

Oral History of Peterson Pham (any pronouns)

From the UC Irvine Community-Centered Archive Project (CCAP) Internship with
Viet Rainbow of Orange County's (VROC's Oral History Project

Session Information

Title	Oral History of Peterson Pham (any pronouns)
Storyteller	Peterson Pham (any pronouns)
Interviewer	Gabriel Chen (he/him)
Transcriber	Gabriel Chen (he/him)
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Content Notes	Oral history recounting a childhood and upbringing as queer-identifying in Garden Grove, navigating the "Orange Curtain," leading public relations for VROC, and bridging family dynamics through community filmmaking and mental health practice.
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Summary	In this oral history for Viet Rainbow of Orange County (VROC), Peterson recounts their upbringing behind the "Orange Curtain" in Garden Grove. They share their journey from feeling isolated in high school due to a lack of LGBTQ+ representation to finding a thriving queer community at UC Santa Barbara , which ultimately inspired them to return home to organize. Peterson discusses serving as VROC's Public Relations Chair and producing a raw, personal short film through VAALA's Youth in Motion program, which acted as a catalyst for coming out to their mother. Finally, as a licensed clinical social worker and therapist , Peterson reflects on the intersection of community-centered mental health and the philosophy of "being" as a form of resistance.

ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPTION

SESSION ONE

Wednesday, June 10, 2026

[00:00] Gabriel (he/him)

Hi Peterson, thank you for joining me today. I'm excited to conduct this oral history with you on behalf of VROC. Just for the first question, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Tell me about your relationship with your Vietnamese and Vietnamese American identity?

[00:17] Peterson (any pronouns)

So, my name is Peterson. Um, I go by any pronouns. I'm in my mid-thirties. About 10 years ago, I started getting involved with Viet Rainbow of Orange County (VROC). I was born and raised in Orange County. The only time I've left Orange County was for school; I went to UC Santa Barbara, and that's where I started getting involved in my communities. I was really motivated to go back to Orange County and to be involved as a queer, LGBT person in Orange County, um, and I've been here since.

[00:53] Gabriel (he/him)

Can you tell me a little bit more about your upbringing as an LGBTQ+ individual? Can you tell me a little bit about what discovering your identity was like growing up, and then maybe how that affected the work that you wanted to do in the future?

[01:10] Peterson (any pronouns)

Um, a little bit more background about me: I'm currently a licensed Clinical Social Worker. I work full-time as a clinical therapist and part-time as a medical social worker. And my identities and my experience working with my diverse community have really informed my present work and have really been touched upon in my lived experience growing up in Orange County. I get to work with many people within Southern California talking about their issues with growing up—it may be a family that hasn't been supportive of them or a community that doesn't feel safe or at home for them. And I can definitely relate to that. Um, I grew up in Garden Grove where, technically, we're still behind something called the "Orange Curtain," separate from places like Los Angeles and Long Beach from the rest of Southern California. So knowing that growing up, it was quite scary for me to be coming into my own identity. I knew I was different from very young. And there were times when I would be laying in bed and kind of hoping and wishing that I would be normal. Like, I just wanted a normal upbringing, that my family was normal. And I realized that my family has a lot more complexity, and that me as a queer, LGBT person also had a lot more things that were special about me. I went to a high school called Los Amigos High School, and that's where I was starting to come out. There were not a lot of other LGBT students—maybe there were two, and not including me. So representation was quite difficult. Conversations around sex, sexuality, and gender were very non-existent. And it was quite—I guess it's scary because there was like no representation, nobody to help provide a visual or a narrative that I could follow in terms of coming out and connecting with people who looked, or acted, or were simply like me. And it took me going to UC Santa Barbara when I started opening up and flourishing. UC Santa Barbara had a larger LGBT community that was very active. I just felt as though Orange County was not safe for me as a person who

was LGBT, which is frustrating because the Vietnamese community here is so large. I've even overheard parts of my family saying that they would be voting "yes" for Prop 8. So it just felt as though within my family, within my community, there was no space for me as an LGBT person despite me also being Vietnamese, right?

