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Interview with Becky Tran
Interviewed by Christine Kelley on 3/16/99
History 201 – Larry Wagenaar's Michigan History Class
Spring 1999 Semester

CK: This interview is of Becky Tran and the date is March 16, 1999 and she is currently a Hope College student. She came over from Vietnam at the age of 12. Becky, how come your parents decided to immigrate over to the United States?

BT: Well, first of all we have four girls in our family and knowing that we are staying in Vietnam, we are not going beyond a high school level in terms of educational wise.

And that is why they want us to come to the U.S. They never had a chance to go to school even though they have they the money but it will be very hard for us to go through a college in Vietnam because they don't look at females as being educated and they usually look at us as staying home. We need to care for our family than go out and be educated I guess. So they thought that this was a chance for them, and they didn't like it over there either and that's another reason why.

CK: Your parents didn't like it?

BT: No, because, this is a long story, but we had this little factory in Vietnam of like sweet goods and we make good candy and cookies and all this good stuff. This is way back before '86 where if you want to buy a pound of sugar you need to go to the government and need to buy from them. There are certain rules where you can't buy more than, I don't know, I don't think this is right, but you can't buy more than ten pounds or whatever. Having a factory you can't be so limited in sugar and peanuts or whatever you are making and they were really upset about this because we really can't make a business if we don't have the stuff there. So basically they have to work really hard they have to work with other farmers if they raise sugars or something like that or

peanuts they go there and sneak everything back home to our home in the middle of the night so no one would know about it and they've done that for years and years and finally they go sick of it and even if they got caught they would give the officers money to let them go and they would let them go. That is how they make money.

CK: You mean the officers?

BT: Yeah, I went back to Vietnam and I got a couple of books, just fun reading books, nothing serious, and they said do you know you have books do you know you have books in there and you are supposed to go to the office and get permission to bring books back to the United States, and I knew about it but I thought it was so expensive to - its almost like ten times expensive to go to the office and do the process and pay them than buy the actual book itself, so I figure I am not going to deal with this. I'm just going to put it in my bag and if I get caught I get caught - and I got caught. So I told him that I am a student and I love learning the Vietnamese language and because of that I bought the books, and I gave him, I think, ten dollars and I got away from it.

CK: And he said?

BT: And he said, OK, just move on. Just like that. With a country like that how could you live, how could you move on?

CK: Why did your parents think, why come to America, did you have family here?

BT: No, we were the first family to come here. We heard so many good things about

America, about the freedom, about what ever you want and being able to go to school
beyond high school level and they want us to go beyond that. Especially having kids,
you know, if we escape now, we come there and get used to the culture and they'll

know English, you know quickly, and get into gist of things - faster.

CK: Did you learn any English before you came here?

BT: Oh, we don't learn anything. We just, I just remember one night my mom said OK, tomorrow night we are going to visit grandma and I need you to pack everything up.

Don't pack too much, just a couple of things that you really like. I remember bringing this hat and I just adored this hat and I'm like yup I'm going to bring this and I'm going to be pretty for grandma because I haven't seen her for years. That is the last that I remember, and we escaped.

CK: You knew nothing?

BT: Nothing. Because if you know something the government will come and take your house away they'll put the family in jail and they'll make your life miserable forever.

CK: Oh my gosh.

BT: You have nothing left if they find out, and you can get killed too - not just losing everything but your lives and your family, money, everything. That is why they say, I didn't find out until we were in the boat for a couple days. I'm like, this is not where we are going and that's when I find out.

CK: Did you go to your grandma's at all?

BT: No, of course not. My mom was pregnant seven months at that time. That's why no body even think about it. First of all we're making money. We are very well off there you know. I have what I want and really, we are not poor and people would think, why would they want to go? But you be amazed because a lot of people spend so much money escape. You can't just go and escape and don't spend anything. It costs so

much money just to give the owner of the boat money.

CK: How much?

BT: A lot, I don't know in terms of like the value here, but back then I heard my parents say they have to give them a lot of money because we have six people in our family.

We were all kids.

CK: When you were on the boat did you go to different islands?

