

## Hai Nguyen - ILLUMINATION interview

**Thomas** [00:00:00] Welcome, everybody, to another conversation as part of the ILLUMINATION series. My name is Thomas Hiura. This project is co-led by Aimee Yogi and Mimi Nollo. And I'm just very pleased today to have a guest with us who works as an administrator with the Springfield Public Schools. This is Hai Nguyen. How are you, Hai?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:00:19] Just fine, thank you.

**Thomas** [00:00:20] Thank you so much. This is a really exciting opportunity because as you've said, you don't do a lot of interviews. I think you're somebody who doesn't; you're the opposite of me. I like the spotlight, the attention. I like to put myself out there. And you said you were raised to to be more, you know, not like that. Whereas we'd like to hear from you, though, about things that you've been doing in the schools, in special ed over 30 years of experience. I think there's a lot there to uncover. So how how did you get involved with education?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:00:52] I got involved with education because way back, I found it was very fun to help others. I started out working with students in high school, learning basic math. And it's really fun to see how they learn, how they can have their light bulb turn on.

**Thomas** [00:01:13] Yeah.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:01:14] So I was asked to tutor a student when I was in high school, a younger student learning basic math. And I found it was very fun and rewarding to kind of teach him how to do the basic math that he didn't know how to do. Ever since then, it just became a hobby and then it became a profession.

**Thomas** [00:01:35] I think there's so many students where they don't ever have that moment of connection for math, for also a wide variety of subjects. And do you think today, as what you're doing today, you still find those times where you see a student kind of light up?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:01:51] Yeah, so my position is actually unique. I'm an administrator and a teacher in special education for the district. So I not only supervise, I also get to work directly with the students. And when you work directly with a student, you really get the true hands-on experience with how they think, how they learn. And you adapt, you try to meet them wherever their skills are and try to build them up.

**Thomas** [00:02:16] Yeah, no doubt. And have you held any other sort of positions? I imagine you don't just become an administrator overnight. It sounds like you have a history with teaching.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:02:25] Right, right. I started out as a special education teacher at middle school level. Had 12 or some years of doing that in a classroom. And from then, I was recruited into becoming an administrator, by my former principal. I started out as assistant principal at the middle school level. Again, still connected with special education. Later on, I have some experience working with the library system as a coordinator, in career and technical education. And then I moved over to work with alternative ed, and again, still connected to special education. I did that for a number of years. Alternative education really is enjoyable. When you have students who are still disconnected from school, and

you're trying to figure out a way to get them hooked in, and bring them back. And try to work with them to pursue their education, and hopefully graduate. Maybe a little late, but they get the education done, either GED or a diploma. And that was also, you know, the more challenge, the more fun. This is how it is.

**Thomas** [00:03:43] I'm glad to hear that. I think a lot of teachers don't have that optimism. Or at least it's been hard to stay, you know, energized. There's the term burnout. But I've heard more people say demoralization is more specific. So to say that it's challenging and fun is really refreshing to hear. I know that you are speaking here as an individual, not on behalf of the district whatsoever. And so there's an opportunity to explore, you know, your personal experiences. In the last few decades, though, Oregon's education system has not produced the kind of results I think that it previously had. Or at least it's ebbed and flowed. What's your perspective on the challenges with graduation rate, for example, over the decades? How have you seen things change?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:04:35] Well with the population I work with, that is not our focus. Remember, I work with special education students. I work with a program. Right now there are 18 to 21. They have completed high school without a regular diploma, a modified diploma or a certificate of completion. So graduation rate is not our concern. Not because it's not important, it's because of the student that I have. We are transitioning them to adult living skills. They are of moderate to, excuse me, mild disabilities. So the focus is not high school graduation. That is because they already finished high school. So our focus is how do we build the skills up for employment, and transition to being a productive community member adult, connected with services that they need that would last them through their life.

**Thomas** [00:05:31] It's very important that that step from the end of K through 12 into adulthood or the real life, it's a huge leap. And it's so circumstantial with different experiences and support networks that students have. So being able to fill in those gaps potentially, do you feel there are any misconceptions about special education that you come across, or that you kind of wish people understood better?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:05:59] I really, again, on that side of education, it is for lack of a better way to express, it's not my focus. My focus is with the students. The students' needs are, with the population I work with, there are certain needs a day, that they have. And we start where they are. And I built my staff in the sense that here's where they are. We know where they need to be and we figure out a way to build the skills up so they can become a community member. Know how to access services that they need, and knowing how to learn the independent living skills that they need as a young adult. And some live in group homes, some end up able to live independently. So the perception of what people see in special education?, Again, it's not our focus. Our focus is how do we build the skills of the students that we have.