[04:41] Gabriel (he/him)

Understanding that, like, you know, you kind of made the decision to move away from Orange County, right? To Santa Barbara seeking maybe greater alignment with your identity and maybe more safety. What ended up bringing you back? Can you tell me a little bit about what drew you back to Orange County in the first place, and maybe drew you back to roles like the ones that you had in VROC contributing to the LGBTQ+ community in Orange County?

[05:10] Peterson (any pronouns)

Ultimately, I really did think that it was Viet Rainbow of Orange County that brought me back. Near my last year in college, I was heavily involved in community organizing. I was really about making sure that there were systems, programs, and people who looked, felt, and acted like me, and creating environments that made sure that not only did these people feel safe but, ultimately, at the end of the day, for me to feel safe. And it was an article—I forget which newspaper—that had images of LGBT people, which ended up being the Viet Rainbow of Orange County, standing and picketing and saying that it was important for them to show up as Vietnamese and LGBT people during the Lunar New Year parade. And that really sparked a motivation to say that there are people like me, there are people who have gone through similar struggles as my upbringing, and that I could have a community back in Orange County. And that it was important for me to participate in that and to contribute what I have learned and discovered about myself in college, and to bring that back to what's supposed to be my home community, right?

[06:40] Gabriel (he/him)

Could you provide me a little more insight into the types of contributions that you made to VROC, and maybe a timeline of when you started contributing and what that kind of looked like for you specifically in your role?

[06:54] Peterson (any pronouns)

I graduated in 2013 and I started getting involved in VROC at the end of that year, around I think October. And there were conversations already about what the next year for the Tet parade would look like.

[07:10] Gabriel (he/him)

Yes.

[07:10] Peterson (any pronouns)

I was driven to my first VROC meeting, which was basically down the street. It was at Anh Hieu's place, and we were basically neighbors. And from there, I was designated to be public relations, which I was already doing kind of in college, so I had some experience working with different organizations, um, being the face and communicating with these different places, and different businesses, and different

organizations within the school. So I was ready to utilize some of that experience and support VROC in that sense.

[08:05] Gabriel (he/him)

Got it. Uh, I got to take a look at the documentary, the film that you made for VROC, and I thought it was really—I thought it was really gripping. I thought it was incredibly emotional. I thought the choices that you made, like capturing the vignettes of different families and your personal experience, were really powerful. Could you tell me a little bit about, you know, while in VROC, your relationship with film? Like, what drew you to want to contribute to VROC through the production of that film in the first place?

[08:40] Peterson (any pronouns)

It was being given the opportunity to participate in a program called Youth in Motion, which was a collaboration with VAALA (Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association). And it was a program for young filmmakers, and for us to be able to learn what filmmaking was. And it was something that I felt as though I couldn't—I didn't have the opportunity, the chance, or the time to be able to explore that in college. So when this opportunity through VAALA came up, I decided to apply. And it was interesting because there were narratives that I wanted to talk about, different storylines that I wanted to talk about, but it just ended up being so easy to be able to utilize my own narrative, my own experiences with the Viet Rainbow of Orange County, to be put into a short film. And I used that opportunity to come out to my mom because, even though I was doing active work in the community, I was technically not letting anybody know that I was doing it.

[10:09] Gabriel (he/him)

Yes.

[10:09] Peterson (any pronouns)

So I used that as an opportunity to bridge my family with the work and my chosen family through VROC.

[10:19] Gabriel (he/him)

Can you tell me a little bit maybe about how the film was received, maybe both by the community and also by your family and by people that were close to you?