BT: Oh my goodness yes, um, you have heard of the concentrated camps, you know, where like people live closely together and there is not enough water, not running water, well water and not enough food. Rats running everywhere. I'm not just talking about you know mice, I talking like big rats, and it's horrendous. I couldn't even describe it. My parents cried like almost every night because they seeing us suffer and we don't have enough to eat. We don't have enough of anything and they knew it would be really tough but they didn't expect that. We live there, and we jump from one island to the next for about more than a year. It doesn't just take like five days to come from Vietnam to America and say, ah you are here, and settle down. It took us more than a decade just to get where we are now.

CK: When you went from one island to another, how would get from island to island?

BT: We were lucky because some people get killed out in the sea because of pirates. We heard terrible stories about that. Thailand, from Thai people would go there to rape all the women. They'll kill the babies and do things. Yes, it happened. It happened, and other people got lost somewhere and nobody found them until they ran out of food and water and they die. Then others, like us, we were really lucky. On the fifth day we

ran out of food and water and I remember my parents and all the adults are praying to the Buddha and everything you know and a Malatian boat came and picked us up and fed us and they brought us to the island. Yup, and we stay there for a couple of months, and we just don't stay there and go on. It is really hard because you have to go through the whole process, if your parents or family members, if your uncle or your grandma, grandpa, whoever is involved. I don't know if you know much about the Vietnam War. The south was fighting against communism and the north are all communist right now. We in the United States trying to you know fight of the north and of course they won. That's why Vietnam now is communist, so if you are an officer fighting for the south then when you go for an interview, and there are a couple of interviews to go through in order to move to the next island. I think you have to tell them I was an officer fighting for the south and blah blah blah.

CK: Did your father?

BT: Yeah, and that's why we can get in, and most are stuck there for ten years because they can't go back to Vietnam obviously. Can't come anywhere, you can't go to the United States or anywhere because nobody accept them. So..

CK: Did your father really fight in the war?

BT: Yeah, he did.

CK: So when you took the boat over here, did you go to California then?

BT: Oh no, everyone thought, no we came we move from the first island to next one which is belong to Malasia, and from Malasia we go to Philippines and we stay there for like seven, seven or eight months. I don't know how that works here. I think they

contacted organizations or churches or any of that. The people came before us kind of organized a group where we have our people still left on the island, let's bring them over, let's help them out in church. Somehow they contact our family back in Philippines and get all the information and then we flew from Philippines through Dallas.

CK: Oh, you did?

BT: We came there first. I think we stayed there for a couple of months and it was so bad because people just don't care and we came here. I remember the first night they got us a really small apartment. We got a couple of Ramen noodles laying around and milk and no bed, nothing. Nothing. No transportation. I remember having chicken pox like a couple weeks after that and we had no where to get a ride from, so my dad and I have to walk in rain for a couple of miles just to go to the health clinic. After five minutes of being there the nurse kicked me out because I think she say something about contagious chicken pox and she say why don't you walk your daughter home, come back and then get the medications or something.

CK: Could your father speak a little English?

BT: Very little, very hard. Just more like they sign language. Yeah, yeah. Cause I didn't know any English and I went to school crying every day because I have no idea what the teacher was saying and she, I remember she hand out tons of papers for me to do. I have no idea where to sign my name even. Maybe not that extreme, but other than that I have no idea where to even begin because they don't help you at all there. We met a family in the Philippines and they came before us and actually they are from Holland

here and they say why don't you come here the people are so nice. They'll help you, and then my dad say forget it we are moving.

CK: So from Dallas you came to Holland? Now did you come by car or did someone fly you?

BT: We flew, yeah, it was a long trip but we flew and my dad got some money and he worked there for a couple months.

CK: So you were in Dallas for a couple of months before you came here to Holland.

BT: So, it was a rough ride for us, more than a year for us.

CK: When you got here...Um, Who sponsored you, was it a church?

BT: Yeah.

CK: Do you remember which one it was?

BT: Oh...it's up north here. It's probably a half an hour away, and I've been to the church a couple of times but it's a catholic church.

CK: Are your parents currently employed?

BT: Yes, factories. My dad works Prince right now, and my mom in Zeeland - Bates that's what they call the company.

CK: How is your father's English now?

BT: Good, he can do a lot of paper work and all the bills and all the forms of Hope College.

Every year they send you forms to fill out, financial aid and stuff like that. I never touch any of that, my dad did all that. My dad did all of that, so he is a lot better than me in some ways. He picked up the language pretty fast.