**Thomas** [00:06:56] Right. I think that's why Aimee thought that you would have so much to offer, is because you keep telling me, it's about the students. It's about the students.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:07:05] See, the difference is that when I have a new staff on board, one of the things I remind them: this is one of the best, most rewarding jobs. And it's hard that you can never explain.

**Thomas** [00:07:18] Right. It's not like, you know, I work at a restaurant, I serve people. I work at a bank, I'm a teller. I'm sure it runs a wide variety.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:07:27] Yeah, every student is different. Every student has a different set of needs. And every student that you meet, you work with them, you learn what is it that they need from you. And remember, this is young adults. They're not fifth graders, sixth graders, they're young adults. They are growing up and they want to be independent. They just don't know how. So that's the difference. They have certain disabilities and certain needs, that you need to kind of fill in the blank and help guide them to learn those skills.

**Thomas** [00:07:54] Do you think that the challenges that they have, entering adulthood-- the world has changed so much. From 2022, the 2010s, 2000s, 90s. So much has changed, I think with technology and with the way that people socialize, and things like that. Do you think that some of those key challenges that students have have evolved, and how has that evolution happened, or do you think it's stayed relatively consistent?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:08:18] Have you ever seen a teenager walking around without looking down at their phone?

**Thomas** [00:08:22] Hmm.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:08:23] That's a challenge. They are so focused on technology, but in a screen this big. So in that sense, we have to learn to adapt to help them to see the world outside the screen. So the challenge is not because of technology. The technology helped them. So we no longer need to put a quarter in, to dial the phone and talk. They can get access to information right on the phone. So in that sense, I don't see it as an issue. The issue is that they are so focused on that, it's hard to get them to widen up the view. And the view that is in front of them. What my staff and I used to talk about is that we call it the Nintendo Effect. Life pass by them and they observe it. What we want to do is to get them to be involved with that life. Don't watch it. Participate. And that's a key difference, is that the challenge is to get them to participate, and work on their goals and be a part of it, and not just watch it. So the technology would help, and again, it's not the challenge. The challenge is to get them to be involved and not just watch it.

**Thomas** [00:09:37] I think that's so true. And it sounds like it would be very clear in your day-to-day life that that's what's happening. I mean, the person on their phone could be reading a book, but they could also be on TikTok. And, you know, there could be even a wide variety within that of things that are educational, and things that are just pure entertainment and fluffy.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:09:56] Right.

**Thomas** [00:09:56] I think that young people... it was already hard enough to make social connections, be self-conscious, go to parties. I think nowadays they are also thinking about, Is someone going to take a picture of me and tag me? How many likes is this post about this thing gonna get? With the numbers and the likes, I think it gets very-- it makes it seem objective. People like you this much. People value what you have to say this much. Do you see that with some of the students that you're working with? I don't mean to harp on this too much, but it seems with anxiety, there's challenges with so much of being a young person today.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:10:39] Well, when you mention all those things, those things do happen. But what you need to do is we need to work with them to learn how to go beyond that. Yes, you're right, they can use a phone to read a book. We teach them to use a phone to

look for research. The job that you want, what's your dream job? How do you get there? Apply for a job using your phone. Do some research on the company you want to work for. We have a student that works for a local company now, and he really wanted to have that job. It took him many months of learning the skills, and practicing and applying and getting his ID, getting everything in order. And finally be able to apply for a job and practice interview skills with us. And now he works at the store he always wanted to work at.

**Thomas** [00:11:27] Wow.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:11:27] See that and that's the point about technology, is how do you get them to use it and participate in a way that benefits them? So TikTok's always going to be there. YouTube is always gonna be there. There's a time for entertainment, there's time for you to use it to benefit. And to gain the skills you need. And that's the end goal of technology. And it really is really simple. We don't talk about those things that you mentioned. Because it's always there. When they leave school, it's always there. We don't need to talk about it. We just need to teach them to use it in a smart way. You know, posting personally about yourself, and use it in a way that benefits you, instead of hurting you. And whether they like you or take a picture or not, you don't even know this person. So we teach them smart skills with technology.