[10:33] Peterson (any pronouns)

I kind of told people in VROC that I was involved with Youth in Motion. I mean, naturally, they saw me holding a camera or my phone, which was the primary source of me collecting these images and these videos. But I mean, as the PR chair, I was always taking kind of videos, so they didn't necessarily know what I was going to do with these videos. I also told my mom, barely, like, "I'm in a little community program." And I really, maybe unintentionally but maybe also intentionally, kept it kind of quiet between them two. The first time any first draft of the film was received, I was still putting it together. Nobody knew what the story was about; I didn't know what the story was about. And it was just haphazard that I put all these clips and audio clips together. And it was received in a way that was very surprising because, like I said, I didn't know what the film was going to be about. But with the short draft, there was a solemnness that made me feel as though maybe there was something there. And I just built upon that in preparation for the film festival, where we, as a cohort, were able to debut our film. And that was where

my chosen family and my biological family—specifically my mom—were able to see this film together and kind of have that event as a way of connecting the two. And I think it was received well, and having them understand my intentions of really bridging the two if you do watch the film. Essentially, that's what I was trying to do with the audio clips and the video clips that I was able to collect from both areas of my life.

[12:51] Gabriel (he/him)

Yeah, I feel like when you watch the film, you really get a sense that the viewer is also experiencing those feelings of—I don't know, like anticipation, almost maybe a little bit of anxiety of like, "how are these two—how are these two parts of my life going to kind of come together?" Right? Um, I think that's something that's so raw about the film. And so that's something that is really, really impactful about the film when it ultimately came down to that moment, right? Where, you know, VROC—the VROC team, your chosen family, and your biological family—they actually coming together and watching it, what was that like for you? Like, you know, you spoke a little bit previously about how, you know, at first Orange County was kind of a community that you wanted to maybe, like, leave and, you know, that you didn't feel safe in. What was that like for you coming back to that community, facing like something so raw, so vulnerable in front of two communities that meant a lot to you? Like, what was that like in the moment, if you remember?

[13:56] Peterson (any pronouns)

Now that you're sharing about that, I'm reminded of when I was collecting the videos from these meetings. And there was a specific meeting where I think a news reporter showed up and decided to take photos. And everybody at the meeting was showing their face except for me, which—maybe it was intentional or unintentional—but it, I think, it was representative of where I was in terms of me being out and visible in regards to my community work.

And in having that moment at the film premiere, I think it finally felt as though, "this is home." Having all these different people be supportive, be proud, be excited that they're able to visibly see everything be connected, even though it's through a short film. Yeah, I know, being able to see that as a representation of where I was in my life at that time. I think it was really special for me because I was like, "this is it. This is everything kind of being worked on." That felt like the culmination of the reasons why I was doing all this work, and it was to feel like I had a place for myself and for my narrative to be heard. And it felt as though that moment was accomplished then.

[15:36] Gabriel (he/him)

Now that, you know, a couple of years have gone by since you produced that film, what's your relationship with your piece of work now? Like, what do you—looking back at it now, what do you think of it? You know, having basically started a new career and everything like that, what does your relationship with that piece of art and that medium look like for you now?

[15:59] Peterson (any pronouns)

I think, well, by now I think it's been like 10 years. Yeah. And within that time, Anh Tuan, the one who's in the film has passed away—my mom has passed away. And for me, the film is a great reminder of—whenever it's Mother's Day, whenever it's my mom's birthday, whenever it's New Year, there's something that I can return to as a reminder of where I am currently and how it compares to where I was

before, and how much growth and change has happened even though things might potentially look the same. When I watch the film, I mean, nothing's changed within the film, but I personally have changed. And one of the reasons why I kept a lot of the blank spaces in the film was, as great as it is to be shown like in a theater, I think ultimately I wanted the short film to be seen through a computer screen or a phone screen that is reflective, and for the viewer to see their own reflection during those blackout moments. And when I watch it again, I see my face change and how I've grown within that time. But as I said, these storylines, these audio clips of my mom, haven't changed.

[17:33] Gabriel (he/him)

Can you tell me first a bit about how you define mental health and how you define maybe taking care of yourself and taking care of your mental health?

