

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

Tuan Nguyen

Interviewer: Linda VanZandt

Volume 1043
2011

This project was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration through Mississippi State University-Northern Gulf Institute, Grant Number NA06OAR4320264. Louis M. Kyriakoudes, Principal Investigator.

©2012

The University of Southern Mississippi

This transcription of an oral history by The Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage of The University of Southern Mississippi may not be reproduced or published in any form except that quotation of short excerpts of unrestricted transcripts and the associated tape recordings is permissible providing written consent is obtained from The Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. When literary rights have been retained by the interviewee, written permission to use the material must be obtained from both the interviewee and The Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage.

This oral history is a transcript of a taped conversation. The transcript was edited and punctuation added for readability and clarity. People who are interviewed may review the transcript before publication and are allowed to delete comments they made and to correct factual errors. Additions to the original text are shown in brackets []. Minor deletions are not noted. Original tapes and transcripts are on deposit in the McCain Library and Archives on the campus of The University of Southern Mississippi.



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 Tuan Nguyen, Volume 1043

Interviewer: Linda VanZandt

Transcriber: Stephanie Scull-DeArme

Editor: Linda VanZandt

Biography

Mr. Tuan Nguyen was born, one of thirteen children, in 1980 in New Orleans, Louisiana, to Thanh Nguyen and Than Nguyen of Phu Quoc, Vietnam. During his childhood, his mother worked as a seafood processor and his father worked primarily cutting aluminum and metals for a local business. In Vietnam, his father had been a fisherman and helped the family escape on their boat in 1975. The Nguyen family was sponsored by a family in Illinois, then later settled in New Orleans.

Mr. Nguyen graduated from the University of New Orleans with a degree in Business Management. After graduation, he worked for Walgreens for approximately five years before becoming Deputy Director of Mary Queen of Vietnam (MQVN) Community Development Corporation, in the New Orleans East Versailles Community in 2006. After the Deepwater Horizon oil disaster in April 2010, Mr. Nguyen was recruited by Congressman Joseph Cao to serve on his oil disaster Rapid Response Team. Mr. Nguyen has been an active member of MQVN Catholic Church all of his life and an advocate for his community since Hurricane Katrina in 2005. His wife, Mary Nguyen, helped establish MQVN CDC. Together they have one child.

Table of Contents

Personal history.....	1
Vietnamese childhood games	2
Mary Queen of Vietnam Church, New Orleans East.....	3
Learning to speak Vietnamese	3
Grandparents.....	3
Mary Queen of Vietnam Community, New Orleans East	3
Wife, Mary.....	4
Father Dominic Dinh Mai Luong	4
Mother, oyster shucking.....	6, 9
Father, fisherman, life in Vietnam	6
Parents' flight from Vietnam	7
Family of origin	7
Sponsors in United States	8
Moving to New Orleans.....	8
Recruited to work for Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation.....	9
Genesis of Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation	10, 15
Hurricane Katrina, 2005, evacuating	10
Coming home after Hurricane Katrina	12
Dangers after Hurricane Katrina.....	13
Father Vien Nguyen.....	14, 18
FEMA	14
Long-term planning for rebuilding community after Hurricane Katrina.....	15
Incorporation of Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation	15
Becoming executive director of Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation.....	16
Businesses returning to community after Hurricane Katrina.....	17
Recovery Grant Loan Program	18
Intercultural Charter School.....	18
BP Deepwater Horizon oil disaster.....	19
First meeting, regarding BP Deepwater Horizon oil disaster, at Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation	19
EPA, NOAA	19
Vietnamese work ethic.....	20
BP representative, BP training/employment for community, failure of Vietnamese/English interpreters	20
Congressman Joseph Cao, Rapid Response Team	22
EPA, U.S. Department of Labor	22
Second Harvest	23
Louisiana Department of Human Services	23
Medicaid, Medicare	23
BP claims processors	23
Providing technical assistance	23

Gulf Coast Claims Facility.....	23
Kenneth Feinberg.....	25
Subsistence-use claims against BP	25
Assessment of health of local fishing community	25
Oil-tainted shrimp caught	26
Cost of shrimping.....	26
Challenges of recovering from Hurricane Katrina compared to challenges of recovering from BP Deepwater Horizon oil disaster.....	27
Aquaponics, aquaculture.....	28
Most oyster shuckers in local community unemployed.....	28

AN ORAL HISTORY

with

TUAN NGUYEN

This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. The interview is with Tuan Nguyen and is taking place on June 2, 2011. The interviewer is Linda VanZandt.

VanZandt: Today is June 2, 2011. This is Linda VanZandt with the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. I'm at the offices of Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation [MQVN CDC] in New Orleans East, and I'm here today with Tuan Nguyen, who works here at Mary Queen of Vietnam and has been a lifelong resident, I believe, of this community, but we'll find out. OK, Tuan, can you spell your name just for the recording and tell me where and when you were born?

Nguyen: OK. It's spelled T-U-A-N, last name Nguyen, N-G-U-Y-E-N. And I was born here in New Orleans at Charity Hospital.

VanZandt: At Charity Hospital.

Nguyen: Charity, yeah.

VanZandt: Charity. OK, great. And where are your parents from? And if you could, state their names as well.

Nguyen: My parents are from Phu Quoc, Vietnam.

VanZandt: Could you spell that? I'm sorry to interrupt you.

Nguyen: P-H-U, Q-U-O-C, Vietnam. And my dad's name is Thanh Nguyen, spelled T-H-A-N-H Nguyen, N-G-U-Y-E-N. And my mom's name is Than Nguyen, and it's spelled T-H-A-N, N-G-U-Y-E-N.

VanZandt: OK. And do they live in this community?

Nguyen: Yes. They do.

VanZandt: OK. Great. And let's just start with a little bit of your personal background, Tuan, so that people can understand how you got to where you are here, helping in your capacity at Mary Queen of Vietnam. So if you will, just start out with

the year you were born, and any memories about childhood here in this very distinct community.

Nguyen: OK. So I was born in 1980, here in New Orleans, and basically I was born and raised here, went to school here, elementary school.

VanZandt: Where did you attend elementary school?

Nguyen: Sherwood Forest, which is now, it was wiped out by [Hurricane] Katrina. They tore it down. And I went to college here. I went to The University of New Orleans, graduated here. I work here. I received a bachelor of science in management, business management. And while I was going to school in my senior year, I actually got a job at Walgreens, which is a, well, not local, but it's a national chain drugstore here. And I worked right in the community, off of Bullard Avenue, which is about a mile, mile-and-a-half away from here. And I was trained there, and I continued to work for them for almost five years, mostly in this community, but one year on the West Bank, which is about twenty-five minutes away from here. And I basically, in childhood, I grew up around here. You know, I have a very large family, thirteen total, lots of brothers, three sisters, and growing up here was interesting. You grow up; you go to school with all familiar faces, all from the community, if not cousins, if not family, then friends. And I remember daily life was simple. It was kind of like come home from school; hurry up, do your homework; and you get to watch a little bit of cartoons. And then when it cools down a bit, we'd run out every day, and we'd play dodge-ball, kick-ball, hide-and-go-seek, other traditional Vietnamese games that you guys have never heard of. So we did that.

VanZandt: Can you mention a few of those? Because, boy, I played dodge-ball, too, and hide-and-seek. (laughter)

Nguyen: Yeah. They have this game called Tah-Lo(?). It's like you dig little holes in the sand. Right? And one hole for each kid who was playing. So if you've got five kids, you have five holes. The hole was big enough to fit a tennis ball. You played it with a tennis ball. So basically you'd draw a line. It would be about—I don't know—seven feet away from the hole. And you'd have to roll the ball into the hole. And whichever hole the ball fell into, that person had to run get the ball and throw the ball at the other kids who would run away. (chuckles) So it was really a fun game.