CK: What about your mom?

BT: My mom not so fast. She didn't really care. She just work and do house work and not very involved compared to my dad. I think a lot of Vietnamese people know him in this town and in G.R. too because we got settled down for a few years and now we have a house and this and that and so he has time actually to help the new comers. Like the people who came here like a year or two and they need a job. They need help.

They need to get like tables or blankets or pots and pans or whatever we can get them. He go around and find that for people or even drive them to work or give them transportation or drive them to Detroit or Chicago to do paper work. He did all that kind of stuff for people because we are one of the first family's to settle here in Holland and we don't have that help when we came. It was very hard for us, so my dad got to do something for these people.

CK: Now in your family are you the oldest?

BT: Yeah.

CK: There are four of you?

BT: Five. Including me it's four girls and a brother.

CK: When you started going to school you started when you thirteen I assume, twelve?

BT: Yes.

CK: Where the other children mean to you at all?

BT: Yes, my name is not Becky. Let me spell it out for you it is Bich. I go by Bich because I like the K at the end so it is not TCH at the end. My parents call me Bich. My sponsor took us to school one day, my sister and I, and she told the teacher (I didn't even know this until I found out my new name) yeah, we should change her

name to Becky because it is closer to Bich and the kids won't make fun of her and of course I have no English to you know talk to them. Ever since that day I was Becky since then.

CK: How were kids mean to you?

BT: I didn't have friends for so long, not even till high school cause I was so shy and I don't talk and we been through so much hardships. I was older than most of the kids, too. Not just in years but in experience too. If you ask me all the games that the kids play, I don't know any. I didn't have that because both of my parents are trying really hard. We were on welfare for a couple months. When my dad had a job and then like I think almost a year later or so that's when my mom start to work and having like little kids too. My siblings were two, three, six, and eight, and so it was hard for me because I was second mom at home and I never had the chance to go out and play or having friends because I don't have enough English and I never, never talk in class ever. You don't hear my voice at all the whole entire day because I won't talk. Too afraid to pronounce things wrong. That's why I'm still struggling right now, but my siblings have no problems at all. No problems. I'm the one who still have some problems but.

CK: You do very well Becky.

BT: I get by but not that well, but you know it's hard.

CK: When your mom and dad started working did they have, did they have any problems?

BT: Oh yes, prejudice still now a day. They came home sometimes really upset and we don't know why but now I understand better but my mom my dad was telling me this actually a couple of days ago at home. He's like it's so hard sometimes because even if

you work there for years and years and you been there more than more people and then the new people come in and they tell you what to do because you don't know the language that well. It is just so wrong, and what can you do? He say something back like I am not going to do it or something. People always pick on my parents or not just my parents but people who don't know English.

CK: Do people treat you differently knowing that you are Asian?

BT: Not in preschool, but in middle school, yeah, not a whole lot, but sometimes.

Sometimes, and then I was more involved in high school and that's when I know most people and I was a good student overall and so most people have the respect for me and I had no problems.

CK: Did you go to Holland High?

BT: Yes, that's where I went.

CK: OK, and then why did you chose to come to Hope College?

BT: Family, this is our family. This is it. We don't have grandma, grandpa, uncle or aunts here, like you guys. This is all we have, and they don't want us to go to far away.

CK: Now are your siblings going to go here?

BT: No, they are like we got to get away from mom and dad for a while. Not that they are not good parents but it just like they need to get away from the house and go somewhere else and go explore world instead of just staying here in Holland for the rest of life just because my parents want them to. Yeah, I don't think they'll will go for the most part. I don't think so. Maybe around this area but not Hope because it is so close to home.

CK: But you'll stay here won't you?

BT: Yeah, I'll stay here and I will go back. I will move back home after May. I can't go because it is the culture where if you are not married you cannot move out. That's is just not even a question.

CK: When you start working at your job as a nurse will you have to support your family here or even send money back to Vietnam?

BT: Here yes, but to Vietnam we don't do that because they are OK there are they have more than enough to live. They are OK there. That's one good thing about our family is that almost everyone is doing OK there, they don't need our help. I mean sometimes we will send them things in general like gifts and stuff like that but not money because they don't need that.

CK: How come your other family members didn't come over here?