[17:47] Peterson (any pronouns)

Um, that's such a broad question. And I think mental health—well, uh, one of the questions that was asked during the Q&A for the premiere was about mental health. And one of the fellow directors got asked why they wanted to create a short film and participate in this program. And they said that they wanted to make films for their mental health. And as great as that was, I challenged that response by saying, um, making films is great, sharing your story is great, but that doesn't replace seeking a therapist, seeking a psychiatrist, getting help. And for me, mental health, even though it might be an individualistic thing where you can work on things yourself, it's that collaboration between you and that provider, you and these other clinicians, you and your entire treatment team, you and your entire community. Mental health is not something that you experience individually, and it's something that is affected by the people around you, the community around you. And I will say personally, I mean, everybody deals with mental health concerns, but even though I was getting involved in college, I was still not treating myself in the way that I feel as though I deserved to be treated in order for somebody to be seen as excelling in their well-being. And it really takes people, community, the moms, the peers, the people involved to really help build what community mental health looks like. Because like I said, you can experience individual mental well-being, but when you're healthy, the community around you is healthy, and when the community around you is healthy, you can also be healthy, too. And that was my relationship with my community mental health, seeing how the impact of our environment is a contributing factor to somebody's emotional well-being. And that mental health does not look like something that you work on alone; it's something that you collaborate with others in order for you to be the best version of yourself.

[20:26] Gabriel (he/him)

I feel like your perspective is very focused on the treatment side of mental health. Can you expand more on kind of your day-to-day role now as a professional? What does that look like for you?

[20:38] Peterson (any pronouns)

In the professional realm, I provide individual therapy, so I do talk therapy one-on-one with the person. A lot of the people that I currently see are adults, young adults, diverse backgrounds, LGBT, people of color. And one of the things that I do talk about is that community aspect of well-being, and having them be involved in their community, being outside, being connected with others, being able to see that they don't need to work on things alone. I can take some of that load off their back, at least for that time when I'm

seeing them weekly, so that they can really make sure that they know that there's somebody else who has experienced very similar things.

And if I haven't experienced similar things to them, that I can find routes, options, ways for them to feel more capable and able of knowing that they have the strength and abilities to make them also feel better. Therapy is not a replacement for things like going outside, like I said, right? Or seeking medical treatment, but it's always nice talking to somebody, especially if they've had that experience, or if they don't have that experience, being able to provide a different perspective in order for us to look at things a different way.

[22:16] Gabriel (he/him)

Reflecting on your role, what would you say then is the most fulfilling aspect, now that you've stepped into a fully realized professional role? Um, what would you say is the most fulfilling aspect of your role now?

[22:31] Peterson (any pronouns)

I really think it is working with my community members. Um, I think community organizing is great, working with people in a group capacity, but speaking with somebody one-on-one could be very impactful. So, I mean, naturally, that's what I do for work, right? So, being able to work with somebody who has maybe a similar background or a parallel background, I think helping somebody understand that, like I said, being able to see different things in a different perspective or apply their lived experience to somebody else's perspective. My most fulfilling thing is to see somebody's eyes light up and for them to feel as though, "Hey, actually, I'm not alone in this, and somebody else understands." And if I don't completely understand, which I never will, that there's at least somebody who's willing to listen and to be able to make them feel at least heard for a short period of time throughout their week.

[23:37] Gabriel (he/him)

What sort of impact do you want to leave on the people that you interact with, both in the community aspect and also the professional aspect as well?

[23:50] Peterson (any pronouns)

I think, I mean, even within our interview, the things that we're talking about or what are the things that we do, I do, that VROC does. And in ways that I'm pivoting in my life right now, it's not just about the doing. If anything, I'm trying to do less, and how I'm trying to live my life is to exist and to be. And I encourage people to just be present, just be in the environment that they want to be in. And a big motivator is going back to what I shared before: it felt like I couldn't exist in my community, so in order for me to feel like I could be here, I felt like I had to do. And now that so much work has progressed, I would want to just be rather than continually having to do things to make sure that I felt safe. I already feel safe. I already feel brave. I already feel grounded. So I'm going to use that to just be, as such. And that's how I am—that's what I'm pivoting to at this time of my life.

[25:07] Gabriel (he/him)

I guess my follow-up question to that would be then: for someone who maybe doesn't have the lived experiences to maybe quite feel, you know, safe in their capacity, or... what would you say your advice to them would be about how to deal with their mental health in, you know, a changing era?