VanZandt: Sounds like a combination between skee-ball and dodge-ball.

Nguyen: Yeah, sort of. I don't know if it's actually Vietnamese or not, but I know we played it, and we called it in the Vietnamese name. You know, tops, marbles, the usual stuff. But yeah, that was basically our childhood. I grew up in a very tiny community. Everyone knew each other. Went to Catechism here, studied Vietnamese here.

VanZandt: Tell me about that. So you were a member—your family's Catholic.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: You're a member of Mary Queen of Vietnam Church.

Nguyen: Church. And of course we grew up going to church every day, *every* single day. I remember my brothers and I, in the summertime, we'd be lazy to go in the evening, so we'd wake up at six in the morning just to go and get it out of the way, sort of thing. (laughter) But yeah, basically, studied Vietnamese here. I was fortunate enough to have that opportunity.

VanZandt: Studied the language.

Nguyen: The language, the written language as well as the reading part.

VanZandt: That is fortunate. Within your family, were you required to speak Vietnamese?

Nguyen: Yes. Yes, because my grandparents and my parents, they do understand English, but they predominantly, they speak—they don't speak it; they understand it, but they don't speak it real well, so even to this day, when you talk to them it has to be in Vietnamese, like strictly.

VanZandt: Did your grandparents live with you?

Nguyen: No. They did before they passed [away], but when they were younger, before they needed assistance, they lived on their own. And they were the ones that taught me all my prayers. I know a good bit. (chuckles) So every summer we would go to my grandparents', my brothers and I, and we were like intensive prayer memorization every summer for like two years and was able to learn pretty much most of the book that we have to learn. So it made Catechism much easier for me.

VanZandt: Oh, *right*. Is that something that you didn't appreciate at the time and do now?

Nguyen: Oh, yeah, of course. Of course because, I mean, actually it was funny because we loved going to our grandparents' because of course, every grandparent spoils you. They were so nice, but every day at certain hours, we had to sit down and study prayers. And I appreciate it now because when I went to Catechism school, you had to learn prayers, and I knew all of them, like, by heart, and it was just so easy. So of course.

VanZandt: A [grade] in Catechism.

Nguyen: Oh, yeah, definitely. (laughter) So yeah, it was interesting growing up here, and part of the reason why I'm still here, because I love it, and it's unique. It's

different. When you grow up and you get the opportunity to travel here and there, there's really nowhere like it here. Yeah.

VanZandt: So many people in the second generation, so to speak, are kind of moving away from the communities where they grew up. So is that unusual for this community? Did most—

Nguyen: Not at all. I actually grew up with the same mentality because the mentality in this community—it probably still is to this day—is that you really can't improve or don't improve yourself until you move away to a bigger city, so to speak. One of the more popular cities are Dallas, Houston, Austin. Some people go to California, and up to the Northeast, but not as much. Texas is more of a more popular—and some go to Florida, Atlanta, but generally, yeah, you grew up with that kind of mentality, kind of like you got to get away to better yourself. I even grew up with the same mentality, thinking that once I graduated college, I was probably going to move away to get a job, but it didn't happen. So.

VanZandt: When did that change? What changed for you?

Nguyen: Probably because I met my girlfriend, who is now my wife, (chuckles) and she's a very different—her life setting is very different from mine. Her mother passed away at a very young age, so she was more attached to her family in terms of she took care of her family, more like the motherly figure, so she never really saw herself leaving. She saw herself staying with family, helping her dad, who understands English and can speak it a little bit, but not a whole lot, and also to kind of like be with her brothers and sisters. So yeah. So kind of, I sort of adopted that same sort of mentality, and so that's why we haven't moved. That's why we decided to reside here in the metropolitan area.

VanZandt: OK. And what is her name? I should ask for the record.

Nguyen: Her name is Mary.

VanZandt: Mary, OK. And do you have children?

Nguyen: No, not at this very moment.

VanZandt: OK. (chuckles) Well, that's great hearing about some of your memories around here. Now, who was pastor in the years growing up? Maybe that changed. Maybe there's more—

Nguyen: Father Dominic [Dinh Mai] Luong, who is now, I think, archbishop or bishop in California.

VanZandt: And he was very instrumental, I understand, in bringing a lot of the Vietnamese community here from other places.

Nguyen: Yeah, definitely. And kind of building this whole community from the ground up, yeah, very instrumental. He was sort of like the pastor that you don't mess with, kind of like the one (laughter), the serious one. Right? Because there are other priests that as we were young, we'd say, "Oh, he's the nice one." Or, "He's the one that's easier during church," or is quicker. You kind of judge the—

VanZandt: You could get away with stuff.

Nguyen: —priests, yeah, like that when you were younger, but yeah, pretty much.

VanZandt: OK. He made you toe the line.

Nguyen: What's that?

VanZandt: He made you toe the line.

Nguyen: Yeah, pretty much. You just kind of don't, with Father—at the time Father Luong would kind of walk in and kind of, "All right, y'all." (laughter) You know, it was kind of like that.

VanZandt: Yeah. Gotcha. OK. And so your education, you said you went to University of New Orleans.

Nguyen: Yes.

VanZandt: And what were your plans? I mean, kind of growing up, what were your dreams? What did you have in mind that you wanted to do?

Nguyen: I mean, growing up, it was funny because when I was younger I used to tell my mom, "If I grow up and if I'm smart enough, I'll become a doctor because you're always getting sick"—because my mom, she had thirteen kids, you know and, "So I can help with the bills." And of course, that didn't happen. Med[ical] school's pretty tough. But when I was younger, I was really, coming from a big family, never really wanted to put any—I mean, I grew up; I put myself through college. I didn't rely on my parents, and so I had to choose a university that *I* could afford. And so that's why I chose University of New Orleans. I mean, it's a good quality education for locals, but at the same time I didn't have to rely on my parents to put out money to pay for college because there's a whole lot of us. And so basically I put myself through college through work, while working, and took loans.

VanZandt: Living at home?

Nguyen: Yeah. I lived at home. That sort of kept everything at a minimum, kept things as simple as possible. So never really had huge aspirations to move anywhere at that time, through college, and pretty much just felt that with hard work, I'll

probably find a job and have a career, a decent career, and that was sort of like the mentality that I had, growing up.

VanZandt: And what was the occupation of your parents?

Nguyen: My mother grew up doing the toughest work, shucked oysters, peeled shrimp, picked crabmeat. I mean, she shucked oysters in *Mississippi* when she had to.

VanZandt: Oh, did she?

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: In Biloxi?

Nguyen: In Biloxi, when she had to; *wherever* the job was. But she pretty much raised the family doing shrimp peeling, shucking oysters, and picking crabs. She continued to do so even when I was growing up, and my dad did that as well, at certain points in his life, but he did work for a company right here, right down the street, off of Michoud [Boulevard], at the business park; a warehouseman, just basically cutting aluminum and metals and stuff like that, sort of like when—this company was a distribution company, distributing metals, different types of metals. And pretty much he did that for most of his life, very rough conditions, you know, kind of hard work. Yeah. Nothing special, nothing spectacular. Yeah.

VanZandt: Well, what did they do back in Vietnam? Can you just talk a little bit about that? And any stories, maybe, that they told you.