BT: I really don't know why. I think some people just need to be very brave and right now you can't anymore. During the early 80's that is when there was a lot of boat people but after that in the 90's we don't have boat people anymore. I don't know you call them but family - if we came here for a while we can go through a lot of paper work and send them here but then it is so complicated and they don't want to because they are very happy there now because the system changed since we left. They are closer to the family and the culture and everything is so totally messed up. Like if I would put you in Vietnam right now you wouldn't even know where to go. You don't where anything is. That's like the same with us. I mean you will eventually find out the hard way of course but if you are happy where you are right now why go through all that

trouble. So that is one of the reasons why.

CK: Would you ever go back to Vietnam?

BT: I went back there during Sophomore year to study.

CK: I mean would you ever live there?

BT: Live there?

CK: I remember you saying something a while ago about possibly working over there as a nurse.

BT: Maybe for a year or two, but living there for the rest of my life? I don't know. It is so hard.

CK: Does your family still cook ethic foods?

BT: We never use anything frozen. I'm talking about like packaged food. We do all homemade Vietnamese food. Everything has to be homemade.

CK: Your family is Buddhist right?

BT: Yes.

CK: Do they know that you are somewhat Christian at all?

BT: No. I don't even want to mention that to them at all. They are not very happy when they hear that.

CK: Do they have any idea?

BT: No, I told them that once. I kind of gave them a hint I liked Christianity and they blew up so bad and I am like okay, that is the big clue for me to shut up now.

CK: Do they know that Hope is a Christian school?

BT: I think they kind of know but they don't really realize the extent. They think that it you

just go there for school. You don't go there because of religious ways.

CK: Where does your family practice there religion at?

BT: No where.

CK: There are aren't any temples in the area?

BT: No, but I think there is one in G.R. and one or two around the area but it is like an hour or hour and a half drive. The thing is that they believe that if you practice it everyday you don't need to go to a church or a temple to pray. This is what I grew up, they taught us you don't have to go to a temple and pray and show that you are good. You can do good within your household. That's how they believe.

CK: Don't you have a shrine that you worship?

BT: Yes, we have that at home actually where we have one for our ancestor from my grandpa. He just passed away like two years ago. Then we have one for the Buddha.

CK: When you worship Buddha do have food that you give him?

BT: We do have that. My mom's always tried to have some kind of fruit, not desert but mostly fruit, like anything considered a good fruit. We put it up there. Like everyday, this is so strange, don't ask me why we do this, we don't celebrate birthdays. We celebrate when you are a year old which you don't remember. We celebrate when you are really old and when you die. I am not kidding.

CK: So how do you know that you are 23?

BT: You just say I think, well, I am 23. That's why, I forgot to tell you this. When we came to the island we need to get all this paper work done and they ask my parents your kids' birthdays and they had no clue for the longest time. They couldn't

remember our birthdays because it is not important in our culture. It's not important. I mean they have it written down somewhere but they don't have it with them. So all of our paper work like my dad, my mom, me, my sister, all of us are the same day. They had no idea of the date so they just say let's just use a whole entire day the same day for all of us.

CK: They allowed that for the paper work?

BT: Yeah, and you will be amazed if you ask a lot of Vietnamese people around here they would use the exact same date that we use because it is the easiest day to remember because all of us don't remember your birthday.

CK: How did you get birthday certificates and social security cards?

BT: See right now I can't use [date removed], because that's my birthday because all my paper work say January 1.

CK: That's everyone in your family's birthday?

BT: Yup.

CK: So you figured out you born [date removed]?

BT: Finally cause all the birth certificate and stuff like that because all my relatives had it, so that's what they gave us. Finally they sit down and yeah, yeah, I think that's when she was born - years later. They just don't remember it something you just don't remember you know and you don't care. So going back to having birthday parties, you have one when you are like a year and you have 'em when you are really old like in your 80's - not even that - hardly that old. You had it when you die and pass away and they have this like not a parties. I don't want to parties because it sounds bad, but like

a remembrance of the person. So every year the day the person passed away we have so much food around and invite a couple friends or family members come over and just to eat and just to remember. That's like you are not enjoying what we are enjoying right now you know? We are enjoying it but it is just a tradition I guess, but no sense. I think we got that from the Chinese people.

CK: With the other Asians here in Holland because I know there are Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos....

BT: We have more Vietnamese than any of those in Holland.

CK: Okay, but how do you interact with the other Asians?