[25:33] Peterson (any pronouns)

And following up with me wanting to be, one of the foundational things that I've learned in community organizing is that your existence is a form of resistance. So you being here is oftentimes more impactful than not being here. So when I've talked to clients who have issues or trouble or concerns about feeling safe or being present or being in a literal place, I see that showing up and just being there is probably doing a lot more work than you feeling as though you have to be actually doing something. And for somebody's mental well-being, you sticking around, you being healthy and happy, really allows people in your community to see you as an example of what a healthy, happy person could look like. And that we need you to be around in order for your community to continue to exist in the large amount of numbers that it needs to be. Because if you're not around, the less people around, the less people power, the less safe people are going to feel. So we need you to stick around, and we need you to take care of yourself. And that's potentially, if you're having mental health concerns, seeking out mental health help.

[27:01] Gabriel (he/him)

Reflecting on VROC, you know, reflecting on the ways in which you showed up for your community then, whether it was through your, you know, working PR or working producing the short film, how has that era defined who you are now?

[27:16] Peterson (any pronouns)

I went to VROC's—I forget what it's called specifically, but it was an appreciation—their appreciation dinner. And I looked around, and there were lots of faces that I didn't recognize. And yet, there were faces that fondly told me that they missed me. And I responded back that I do miss them, also. And it's not that I don't want to see these people, and it's not necessarily that all these people are in the past and I don't want to connect with them. It's such a difficult time in my life to be able to reconnect with a place where me doing that work was such a big part of who I was. And like I mentioned, in the past 10 years, I've pivoted towards being. So, in being there at the dinner, it was nice to not have to walk around, and to work on the microphone, and to not speak up, and just eat. I've pivoted towards existing. And I'm currently existing because of all the work that VROC has done that I contributed to my own life. And I look at it fondly, but I don't look at it in a way that I'm looking back; I'm looking at it as foundational to me being able to look at things in a healthy and happy way now.

I took care of my mental health. I've been able to utilize my experiences in organizing to help do my work. It's all foundational and all necessary for me to honor and respect in order for me to exist now. Just glad that I don't have to keep doing—because not to say that I already put in my work and put in my effort, but everybody has created such a safe and brave space for me that I can sit back now and just exist and to watch, rather than to have to constantly be doing something. I'll just show up.

[30:02] Gabriel (he/him)

Right. Yeah, perfect. Well, thank you so much. I appreciate your insight, Peterson, on, you know, your personal involvement in VROC, as well as, you know, insight into what your life and what, you know, your professional—what your professional capacity looks like now. Before we finish up the—before we finish up the oral history, is there anything else that you want to share, um, that you think we might have missed or that you think might be important for you to share while we have this space?

[30:33] Peterson (any pronouns)

Um, I think in adding more to what I just shared right now is that, besides your existence being a form of resistance, the other phrase that I learned in community is: "the personal is political, the personal is powerful, the personal is professional." And in being, and existing, and just being present, I think it's returning back to that personal part where I used my own personal politics, my own personal experiences to feel powerful, to be political, to be professional. I feel as though things are becoming full circle where the professional, the political, where the powerful is returning back to being personal, for being. I think it's so great seeing that VROC has created an infrastructure where many people can simply be, also. And that's, like I mentioned, that's been where I've pivoted. And hopefully, people—many community members who haven't been able to participate or to be in VROC spaces—continue to be and continue to just show up. VROC has done a lot of the important work, important structure, the important frameworks that are going to allow people to feel safe and brave, show up, and just be. And I think that's a great place for VROC to be right now.

[32:10] Gabriel (he/him)

Well, on behalf of VROC, thank you so much, Peterson, for being open to conducting this oral history with the organization. I think that looking back on what we've spoken about, for people that are interested in VROC's oral history, this will be a great opportunity for them to, you know, become inspired, to think about maybe their mental health a little bit differently, and then also, like you said, to work towards just being, you know, putting in the work and then, um, eventually being able to, you know, sit back in the work that they've done. So, thank you so much.

[33:10] Peterson (any pronouns)

Thank you for your time.