**Thomas** [00:12:16] Absolutely. The nature of your job, it sounds like you are working with students that have been trying. They've been working. It's not that you show up and then things are magically sort of better for them. There's a lot of effort and a lot of emotional labor that I would think has to go in. Do you think that more often you're kind of easily able to get out of bed and just charge forward and be optimistic?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:12:42] You know, if you meet my students, you would want to work with them. I got a great staff that I work with, they're tremendous. They have heart of gold. They love working with the students, and the student will energize you. If you meet some of these students, they're incredible. And that's one of the reasons why I stay with them, and I work with them because these are students that have some disabilities. And every day to them is a new day, and it could be a challenge. And they get up. So we meet them where they are, and they are a kick to work with. The stories that staff can tell on their little successes, their big successes, it's incredible. It really is a joy to work with them. That's why we do what we do. Like I say, I couldn't do it without my staff, and the staff are incredible in what they can do with the students.

**Thomas** [00:13:42] Or the young people, like you said, the young gentleman who was able to work at the store he always wanted to work at. I remember I really wanted to work at a CD store, and it took me so long and they finally called me after I gave my resume. It was a year later. I was in Minnesota at the time. They didn't look at me as a serious applicant, or for whatever reason it wasn't available for them to hire at that time when I was really seeking it. But are there other-- do you think it's common? That's kind of a vocational kind of outcome, right? That he's able to go into that store. What other things do you connect these young people with? Do you help them get into certain jobs, or what kind of goals do you think the students are interested in that you are able to help.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:14:30] Our students at our level, we work with post-secondary high school students in the community transition program. There are students who completed high school, whether a certificate or a modified diploma. They are ready to move on. So we focus on their preferences, their interests and their skills. If they are focused on post-secondary education, they may want to go to LCC or to learn skills. What is it that they

need in order to pursue that? We have a student who would love to be an auto mechanic, someday. So we're working with him to build the skills he needs. And during the summer time, we helped him get a job at a local garage to learn the skills. Now, it's funded through a grant. But that grant helps students learn the job skills, and also to see if he really would want to pursue that. So yes, we do kind of base on career-related, but again, the student already finished high school. They no longer need credits. What they do need is the skills, whether it is training, community training, apprenticeship program or post-secondary school like a community college or even a trade school. Again, it's based on their preference and interests, and we do an interview with every student to figure out what is it that you need? What is it that you want to pursue?

**Thomas** [00:16:02] And inevitably there are going to be challenges. I mean hardships. I mean outcomes that don't meet where you want. How do you deal with that?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:16:11] Well, that's part of why we interview. Okay. So and part of the skills is to do research, have them pursue the career they want, but also look at what are the skills that you need in order to pursue what you're looking for. And as they go through the skill development, what we call pre-employment skills, and one of them is to do a little bit of research into the profession that they want. That way they can check out what they have, what they don't have. And also, we can have them do a-- for lack of a better way to say it, like a job shadow. Or to do a summer program where they get paid to work at a site, to see if it's something you really want to pursue. This is something you want to do for the rest of your life. We have one student who ended up loving their work site that they got to work in the summertime. I have a student who did the whole summer work experience and said, I don't think this is something I want to do the rest of my life.

**Thomas** [00:17:16] That's great.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:17:17] And that's part of the skill building. You know, you get experience. If that's what you want to do, let's go down to your next choice. What is it you want to do now? Okay. If auto mechanic is not for you, but you thought that's what you wanted to do. What's your other choice? We have one who would love to be a beautician. We're working with that student to look at, you know, what does it take to become one, to be a licensed beautician.

**Thomas** [00:17:45] So there's a variety of goals.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:17:49] Oh, yeah.

**Thomas** [00:17:49] And I know that there are young people that might have a hard time answering that question. Who do you want to become? What do you want to do? And so you've probably have situations where they really don't know. They don't know, they don't know, and they might not feel they have a secure, strong place in the world. They don't have that sense of identity. How do you move forward?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:18:10] Well, that's why we have what we call pre-employment skills. So they go into the job club. They they look at different aspects of the industry. At different jobs, careers, you know, because there's six main pathway to different careers. You have hospitality. We have a student who wants to be police officer. We have a student who wants to be military.