Nguyen: I don't know a whole lot. I mean, I do know some, but they were pretty self-sufficient. He knew some contracting work; he learned from his father. They kind of built their own houses and that sort of thing, kind of like father passing along these different skills to their kids. So he learned some construction, general contracting from his father, and he was also a fisherman. He eventually saved up enough money to either build—I forget. I don't know if he built his own boat or not, but he eventually got his own boat some time before the [Vietnam] War. And he put my whole family onto the boat, and as they were getting out, to get away from the Communists, that's when the American soldiers picked them up on the way out, so they had just abandoned their boat. But yeah, they pretty much worked for themselves.

VanZandt: Did he serve in the military at all?

Nguyen: He did. I think as a cook—I'm not sure—for the military, for the South Vietnamese military, so he did serve in the military, yeah.

VanZandt: OK. And do you happen to know what year he was born? It's OK if you don't. I was just curious of his age.

Nguyen: He's like sixty—I don't even know how old he is right now.

VanZandt: That's OK.

Nguyen: It's funny because my wife knows, but he's retired a while back already.

VanZandt: Tell me what you do know, because you were born here, so I guess you just heard some stories. What have you heard about their life in Vietnam and then their decision to leave, and kind of those war years? Anything that you know to share.

Nguyen: I don't know a whole lot. I mean, they used to tell stories when we were younger, but I—

VanZandt: I know. You don't pay attention. Right? (laughter)

Nguyen: Yeah. You don't pay attention when you're younger, but I just, all I know is that they—let's see. I think they were telling a story the day of that happened, that it was chaotic, that what had happened, it just happened like (snaps fingers) at the spur of the moment, and they had to gather what little they had and then literally hop on the boat with my grandparents and whoever. I mean, I know my mom's sister stayed back for whatever reason. I don't remember. And so did her brother, but not everyone made it, of course, and yeah, I don't know a whole lot about how it really happened. Probably have to ask them.

VanZandt: Do you know if they left, was it 1975?

Nguyen: Yeah. We came here in [19]75, because my sister was born in [19]75. She was born here, in Illinois.

VanZandt: OK. And how many siblings of yours were born in Vietnam?

Nguyen: Let's see. I have to do this every time. (laughter)

VanZandt: That's OK.

Nguyen: I have to count my fingers. Six. Yeah, six. I might be missing, but six, yeah.

VanZandt: OK. So when they left, they left with your grandparents and six children.

Nguyen: And my parents, yeah. And then my—

VanZandt: On his boat.

Nguyen: Yeah. But they were scooped up by the bigger U.S. boats on their way out.

VanZandt: OK. And then from there, did they spend any time in a camp? Do you know? Pulau Bidong or—

Nguyen: No. We were one of the more fortunate families, from what I understand. We were processed in Illinois, and a family immediately became our—what's the word?

VanZandt: Sponsors?

Nguyen: Sponsors. And the church put us into a home and got my dad a job immediately, and they just said it was really boring because there was no other Vietnamese families around.

VanZandt: Were they—

Nguyen: They were the only one. They didn't know the language. They didn't know the culture. They didn't know anything, but they told me that the sponsors were *so* nice. They still keep in touch with them. They write cards.

VanZandt: Do they?

Nguyen: Yeah. And I think one of them, like one of the sponsors passed, but like one of the kids, or both of them—the kids wanted to visit my mom one day—came down and visited my mom. And they would repeatedly tell us—they were the nicest people, and the church was really great, you know, got food, clothes on our back, got them a place to stay.

VanZandt: A Catholic church?

Nguyen: Yes, this was a Catholic church. And of course they found out—I don't know how, I guess by spread of word somehow—that a lot of the, some of the people they grew up with, they lived in villages [in Vietnam] together were moving down to New Orleans and that a church was being built, and the church was recruiting the immigrants. And so of course they all came down all at once when the opportunity arose. I remember my dad was saying that the sponsors didn't want them to leave, but it was kind of like better for my family because they could be around other Vietnamese Americans and stuff like that, so.

VanZandt: Absolutely, right. Do you know what his first job was when they arrived here?

Nguyen: No. He didn't tell me. (laughter) He was telling me a story; he didn't tell me what his first job was.

VanZandt: OK. Yeah. I just wondered if he got right into fishing.

Nguyen: No. He didn't go back to fishing, believe it or not. He just went straight to working for warehouses and companies. He never went back to fishing.

VanZandt: OK. So just your mother worked in oyster shucking, some.

Nguyen: In the shucking. He did, too, some, when he first came down here to the South, but as soon as he got a job in the warehouse, he just stayed there for a very long time. He had insurance, and it was enough to raise a family.

VanZandt: Right. OK. Great. Thank you. That helps us understand, your background. And so after college, when you graduated, how did you end up here?

Nguyen: I was working for Walgreens as a manager. And at the time, May, who was my predecessor, who was the economic development director, was going back to grad school, so they wanted to recruit someone. And the deputy director at that time, Susan, wanted to recruit someone that knew the community, that understood the community, that had a good education, and basically asked me to come and help. And I was kind of like, I was raised by my parents saying, "Be the best you can be. Make good money so we don't have to worry about you because we suffered, and we don't want you to suffer." You know, there's always that same mentality. And so I mean, I worked at Walgreens at the time. I was sort of like, I was doing really well. I really loved my job, and I was in line to get my *own* store, and so it's sort of like I was getting promoted, moving up the ladder slowly. And so after four-and-a-half years I was doing really well there with the company.

VanZandt: So it wasn't that you were looking for something.

Nguyen: No, I wasn't. The district manager knew me well, you know, the other manager. I was learning a lot, and I was doing really well. And they kind of asked me, "Well, why don't you just pop up? Do an intern[ship]."

VanZandt: Sure. That's the way they reel you in. (laughter)

Nguyen: Yeah. I said, "OK. Sure. I'll help out." And so I started by helping out, and the next thing you know, I left Walgreens, worked there full time, and I've been here ever since, pretty much.

VanZandt: Wow. So Mary Queen of Vietnam CDC was already established?

Nguyen: Yes. When I came on, they were established for a year. They were a year old.

VanZandt: For a year, OK. And so I guess that's kind of a natural segue into, can you tell me a little bit about how the community development corporation got started and when that happened?

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: Kind of the evolution to where you are now.

Nguyen: OK. So the interesting thing is my wife Mary is the one that started this organization, with Father Vien. And so we can go back to the storm [Hurricane Katrina], I guess. So when the storm happened—

VanZandt: Yeah, sure, because I wanted to get to Katrina. So go ahead, however it makes sense.

Nguyen: Yeah. It kind of connects. So when the storm happened, of course I couldn't—I was working for Walgreens when I evacuated. So all of the stores around here were shut down, and they gave us—they paid us. They were really good. They paid us for, I forget how long. Was it a month or something like that? They just went ahead and paid us.

VanZandt: You evacuated before the storm, did you?

Nguyen: I evacuated on Sunday.

VanZandt: The storm was Monday, just for the record.

Nguyen: Yeah. My wife would not leave. She's so crazy. Like we were leaving, she goes, "Well, why don't we just stay. It's just another storm." Because we're used to it. We've ridden out *so* many storms.

VanZandt: Sure. So many people felt that way.

Nguyen: Yeah, and for us. So I told her, "Well, it's a minivacation. Let's go visit my brother in Dallas." I hadn't seen him in a while, and my nephews and stuff. So when we were driving out, and we hit traffic, she says, "Why don't we just turn back and go home?" I'm like, "Well, no. Let's just go." And we're glad we didn't stay because it was pretty bad. But anyway, basically the storm happened, and then—

VanZandt: Did your parents go, too?

