandt: And you'll be able to do what you want to do.

Le: Yes. Um-hm. I work too hard, but I can't keep it.

VanZandt: Can't keep up.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: Fishing's a hard life, isn't it?

Le: Yes.

VanZandt: What did you like about it when you were out on the ocean?

Le: Now I don't know what I choice(?). You know? Work, get money, relax, live my life. That's all.

VanZandt: Yeah. Shooting the breeze with friends.

Le: I help(?) my kids. My kids, never see them long time, four or five years. This year, she come. "Happy birthday, Daddy."

VanZandt: Surprise?

Le: Surprise, yeah.

VanZandt: Wow. So what birthday did you celebrate? How old are you?

Le: October 15 my birthday.

VanZandt: OK. How old are you now?

Le: Fifty-nine now.

VanZandt: Fifty-nine! It's a big one. Next year you'll celebrate. I hope you have a *big* sixtieth celebration (laughter) with all your family.

Le: Yeah. Yes.

VanZandt: Go to Vietnam, maybe. See your children.

Le: Maybe.

VanZandt: What's different about Vietnam, than living in the United States? When you go back and see your family, what do you think about?

Le: America, I like it, but I see my family, too sad. My mom, my dad, my sister, all sad. Not different, but they grow up. They too old, too. I am old, too.

VanZandt: (chuckles) Old like you. They grew just the same, huh?

Le: Yeah, the same. But weather in Vietnam, and America, very different.

VanZandt: Little different, sure. The weather. Is it like in Biloxi, though? Where you live in Vietnam?

Le: No.

VanZandt: Warm?

Le: It's warm, warm, mostly. Vietnam you don't have cold; warm.

VanZandt: That's right, very warm.

Le: Hot, warm.

VanZandt: (laughs) Only warm and hot.

Le: Yeah.

VanZandt: OK. Thank you, Mr. Le, so much for sharing your memories.

Le: Thank you.

VanZandt: Thank you so much.

Phan: Cảm ơn cậu Ba nhiều.

(Thank you very much.)

(end of interview)