**Thomas** [00:18:31] They could probably get it now, there's a lot of jobs.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:18:34] But again, as we look into the different requirements, that's part of our pre-employment skills, you know. Can you look at a job, look at the skills, what education is required, and see if you can build your skills up in order to apply for that job. To get back to the example of the student who wanted to work for the store, not every student wants to work at that store, but he does. So he really looked at what are the skills that I need, in order to meet that job description? And we worked on those. And he was willing to work at a different job to build the skill. He never worked the counter before. So we went for the coffee cart. He built the customer skills. He learned how to mix drinks, he learned how to make change, he learned how to greet and take orders. That became part of his resume. And then he took another job at another store, a fast food restaurant locally. He didn't really enjoy working there for a few months. He decided to resign from there, but he also worked for a concession stand at the Em's baseball game. Loved it..

**Thomas** [00:19:42] That's great.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:19:43] So every summer, he works there.

**Thomas** [00:19:45] Mm hmm.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:19:46] And he really enjoyed it. So that also became part of his skills.

**Thomas** [00:19:48] And I'm sure they know him. Yes.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:19:51] See? And then he applied. He used all those skills, the mock interview with us. And now he got the job that he wanted.

**Thomas** [00:20:02] Amazing. Amazing.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:20:03] So every student has a different set of needs, and every student has wants..

**Thomas** [00:20:10] I think I know how you're going to respond to this, because you're not a person who seeks the spotlight. But I think that there's a lot of unrecognized work that you're probably doing. Do you feel celebrated enough? Do you feel like your work is honored, compensated, appreciated enough? Not maybe not just for you, but the team that you work with.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:20:32] You're right, it is not me. It's about the student and about the staff that you work with. They are great staff. You invest the time and effort into building the staff and building the program. So I have great teachers that I work with. Together, we build the staff and we show what is it that we can do to help students. So one of the things we work on is not teaching, but it's more like coaching. This is a separate thing between teaching, giving knowledge, and we do do that. But coaching is a mentality that you need this skill. We're going to help you build the skills. Coaching is about building the skills. It's not teaching, here's what I need you to learn, go learn and come back and tell me. Take a test, see if you get done. So again, most of the students are learning job skills. They need to know how to do certain, for lack of a better word, jobs. Right? If you're a stock boy, there are certain things you have to learn how to do. If you are a server, you have to know how to make orders. You have to know how to make change. So those are the skills, we build them, we coach them. And yeah. Now, if we do our job correctly, the student will learn the

skills they need to learn. And that's our recognition, see? And that's where we're at. The success that we see is what the students can bring to the table.

**Thomas** [00:22:01] Absolutely.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:22:01] And that's a different aspect because again, we're not a program... And in particular when we work-- when I worked in alternative ed, and what I'm doing now in special education, we build the skills of the student, whether it's academic or job skills or personal development skills. It's all about learning the skills to move forward. It's not about whether or not you can pass a test. The reward is how do we get the student to a point where the student can engage in education or in life? Participate in that life, or the educational program.

**Thomas** [00:22:46] Awesome. We can always keep talking about the students, but I also want to talk about Springfield. And it seems that you've been in this community for a long time. When did you begin your journey in Springfield?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:22:58] I started to teach in Springfield in 1990. So it's been a number of years.

**Thomas** [00:23:05] Excellent. Wow. Yeah, I was born in '93. So you must be contented enough. Where did you come from before? What's your back story, if you don't mind?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:23:16] What do you mean, back story? Clarify that.

**Thomas** [00:23:17] I don't know, your origins. And did you come to the US as an immigrant, or...? You don't need to answer any of these things, necessarily. I'm just kind of curious about your background and being in Springfield.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:23:31] Well, I'll tell you this much. I was born and raised in Saigon. We immigrated here in 1975, and that's the start of my journey. Yeah. I came to U of O, I became a teacher in '90.

**Thomas** [00:23:48] No pho restaurants in 1975, in Eugene-Springfield. Is that right?.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:23:52] What's that?

**Thomas** [00:23:52] Pho restaurants, like Vietnamese food? There probably wasn't--

**Hai Nguyen** [00:23:56] I don't think anybody would even know what it is.

**Thomas** [00:23:58] Yeah. Yeah.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:23:59] No, I have no idea what Eugene was like in 1975 because I didn't come to Eugene. I lived somewhere else in Oregon, first. When I first came over. I lived in a small little town.

[00:24:12] Where?

[00:24:14] Northeastern Oregon. Hermiston.

**Thomas** [00:24:16] Okay. Yeah.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:24:16] It's a wonderful little town.