Nguyen: No. Yeah. They left. For them it was like, "Hey, let's go visit," their son, my brother in Dallas.

VanZandt: Right, right. OK. Everyone left.

Nguyen: Yeah. Really the only time my dad would go visit my brother in Dallas is when the hurricanes hit, and so they left already. I was one of the last to leave because I had to stay back and *work*, because I had to shut down the store. And so yeah, I had

to go do the protocol, shut down the store and all that. And it's actually almost fun, to be honest with you, when a storm is coming. You're like, oh, it's hectic, and everybody's trying to pump gas. And it's kind of crazy.

VanZandt: Kind of an excitement to it, a little bit, yeah.

Nguyen: Yeah, it is! It's almost—you grew up in this community; you're used to it. That's the truth. You're kind of like, "Storms are nothing." You're used to them. We grew up, and storm was hitting, you kind of run outside, "Hey, what's going on," when the storm came, and that sort of thing. And so we hung out. We waited until the *very* last minute on Sunday. We left Sunday afternoon, and then it took us pretty much all night to get to Dallas. The traffic was *horrendous*. It was horrible.

VanZandt: Because everyone else kind of waited until the last minute.

Nguyen: Yeah. And it's interesting, you know, Linda. We were driving, and we were leaving, and people were cutting the grass; people tending to their gardens. And my wife goes, "Why are we leaving?" (laughter) Cutting the grass, you know. She's—

VanZandt: You're like, "Don't look."

Nguyen: "They're staying. They're fine. They probably got enough water and food," whatever. Yeah, and so we left, and when it was hitting, we were sitting around, huddled around the TV at my brother's house in Dallas. We were watching on the news. It was kind of like, "Is this really happening? There's no way." Because we'd keep getting rumors and calls and texts saying, "Oh, I heard there's water. Oh, I heard this person died. I heard that person"—it's kind of like rumors, a lot of rumors. And we couldn't confirm any one of them because there were so many different rumors, ranging from we got—because we saw on the news, "Oh, the levees broke." But we wanted to know how this community was, and of course this community is not going to be on the news about how much water we got. And so we didn't find out anything until we actually got into contact with one of the guys that stayed back here, and he was, "Oh, we got water. I was pushing people around on boats," and stuff like that. And so that's when we—

VanZandt: What was your reaction?

Nguyen: I was just like, "Oh, my gosh." And of course the next question was, "Well, did *our* house get water?" And my wife was like, "Well, did *we* get water?" and this and that, and so never really got confirmation. It was always just hearsay. We would hear people say, "Oh, someone down the street said we got this amount of water, six feet of water." And then the next hour, someone'd say, "Well, someone down the street, she said we only got two inches of water." So it was kind of like we really couldn't believe anything, and so as soon as we heard—this was before the mayor [Ray Nagin] even opened up the city back for people. It was still too dangerous. But

we heard down the grapevine that you could actually get back into the city between, was it four or five in the morning, or four to six in the morning, or five to six? I forget what the exact time was.

VanZandt: That's right. I remember they opened those limited hours.

Nguyen: Yeah. But it was only open coming from the north side, coming from Highway 11, which is a small highway that you have to—you couldn't come through I-10. You could come through I-12, come back up through Slidell, come back down this way.

VanZandt: Like Hammond, Slidell.

Nguyen: Yeah. And the state trooper took a break for that small period of time. Word got out, and so we timed it. We hit it just right. We drove through; got back home with my family and went into the house, and we pretty much gutted what we could: threw out all the carpet, threw out the couch, cleaned out the refrigerator, threw everything out.

VanZandt: So what was your reaction when you first saw it? Do you remember?

Nguyen: I mean, of course we were kind of like, "Whoa! What the hell just happened?"

VanZandt: Was it worse than you imagined, or better?

Nguyen: Yeah, *much* worse. We came into a house full of mold and fungus growing everywhere, but you kind of—

VanZandt: How much water would you say you got?

Nguyen: My parent's house didn't receive much, kind of like a inch or two. My wife's house at the time received a foot-and-a-half to two feet. I mean, it doesn't sound like much, but it's enough to really wipe out your whole house, pretty much.

VanZandt: Yeah, absolutely. And you had two homes to worry about.

Nguyen: Yeah. And so we cleared out my parent's home and then went over to my wife. At the time, her dad couldn't make it back because her step-mom—her dad remarried—her step-mom was pregnant. So they stayed in Houston, and I went back with my wife and her little brothers. We almost had a little fun. We were bowling in the street.

VanZandt: You were bowling in the street?

Nguyen: Yeah. We were bowling in the street, (laughter) but we threw out what we could. But it's very different for my dad; my dad cleared the *whole house* out. We came in, and we just threw a lot of stuff out, but we couldn't really throw everything out because it was just too *much* for us to throw out. But we threw out a lot of stuff, just not everything. We didn't rip up the carpet. You know what I mean?

VanZandt: Yeah.

Nguyen: But my dad did all of that. He did all of that, so when the—

VanZandt: What kind of things were you able to salvage? Were there any personal belongings?

Nguyen: Only what was upstairs. My dad's house was a two-story house, but my wife's house was a one-story, so they threw everything away. They lost everything. They didn't have anything. Just the clothes on our backs.

VanZandt: So there was nothing you really took with you, prepared to—

Nguyen: You leave for it thinking it's a three-day vacation sort of thing, so that's the kind of thing we—our mentality was. But like my room was upstairs in my parent's house, so like all my personal belongings were still there. But you ended up throwing away a lot of stuff because the humidity, and after leaving it so long, and when you leave, you can only take so much. Like when my parents came back with one truck, there's only so much we could take and get out, and we were very limited in time because the National Guard was walking around, [helicopter] choppers were flying. And you had to kind of sneak around to do it. So once they spot you, they're like, "Get out." It was too dangerous. You know? And so—

VanZandt: And what was dangerous? Just for the record, so people years from now might really understand how bad it was.

Nguyen: The environment, the air, the water. They still had people looting with guns, that sort of thing. Really, with the looting thing, it was really dangerous because my wife told me her dad came back even earlier than that, when there was still water, and met guys with guns who would kind of like rob you when you were driving into the town or something, but they came in kind of pretty well prepared so they got back out. They came back when there was still a lot of water. So they got right back out.

VanZandt: Yeah, and without power for so long, too, things were dark early.

Nguyen: And so when the mayor finally opened the city back up, we came back immediately, and my dad cut the Sheetrock off, and he did as much as he could to prep the house and make sure it would really receive minimal damage.

VanZandt: Do you think that helped him in a way?

Nguyen: Oh, yeah.

VanZandt: Kind of feel like he had some control over the situation.

Nguyen: Big time. Big time, because when we came back, we had minimal damage in the house, and he just had to do, spray of course, redo the Sheetrock, redo the flooring and stuff. And before you know it, we were back. But I remember coming back early, and my wife's house had a lot more work to do, but *she* started volunteering with the church and Father Vien. At the time, CDC wasn't born yet, and she started volunteering, doing a lot of important supplies distribution, cleaning supplies, food. She did that at the church.

VanZandt: And we should say, too, for the record, and you expound because you know much more, but just the little bit that I know because I met Father Vien pretty early on, a few weeks after Katrina. This is Father Vien Nguyen, who was the pastor at the time at Mary Queen of Vietnam, who was quite the mobilizer and leader of the community post-Katrina.