BT: Well from my experience, I met this girl and we are really good friends right now and she's going to Western and its kind of funny because we came here together about the same period and she has no English and neither do I and we became really good friends because we don't know any English.

CK: Is she Vietnamese?

BT: No she is not. She is Laotian. We had a lot of sign language kind of and that is how we learned the English together. We do a lot of projects together and she is really good in arts and we just hang out together and that's how we pick up English you know even though we don't speak the same language and we use a language where we don't even know. I don't know, I have, we have such a really good friendship.

CK: That's wonderful.

BT: And she is doing, she is, her major is I think aero-engineering and she is really smart.

CK: Now do you think she will come back to Holland?

BT: She wants to go away. I am more bonded with my family because that is all we have and she has aunts and uncles here.

CK: How do you interact with the other ethnic groups like with the African-Americans or the Hispanics, and how do your families interact?

BT: I don't think we really, nothing much, not really. We focus more on the Vietnamese community more than them.

CK: Do you know anything about the gangs around here? Are there any Vietnamese gangs because I do know the Latin Kings are here in Holland.

BT: I don't think there are Vietnamese gangs here. I know that maybe in G.R. they do. I think they have one. They used to at least.

CK: The Latin Kings are here in Holland, right?

BT: I think so. Oh yeah, it was a big thing when I was in high school, but I don't think they have Vietnamese gangs or anything. We do have a pretty big population Vietnamese here in the community.

CK: Is it growing steadily?

BT: It is growing because it makes sense if you think about it cause I was talking to my boyfriend the other day and I'm like why do we have so many Vietnamese here in Holland instead of wherever? It is because we have a lot of factories here and that's the only kind of job that we can have because obviously they are not very good with the language and they are good with their hands so that's how they make a living.

CK: They make pretty good wages too - considering.

BT: You would be amazed where this Asian family has been here longer than us and they

have this huge house and you would think they have lots of money. I don't know if they have a lot of money or not but all the kids are in school and in college, and they have this house for I'm sure more than \$200,000 just the parents living in there now. They know how to save money, believe it or not, even they came here for just a very short period of time in comparison of you guys being here forever.

CK: Where were they from?

BT: Vietnam. They have been here maybe less than fifteen years.

CK: And I imagine they are hard workers and savers.

BT: Hard workers and save a lot. We don't party. I mean we party within our community but we don't go out and gamble. We work. We don't go out and we don't take vacations. We don't travel hardly. We just work work work and save a lot of money. We came here for a better life.

CK: Does your family just focus on sending the kids to school that is why we are saving and kids are number one?

BT: Yup, like now a day, I came home the other day and I'm like Dad, I need some money for the NCLEX and he just wrote me a check for \$250.00. He gave me extra money for spending, and I am working and he gave me money and when he says it comes to school anything, anything. He is so good about it. I remember one year taking precalc in high school and we need that calculator, Texas 82 or whatever or 81 and I told him that when he came back from work around midnight and the next day I came back from school it was sitting on the table for me. Anything, anything, when it comes to school he will get anything. We got a new computer like a brand new one like last year

just for the kids. We have one but its getting old so he wants a new one for the kids. We value education, just anything. So that is very important because they never had a chance to go to school.

CK: How much education did your parents get over in Vietnam?

BT: Not very much. I mean my dad, his Vietnamese is really good. I mean like he didn't really go to school but for some reason he is very intelligent and his writing language and his communications skill and everything he is really good at that. My mom, Vietnamese is her native language but in terms of writing I don't think she is not that great compared to my dad. But they both didn't go to school that much maybe a couple of years. A couple of years and that is when the war and it was such a tough time for them and none of the kids got much schooling during that time. So that is why they always always always want to go to school. That is why they always say, "Oh you kids are so lucky you are in school and you are learning. We couldn't do that when we were younger." And it is so hard for them to do now because they don't know the language and they don't have time. They don't have time for that. Yeah, I really respect my parents a lot. They have done a lot for us.

CK: Now when you have kids are you going to do the same for them like your parents have done for you?

BT: Yes, definitely.

CK: Now what about when it comes to religion?

BT: I'll let them decide.

CK: When you go home do you communicate in Vietnamese?

BT: Vietnamese, yeah, Vietnamese.