**Thomas** [00:24:18] Nice.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:24:18] Yeah. It's the biggest little town. Yeah.

**Thomas** [00:24:23] And then, but the community has changed, as you said, the Asian community, the Asian cuisine, so many different organizations. And then you've been involved with the Asian Celebration, is that right?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:24:36] Yes.

**Thomas** [00:24:37] What other organizations for the AAPI community, or involvement have you had?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:24:44] I pretty much just hung out with the Asian Foundation and Asian Celebration all the years. And and then when I became kind of an older person, my kids got involved with the Asian celebration. They play taiko drums. The waka daiko kids. And now they're old enough to teach the younger kids how to play taiko drums.

**Thomas** [00:25:05] Wow. Wow. And, racism in any community in the US. Do you feel that it's been a challenge in the educational space, enduring bias?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:25:21] I really don't want to get into that part at all.

[00:25:23] Okay, yeah.

[00:25:23] I don't want to talk about that piece because it really is, yeah, it's not my thing.

**Thomas** [00:25:28] No problem. That's perfectly fine.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:25:29] You can cut that out.

**Thomas** [00:25:30] Yes. No, we didn't we didn't even talk about it anyway. But I've just been appreciating as just myself, getting to know so many people who are advocating in different ways, or working in different areas. I think it's good to have, you know, a wide variety of people in your community doing a wide variety of things. Starting a church, doing this and that.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:25:56] So I think one of the most important things, and one of the reasons why I got interested in working with the Asian celebration, the Asian Foundation was one of the key elders. You know, I met Aimee there, I met some other folks. Some of the ladies, and one of the elders who recruited me into the program said that the goal was not to be political. The goal is to project a positive image of what we do as an Asian community, living in this community. And that really appealed to me. And that's why I joined, and that's why I stay with them. It is apolitical. It really is projecting all the positive things that we can bring to the community. And that, to me, is more important than all the other subjects because, you know, you project what you want them to see. And they see what you project, right?

**Thomas** [00:26:53] Right, yeah. And I have no interest in a political discussion. I'm more interested in, you know, this is a world where it's just challenging to be yourself, come into a room and and just, you know, I had just met you. We're having this conversation now, you know, and making connections across any kind of boundaries is always something that takes courage. It takes empathy for other people's experiences. It takes a listening ear, I think. And so I grew up, just so you know, attending Asian Celebration every year. I think it was very affirming and positive. And I went to Yujin Gakuen Elementary, so we got to actually come up and play taiko. Poka poka, shan shan, I remember the song. I never Sakura, with the plastic sword katana. And so I'm just grateful that there has been space for people, from growing up in this community to just celebrate. To celebrate culture and have that here.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:27:54] Very positive.

**Thomas** [00:27:55] Yes, it is positive. And there's nothing contentious about it. It's just always appreciated. And thank you for your contribution to it, truly. Do you think there's anything else with the students' successes, and your steadfast emphasis on these student outcomes? Is there anything else that you want to you want to share?

**Hai Nguyen** [00:28:20] No, not really.

**Thomas** [00:28:21] Yeah. Okay. Well, that was the only other thing I wanted to ask you, was just about the Asian-American experience. But you know, even I think I have a bias to think, okay, how are we going to do this interview? Talk about all the hardship. And talk about all the feeling alone and isolated. And that isn't everybody's experience. And so, you know, being able to just talk about what's going on with students. And my one question, I would ask you where does your optimism come from for the future? I assume that you believe that there's always going to be students with mild disabilities, special needs. And it seems that you're involved in their success on a day-to-day. What's your thoughts on the future of maybe your program, or their ability to succeed.

**Hai Nguyen** [00:29:19] The future. Well, again, we don't decide which student we get. They arrive when they finish school. And so we work with them. And again, that's why our goal is our focus: where they are, and building the skills up to where they need to be. And with some students it takes a little bit longer than others. So, predicting the future is kind of irrelevant because the students are going to need help to become productive young adults. And it needs help, guidance, and some coaching to build those skills up.

**Thomas** [00:30:02] Well, excellent. Thank you for being in that position. Thank you for your professionalism and your willingness to stretch maybe to the limit of your comfort zone, with me asking you all these questions. And we thank the audience for being here for this conversation with the Springfield History Museum's ILLUMINATION project. Thank you, Hai Nguyen. Thank you, all. Take care.