Nguyen: Yeah. He was the one who actually recruited my wife Mary. You just have to keep in mind that in the community the pastor is kind of like the *man*. You kind of like, when you're younger, you kind of fear them because they're that figure, and fear them in a good way, not scared of them, but kind of like you respect. And so you don't really communicate. You do talk to them, but kind of like, "(speaking in Vietnamese) Hi, Father," and "Bye, Father," and kind of like, "Hey." That kind of thing, but only those that were close to him would come and talk to him. But at the time I remember my wife, at the time my girlfriend, was telling me, "Father Vien wants to recruit me to help rebuild the community." We'd never done it. I was like, "Whoa!" And she was applying for pharmacy school, or *planning* to apply for pharmacy school. And I was like, "Well, how's that going to affect your school? What are you going to do?" She said, "Oh, I'm just going to do it temporarily. I'm just going to help out."

VanZandt: So it's something she really felt the need—

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: —and wanted to.

Nguyen: And so she took it on, volunteered, and started doing the distribution and doing a lot of FEMA assistance, because a lot of the language barrier and all that. FEMA's really horrible at having that. It just wasn't there, and even when they hired some folks that could speak the language, they were the FEMA type. They weren't community members. You get what I mean?

VanZandt: Um-hm.

Nguyen: In other words, she was a community member trying to help another community member. So she did a *lot* of that for quite a while, and then next thing you know, they're doing all this long-term planning. First they were doing short-term planning, then long-term planning; how to rebuild the community. They started having forums; they did charrettes; they invited architects to come in and draw all these plans for them, and some of them are right there, the original ones.

VanZandt: Yeah. We're looking at them, too. Because this was really a chance to kind of start over and envision a new community.

Nguyen: Yeah. And Father Vien used to always say, "Well, you know what? The silver lining is that, yeah, we get to rebuild, and we get to say how we rebuild, and we get to do it how we want to do it." And so Mary was kind of really immersed and thrown into the position. She really was scared. She really didn't want to do it. And I don't know if Father knows this or not—he might know—but she really didn't want to do it. She was just kind of like, growing up, she wants to do something in the medical field where it's more secure; it's safer. You were raised, taught to either—we're raised to be either you become a priest or a nun, or you do something in the medical field. It's kind of like that. Do something good. And so she was kind of like, "Well"—and then I told her, "What's the worst?" We told each other, "What's the worst that could happen? Do it for a little while, and if it's time to go, you go. Right?" Well, one thing led to another, and the next thing you know the CDC was incorporated. She was thrown into the hot seat. She became executive director and she did it for two years, I think, before she applied to pharmacy school. She decided finally—she set it aside for so long; she finally decided to apply to pharmacy school, and she made it in, and that's when she left.

VanZandt: That's great. So maybe 2007 or [200]8?

Nguyen: Yeah, something like that. I don't remember. It was two years ago. Two years ago was when she left.

VanZandt: I wasn't sure if it was formed—

Nguyen: So two years ago was [2009]. She left in 2009, either [200]8 or [200]9. I don't remember what year.

VanZandt: OK. So it was formed—

Nguyen: Two thousand five, yeah. We were formed in [200]5, but we legally didn't have our 501c3 till 2006. Yeah, so.

VanZandt: And what is the makeup of it? Is there a board? If you can just kind of explain.

Nguyen: There's a board of directors.

VanZandt: Board of directors.

Nguyen: It's all community leaders. Father Vien is still our chair [of the] board. We have different community leaders throughout the community being on the board. It's all community members or users of the clinic and this and that. Some of them moved, but they're still board members.

VanZandt: OK. Fantastic. So it came about as a result of Katrina, and fortunately was in place with all of the resources and assistance in place in time for the BP [British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon] oil spill event.

Nguyen: Yeah. So (chuckles) it was crazy. You know, Katrina really taught us a lesson. And so when I came on board to the CDC, it was a year out, things were a bit more calm, but we were still doing a lot of Katrina work. It takes a while. I was doing a lot—the facade projects, that's my project out there. I did that, and I was doing a lot of—

VanZandt: The what?

Nguyen: The facade, the business facade.

VanZandt: The business façade, OK.

Nguyen: So basically we got a small pilot grant. It was like \$105,000 to do this project. And we created a partnership with MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], and we crunched numbers and did outreach, and we finally went out there with the business owners, and each business owner that wanted to participate in the program received a small grant, a matching grant to improve the business. The idea was to kind of bring the economy back, as much as we could, to this community, and so it was successful. We were able to do—more than half of the businesses received facade improvements with a limited amount of money, and the idea was to kind of like let the city know that, “Hey. We're back. Why don't you put some more dollars into this community we're building?” And so that's what—

VanZandt: Put a new face on things.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: And just also for the record, these are businesses that are along Alcee Fortier Boulevard here—

Nguyen: Alcee Fortier, sure.

VanZandt: —which is where you're located. And they were here previously, prior to Katrina.

Nguyen: Previously, prior to Katrina.

VanZandt: And so of course there were these years after Katrina where people kind of came and went. I know it was that way, definitely, on the Mississippi Coast. "Should we come first? Should the businesses come first? Should the people come first? Is there enough business *for* the businesses to open?" So how did that kind of evolve? And how many came back?

Nguyen: You know the difference between this community and every other Vietnamese-American community, even one as small as Biloxi or some as huge as Houston? The difference was—it was interesting. The people came back with or without businesses here. I mean, you think about it. When my family came back, my wife and I, we came back, we were cleaning out our houses using camp lamps, like camp lanterns, the little fire thingy? That's what I was using to clean up the refrigerator and all this. We didn't have electricity. There was no business. There was only one business. There was Ming Gang(?) Supermarket. She was operating using a generator. And anything beyond the little that she was able to sell out there, we had to drive all the way to the West Bank or Metairie to get food, and I had my—

VanZandt: Were there more open and available in Metairie?

Nguyen: Oh, yeah.

VanZandt: In better shape?

Nguyen: I mean, it was interesting. I drove my car from here to Metairie along I-10 and then [Highway] 610, pitch black, no lights. I ran over a brick or something—I don't know what it was—and blew my tire, pretty much broke my rim on the way home, buying food, going to Winn-Dixie in Metairie. But that was the kind of thing we were doing. We were kind of used to it. We did that for a very long time. Metairie, as soon as you hit Metairie—it's interesting—it was just, *boom*, like nothing happened. The lights were there. All these businesses were open, yeah. So we did that for a long time, the trekking back and forth to buy food and the necessities, but other than that, Ming Gang came back, Kenneth(?) Pharmacy came back, on their own accord, so.

VanZandt: Did they have any kind of assistance?

Nguyen: No, not at all. Even when I worked at the state to help them with the business recovery grant. We call it the Business Recovery Grant Loan Program, pretty much to help businesses come back. They received the grant if they came back, et cetera, within the parameters. But these guys, they opened way before that program

was even executed; had no assistance, no one received any dollars for anything. On their own savings, they came back and opened up.

VanZandt: And did it—like you said, the story that so many people have heard since is, “This is a community that did it before anyone else.” It was really a model for—

Nguyen: Yeah. Kind of keeping in mind, we did sneak back, and most of the community did. A lot of folks did. It was to the point where, I think the troopers found out, and they just didn’t leave it open anymore because, I remember my brother; I told my brother, and he was like, “How did you get in?” And I was like, “There’s a time.” (VanZandt chuckles) He came back. He calls me. He goes, “They didn’t take a break.” So they drive all the way back to Dallas.