CK: Now when you have children, are you going to speak to them in Vietnamese?

BT: Yes, Vietnamese. I think I know more Vietnamese than English and it is really sad cause I have been hear forever and still don't pick up the language as fast and for some reason I just don't compared to my siblings.

CK: But your siblings were younger when they came here.

BT: Yes, but I don't talk either. It just don't talk in class. I don't communicate to anyone so that is why I didn't pick up the language that fast. I came back to Vietnam two years ago during my sophomore year and I took a semester of Vietnamese there and I learned the language more. So I am just hoping that I'll remember most of what I learned. I want to teach my kids later if they need to know. They won't have any problem learning English I am sure, but still.

CK: It is good to have that second language.

BT: Yup, and if they go to school and take Spanish or something. There you go, not bilingual but trilingual I guess.

CK: Yes that is definitely true.

BT: Also, our culture, we just focus within our family and the Vietnamese community. Its amazing because when we came here, I think we probably had less than four Vietnamese families in this community here. We get together with them and the kids hung out and we don't go out broader communities. We don't interact with Dutch people or Hispanics. Just because we felt more comfortable in our "group".

CK: Do you remember when you first came to the U.S. and what you thought about it or

even what you think of it now?.......Can you remember when you first came here?

Were you like, "wow" this place is nice or I don't like it? I want to go home to

Vietnam.

BT: It was kind of cool because I saw big cities and I've never saw big cities before. I thought, wow this is so amazing, but it take me so long until I was like, whatever. But I remember, the only thing I remember about the United States in comparison to my homeland was the snow. I came here during the fall and I kept asking a friend of mine (he is Vietnamese) actually we came here together and we went to the same school all the way up to high school and he is actually here on campus too. And I kept asking him, and he was here for like a year before I actually, walking home every single day, I was like, is it going to snow tomorrow, is it going to snow tomorrow, I want to see snow. I kept asking that until it snow and that's the first snow and I was amazed cause we don't have snow back home. That was the only that I thought was kind of cool, but trust me now I don't know about it now. That's the only thing I can remember that make a really big impact coming to a new place. Otherwise, I really don't care, I was a kid and whatever you know. It was too weird, but my sister she was like around two, I think, every time she saw someone, blonde hair and blue eyes, she would scream. She was so afraid cause we don't have any people that have blonde hair and blue eyes. To her that's like oh my gosh.

CK: Kind of like a ghost, huh?

BT: Oh yes, like a ghost or someone.

CK: Do you consider this home now?

BT: I think so.

CK: Or do you still think of Vietnam as your home?

BT: I....both because I wouldn't be where I am today. I am very thankful for being here, and I love the United States. In a way this is my country too, but I still have my Vietnamese identity and I will never get rid of it - like my accent, my language, my food, my values and everything else. It is still part, the majority of it is, you know, Vietnam. I think I will raise my kid that way and at least teach them because they will never live there. I mean they will visit. I am sure I will bring them back to Vietnam if I ever have kids, but you know, they won't have the experience that I've had.

CK: Was the War going on at all when you were born?

BT: '75 was over by then and that's when I was born, so it was over. But my mom had such interesting stories. She saw flying heads and dead bodies with people walking on top of dead people, and just things like that. She's been through so much that's why she is like, it's amazing that we are here today. It was so scary, you know. It was really devastating for that generation. Even when I came back to Vietnam the north and the south, there was still a lot of hatred against the two groups of people. I studied up north, and I am from the south, and my accent, and they knew, but they were fine with that - the north people - they were very accepting of us. When I came stair talking about the north people, how kind, all the Vietnamese, all the southern people are like, if I ever see one blah blah I'll just kill them or something. So much hatred cause they believe they are the ones that took the country and make it into communism. It was so bad, and my relatives they hated the north people. I say they are good people

they are not bad people.

CK: How did they treat you when you studied up north though? They knew you were from the south, you are an American.

BT: They treat me good not mostly because I am from the south but because I am an American. Vietnamese-American. People are very nice because they know that you are an American. It doesn't matter who you are. If you are an American they will be nice to you - that's how it works, and if you are Vietnamese-American, better yet. They will come to you and say, I love you, I love you, just like that and I'm like just get away from me. I don't even know your name. Guys would follow me around or they just..... If you are a male, going back there, all these beautiful ladies will come to you and say take me.