VanZandt: They were on to you. (laughter)

Nguyen: Yeah. So they kind of (inaudible). But everyone came back on their own. Father Vien played a crucial role. He was the one that said, “Well, you know what? If we don’t come back, they *will* bulldoze us. If we don’t come back, they won’t turn on the electricity.” He held mass every week. I mean, the church was *hot*. They were doing candlelight power. I mean, that church was *packed*. I mean, it wasn’t as packed the first time we—I remember the first mass; there was not as many people, but I mean, it would literally double every week. And the next thing you know, we were having lunch after mass with the whole community. It was like really simple food, you know, rice, broth, some sautéed items. But the church would cook it, and then all the community members would eat together. And so it really started with just that small thing, and next thing you know, these different committees were like working on how to rebuild. The CDC was born. We were looking into long-term development, opening a school, opening a clinic, doing some business revitalization projects, you know, this and that. So, yeah.

VanZandt: Um-hm. And that was done—I’m so glad you mentioned that because coming in here, you pass the Intercultural Charter School.

Nguyen: Charter School, yeah.

VanZandt: Which was founded *before* the oil spill.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: The business facade project happened, so things were going on, and the cultural center being planned, the retirement center being planned.

Nguyen: Center was being planned. The clinic actually opened up, the two clinics. And so yeah, it’s interesting. And so it happened right before the spill, and then the spill—

VanZandt: Yeah. So let's get to that.

Nguyen: Yeah. So when the spill finally happened, we'd had sort of like this infrastructure, I guess you could say, within the CDC, and so when it happened, immediately community members went to us and to Father Vien and was like, "Hey, what are you guys doing about this?" And we're like, "Nothing, because we haven't talked to the people yet." So we said, "OK." So we held the first community meeting in May.

VanZandt: In May. OK. So the spill happened April 20, [2010].

Nguyen: It was April 20. The community members came to us like two weeks after. When they found out the spill wouldn't cap, we organized a community meeting on May 5, I think.

VanZandt: Do you remember about how many people showed up? Was that well attended?

Nguyen: Oh, yes. It was *very* well attended. We had people show up from, some from Texas, a bunch from Mississippi, some from Alabama, and even some from Florida, yeah, showed up.

VanZandt: So this wasn't just for this community?

Nguyen: No, it wasn't. It *was* for the community, but word spread, but we invited everybody. We didn't expect people to come, but people came. And I think the first one, I mean, that school was *packed*.

VanZandt: Where was it held?

Nguyen: At the Mary Queen of Vietnam, the Catechism school. Six hundred or something, six to eight hundred people. It was a lot of people. It was really, really packed. And we invited like everyone. We invited Congressman [Joseph] Cao at the time; he had become congressman.

VanZandt: Congressman Joseph Cao.

Nguyen: Yeah. He came. All the local—had some local—the mayor didn't come. Some of the local, a councilperson came. [Senator David] Vitter and [Senator Mary] Landrieu sent representatives. They couldn't make it, but they sent reps. A BP rep came. Folks from different federal agencies, EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]. A bunch of EPA folks came. We have a pretty good relationship with them. NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] came. We didn't even invite them, and they came. It was interesting. So there was a lot of people there, and from there we learned that people were just *scared* because they didn't know how they were going to work. They were just scared for their livelihood, and all they wanted to

do was work. That was pretty much it. And from there, the BP guy took notes. He was really good. He didn't answer anything he couldn't answer, so he didn't answer anything that was really—

VanZandt: Do you remember who that was?

Nguyen: Oh, shoot. I forgot his name. I probably have his card in my—

VanZandt: That's OK.

Nguyen: I probably have his card in my stack of—

VanZandt: But he addressed—

Nguyen: He didn't really—yeah, he addressed the crowd, but he was really good in terms of PR [public relations]. He didn't answer anything where it would hold BP liable for anything, so he really didn't answer any questions. He was just kind of like, "Well, we'll get back to you." That was his answer to pretty much everything.

VanZandt: And I assume translation was going on.

Nguyen: Yeah. We had interpreters and stuff there. We had headsets because we already had had headsets, but EPA went and got us another hundred, two hundred headsets. We actually, EPA actually hired a professional interpreter, but I guess this guy wasn't really—didn't expect it—he couldn't really do it. So Father Vien actually ended up interpreting for like two hours. Yeah. And so—

VanZandt: And so what came out of that? Did it give community members a chance to speak and voice their concerns?

Nguyen: Yeah, they did. They were the ones that spoke to the BP reps. They spoke to the politicians and bureaucrats and what not. And so from that, BP actually responded and came to us right after the, a day after the meeting and said, "OK. The people want to work. We'll train them. Can you organize a training, tomorrow?" And they were here at like five p.m., and I was like, "You're literally giving us less than twenty-four hours to organize. This is nuts."

VanZandt: And what kind of training would this have entailed?

Nguyen: For cleaning. For the cleaning. The cleanup, BP cleanup. And they would pay them and et cetera, but they just needed to get trained and certified. But this is what the people wanted, so we said, "OK. Fine. We will do that. You make sure you have interpreters there to be able to do it. Make sure they will interpret. Don't be like the guy who couldn't do it yesterday." "Oh, yeah. We have all that."

VanZandt: "We'll do our part; you do your part."

Nguyen: Yeah. “We have all that. Don’t worry. Just get the people there.” And, you know, we warned them, “Make sure you have interpreters.” And so we did our outreach. We sat here, and we called and called and called.

VanZandt: I was going to ask, how did you get the word out [with little notice]?

Nguyen: Well, we had all the staff sat down.

VanZandt: Phone bank, yeah.

Nguyen: Staff and the interns sat down, and we called like everybody, and we actually, I think—

VanZandt: We can pause.

Nguyen: OK. (brief interruption) We told them; we said, “We’ll organize.” And so the next day fishermen from all over came, mostly from the community, but some from Mississippi, Alabama. They wanted to get trained. These people are ready to work. About six hundred, literally, deckhands and fishermen showed up to this meeting. Some community members who were like, “Oh, I want a job.” So come anyway and find out what’s going on. But it was a lot of people. It was packed. And keep in mind they had media there because they had media at the first meeting, May 5. So they had media at the training. All of the local channels were there. The newspaper was there. They started the training, and they had two interpreters, two girls there. And they didn’t expect what happened. So they started interpreting, but they weren’t ready, themselves. They didn’t have terminology for these technical terms like “boom.” Like, what is a boom? There’s no word for boom. You actually have to just say, “Oh, it’s a floating device that stops the oil.” You had to kind of like just explain it. And so they weren’t actually *interpreting*. They were just saying “boom.” And then these fishermen were like, “What the heck is a boom?” And then they were using terminology that some of these guys were offended by because these two girls are obviously like recently from Vietnam. I think they’re from the North, and so these predominantly immigrants who lost their country to the North was kind of like—I was standing there, and they start whispering to each other. And I thought, “Oh, crap. Something’s wrong. This is not good.”

VanZandt: So they sort of introduced this element of distrust, maybe?

Nguyen: Well, I mean, they basically were using terminology that weren’t accepted by the Southern immigrants who fell to these Communists, and then they weren’t fully translating, interpreting some of the terminology, either. And so [I said], “Guys, can you just stop?” One of the fisherman was saying, “Can you just stop?” He’s a younger guy. He’s younger. So he said, “Can you just do it in English?” And so we tell him, “Well, if you do it in English, the other 95 percent of the guys won’t understand, so no, you can’t do it.” But it got to the point where they just stopped.

They couldn't do it anymore. They couldn't interpret anymore. They were so ill-prepared that they did it in English, and of course the other folks didn't understand anything. They didn't have enough of these yellow cards that they were supposed to certify these people. They only had so many, so half or a little less than half of the participants there didn't receive these cards. And so we were having all these issues and problems. I remember a lot of these deckhands came to me *way* after the training and was like, "I still didn't get my card yet, and they promised they were going to get it. They never followed through." And so this kind of like catastrophe was on the news, and it was on the newspaper, and so BP kind of looked really bad. They stumbled, and so that's when they came back to the City, saying, "Well, OK. How can we work with you?" And so we created a partnership with them, and they had people who actually came to the office *every* day and were like, "OK. What can we do to help the community? How can we help?" And next thing you know, Congressman Cao created this Rapid Response Team. He invited myself to be on it.

VanZandt: Yeah. Tell me. I know we don't have much time, but what was your role in that?

Nguyen: Yeah. He invited myself. Minh [Nguyen] is with a local youth group [VAYLA]; he's executive director. He joined the group, and one of his staffers, Jennifer Vu. And so the next thing you know we were traveling nonstop for like a month. We visited fifteen cities all across the Gulf Coast, different states.

VanZandt: So this was something Joseph Cao had organized.

Nguyen: He did, himself.

VanZandt: So this was for the Vietnamese community to—

Nguyen: No, not just for the Vietnamese community, like for the Gulf Coast. That was his—

VanZandt: Oh, OK.

Nguyen: I think he first did it to help the Vietnamese community, but it kind of like—everyone kind of came to him, "Well, how can"—and so we actually visited the Native Americans, the Cajun Americans. We started working with the African-American oyster fishermen, and between all of this we're working with the Feds, you know, like EPA. We're working with Department of Labor. They were really great. Next thing you know all these secretaries are coming out and visiting and trying to find us. So Secretary Solis from the Department of Labor must have did like three community forums; she did a lot. And we organized fishermen for her, and she sat down at a roundtable. It was so cool, like at a table like you and I are sitting, and she would just talk to the fishermen, and we would interpret. And so a lot of this happened, and next thing you know, while we're doing all of this, I'm working for the staff to organize like the immediate response needs that the community members

requested for, and that was utility assistance. We partnered with Catholic Charities to provide utilities assistance, food vouchers, food boxes with Second Harvesters. They brought the food boxes down; we were passing that out. Getting them money to pay for their electricity bills, some with some rental assistance. We asked for the state's Department of Health and Human Services [DHS]; they brought in three wonderful women to help with food stamps assistance. They were great. I mean, we still keep in touch with them. They're so wonderful.

VanZandt: I was going to ask, are these relationships still on-going?

Nguyen: Yeah. With DHS it still is. I mean, the beautiful thing was not only were we able to help the people that were affected by the spill, we even helped just community members who had issues with food stamp applications. They came in, and they helped them. They were just helping anybody and everybody who was coming through this door. They came here every day, and they were great. They stayed *way* until like months out, until we didn't even need them anymore, and they were still here. I mean, we still needed them for the community, but in terms of the immediate oil spill response, we attended to it. And so we were able to do that. We invited the state's Medicaid, Medicare folks. They came and took applications. We actually demanded that BP put in some of the [claims processors]. They came in. So it was sort of like a one-stop shop that we had going on here. Crazy, it was hectic. It was hot. We had hundreds of people out here at a time, lining up. I mean, it was pretty bad, like—

VanZandt: It sounds like it was a real source of comfort and security in just this—

Nguyen: It really was.

VanZandt: —time of the unknown and uncertainty of, “What's going to happen?”

Nguyen: It really was because we actually had people coming from Lafayette, people coming from Mississippi, coming here, and to be honest with you, some of them came just for information. I remember some Lafayette folks leaving at three, four in the morning to try to get food vouchers, at the same time, trying to get information, and it was that kind of thing we were dealing with. And so, and at the same time we were out there, we were outreaching, working with the Rapid Response Team, with Congressman Cao, going out there, reaching out to them as well, and finding out and trying to figure out what was wrong. And so that kind of like, that whole thing happened. And so that's how we responded to the oil spill. Next thing you know, we're putting in a proposal to the state to be a technical assistance provider. We got that grant. We were able to hire like seven employees and provide all this technical assistance. We retained one just from all of those. It was a good grant. We were able to hire some folks, just an *immediate*, quick response. We processed hundreds of applications with GCCF [Gulf Coast Claims Facility], not only helped process, but helped advocate for them, tried to get them as much help as we could.

VanZandt: Gulf Coast Claims Fund [and Facility], which took over—

Nguyen: Facility, which took over the BP fund. They were actually more of a headache than BP, believe it or not.

VanZandt: Yeah. I was going to say, BP was so vilified.

Nguyen: Oh, yeah.

VanZandt: But it sounds like you had a—

Nguyen: They were, but at least they came here, and they said, “Hey, Tuan, how is applicant Mr. Tuan doing?” “Well, you know what? Mr. Tuan has got issues. He sent this and this.” “OK. Well, let me take that back.” And they would actually *help* and try to make it happen, but GCCF, completely different. You would call and, “Well, I don’t have authority to answer that. I don’t have authority to help you.” And then you still have a lot of people dealing with that same issue, so we actually preferred to work with BP.

VanZandt: So has it gotten worse now, what you’re dealing with and the lack of response? Or how would you characterize—

Nguyen: With GCCF it really did become worse. It really did get worse. It was *really* tough. It was like the people became numbers. We became a process. It’s just, for GCCF, it was just kind of like, “Well, we helped 85 percent.” We just became a percentage, whereas BP was kind of like, at least we had Linda and Bill coming in here every day. Like they brought a tent for the people. It’s not much, but it’s better than—

VanZandt: It doesn’t take much.

Nguyen: Yeah. And they brought water. And it wasn’t much, and they did stumble at first, but at least they sat down and made an effort, came in here and talked to the people and pulled people’s files that had issues and problems.

VanZandt: So why do you think that is with GCCF? What do you think? There’s a sort of tenuous relationship. They’re supposed to be administering BP money, but—

Nguyen: I think it’s a very simple answer because BP was responsible, so BP, to save face and to save stock numbers, at least they can call back and say, “Well, we are trying to work with the community,” whereas GCCF, they were not liable to the government *or* BP. Yeah, they’re sort of like supposed to be this independent agency that’s supposed to fairly help people, but by doing that, they weren’t held accountable by anybody. All we could do was go to our bureaucrats and Senator Vitter and Senator Landrieu and say, “Senators”—at the time Congressmen Cao, until he left office—“This is what’s going on.” And they would work for it. And that was the

only way we received pressure, whereas BP, we actually sat down and had calls with these big guys, and they were like, “OK. We will”—because I mean, they were in the process of putting together a claims facility down here on Michoud. We told them, “Well, no. We’ve got this going on. We *really* need your claims adjustors here in the office.” And they put two guys in the office for as long as they could. And so—

VanZandt: So what’s going on now? And we would go on longer, but in the interest of time, what are the biggest issues now, the challenges? And what do you see for the future? Because there are some, like you said, silver linings with the agroponics. We talked to Daniel [Nguyen]. What are the real challenges? What are people showing up for now?

Nguyen: They’re actually still showing up with GCCF claims issues. A lot of people still haven’t got paid. And, you know, [Kenneth] Feinberg through his defense is going to say, “Well, they didn’t have documentation.” Well, you know what? When you come into his office, and you send something five times, six times, through e-mail, through fax, and through—you have to ask yourself the question, “What the heck’s going on?” And then you find out they’d lose people’s files, and people are having to submit applications again. Next thing you know they’re having double numbers. Lots of people have served different problems, and our lead TA provider, Tinh(?), still sees people; not as much, of course. A lot of people were able to be processed. You know what I mean. Out of—hundreds of people were helped. Yeah, there are going to be a lot of people that are happy with their claim, of course. But still, if it’s just one person that’s unhappy, our job is not done. So we’re still working with people. We’re trying to, we’ve been fighting and advocating for GCCF to pay for the subsistence-use claim, which is basically saying that when people fish, they don’t just make the dollar amount; they do take home shrimps and fish for their family and friends to eat. And now that that’s no longer there, they actually have to spend money out of their own pockets to provide food. And we’ve been fighting for that, and we took it to, we took some fishermen up, all the way up to DC, sat down at a Senate committee hearing in front of Feinberg, and he’s promising the guy on the side, “Well, we’ll take care of it. We’ll take care of it.” And he never paid out a penny for subsistence use. We’ve been getting—

VanZandt: I heard he’d been promised some money. So he still hasn’t received any?

Nguyen: No. And we’re still, we’re getting people being denied, and we provide very good documentation. We come up with the numbers and everything for them. It’s just not enough.

VanZandt: So how’s the community doing? What is the mental state of the community?

Nguyen: So there are some fishermen that are back out, fishing, some, not all. A lot of deckhands can’t find jobs. Some of the boat captains are not out there fishing. We’ll get reports, we did—we haven’t heard any lately—but we’d hear reports of oil.

Some catching shrimp—we actually had one of our staff go out with some of the fishermen that went out, that caught some shrimp that had oil tainted on them.

VanZandt: What areas? Do you remember what areas?

Nguyen: It was out there in Lake Borgne, out here.

VanZandt: Lake Borgne.

Nguyen: Yeah.

VanZandt: This was recently?

Nguyen: Yeah. It's about like a couple months ago. And we've had some reports where they've got some weird bubbles or something in the water.

VanZandt: And do you report that?

Nguyen: Yeah. We sent the shrimp out to be tested by Tulane for, you know, sort of like don't want to report it to BP or GCCF; we really don't see the sense behind it. And so yeah, and so we do report it to—I don't know if they reported the shrimps to NOAA or not, but we did build a relationship with them when we were working with the Rapid Response Team and all that. So we feel like at this current point and moment, if there's an issue or something, we're not afraid to immediately report it to EPA or NOAA or, you know, wherever it needs to be reported, and so.

VanZandt: So some, it sounds like, are going out. I talked to a tuna fisherman yesterday who hadn't been out in a year, but he's going out next week. And he said quite a few others are kind of waiting to see how he does.

Nguyen: Yeah. And so, yeah, some people are starting to go back, but not all, kind of like waiting to see how things go, how things are. But yeah, because a trip is not—they cost them thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars to prep, buy the fuel, and then they go out there, and they don't get anything. That's their livelihoods we're talking about. Yeah, it's a risk, so.

VanZandt: And we're at the beginning of hurricane season. Have you noticed, are people fearful, or what—

Nguyen: Um, no. It's been mentioned, but I mean we're not fearful. You know, (chuckles) I joke about it with my wife, "If any of the hurricane names sound a bit crazy or wild, let's get out of town." (laughter) Like Katrina sounded like she could be a wild, wild woman, so it's just kind of, you know, we joke about that. (laughter) If it's a nice name—

VanZandt: You got to have some levity. Don't you?

Nguyen: Yeah. If it's a nice name, we should be all right. (laughter) We joke about it and stuff like that, but other than that, no, the hurricane season for us is just—

VanZandt: Just another season.

Nguyen: Kind of like earthquakes in California. Right? If it comes, you kind of just—you can't—

VanZandt: And I guess just in closing—because I know people are waiting on you—people who know what New Orleans and this area's been through after Katrina, what are the differences between what people are dealing with now with the BP oil spill versus Katrina?

Nguyen: The biggest difference was with Katrina, it was almost their future was in their hands. *They* decided they were going to rebuild. *They* decided if they wanted to come back or move away. They fought the landfill. It was in their hands, and they didn't allow a landfill. They said, "We want a school." So we sat down, and we chartered a school. But with the spill, you looked in these strong men's eyes who worked their whole lives and are never dependent on any agency or government or *anyone*, look at you and go, "What the hell am I supposed to do now? Because if I can't use my hands to feed my family, what am I going to do?" That was the biggest difference. It was the unknown, as compared to, "Well, with Katrina, water hit six feet or five feet or two inches. I can do this, and I can come back," whereas with the oil spill it's kind of like, "Well, when can we fish?" Or, "How is it out there right now?" Like you said, like one guy's going, but what the other six, seven, sitting there like, "Should I take the risk? It's going to cost me \$40,000 to go out there. If I don't make it, that's \$40,000 *more* I'm in the hole." And so it's the unknown. It's the uncertainty that's—you can't deal with that. It's almost like it's a mental thing, whereas Katrina, it's mental, but physically you can do something about it.

VanZandt: Like your father did.

Nguyen: Yeah. He came home and ripped up his carpet and cut off his Sheetrock up to four feet *before* we were even told we could come back. It's that control.

VanZandt: And immediately see that progress and know that you're getting somewhere positive.

Nguyen: Yeah. Yeah. But with the spill, these guys out here don't know *when* they can go back. That's the biggest difference.

VanZandt: And so you're moving forward in this workforce development and trying to retrain. What are some of the other businesses or occupations that you think this community could—

Nguyen: Well, we did do a community workshop, and we found out that people were definitely very interested in new technologies such as aquaponics and aquaculture. So we're moving forward, and we're trying to do a pilot project with the State and with the City and with the Feds, as well. And so hopefully it's a great pilot project. We've got a good number of people signed up, and they're ready to go. We hope that they become entrepreneurs; they become vendors. And these are the people that were dislocated by the spill.

VanZandt: That's what I was going to ask you. These are fishermen?

Nguyen: Yeah. Well, actually the ones that's very interested in the aquaponics piece, they are the shuckers, like my mom. That's all they know how to do. They've shucked their whole lives here, and with the spill, it wiped out their industry, and—

VanZandt: And the Mississippi River flood has affected—

Nguyen: Yeah. And from all the women that worked, I think there were one or two that have been called back, but *very* few jobs. Not one or two, a little more, but a lot of the women, yeah, a lot of women, that's all they do. And yeah, they're very interested, and they want to try it out, and so that's just part of it. And we're also trying to just place people to work in anywhere and anything that's available out there because we'll have like a temp agency, that makes a cut off of your pay, come here and try to recruit people for a hotel job, and we get like thirty, forty people coming here. It's just like, people are ready to work. So just trying to do our best to try to get people to get jobs.

VanZandt: Well, thanks, Tuan. I appreciate all your time. And good luck with everything that you have going on.

Nguyen: Thank you, Linda.

VanZandt: And it sounds like you might end up being a role model, your community—

Nguyen: Oh, I don't know. (laughter)

VanZandt: —in this whole sustainability effort.

Nguyen: We're trying to. And for us it's not even about being a role model. For us it's trying to help this community become self-sustainable and to create jobs, and hopefully it works, and people embrace it, and that we do become some sort of hub or something for the area.

VanZandt: Yeah. That would be great. Thank you so much.

Nguyen: OK.

(end of interview)