

American Dream

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Vietnamese refugees have prosperous business here

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

The waters of the South China Sea were warm. Thirteen-year-old Kim Vu made out the vague outlines of the boat about 100 yards away in the shadowy Vietnam night. She could ride a bicycle as well as anyone in her village — bicycles were the fastest way to get around — but she had never learned to swim.

"So I grabbed hold of the side of a basket that was being pushed toward the boat," the pretty, good-natured Vu, 43, recalled three decades later in the busy, no-frills office of A&M Foreign Car Service, the garage on the border of East Haven-New Haven, owned and operated by her husband Van Nguyen that is indispensable to 400 Volvo owners up and down the shoreline.

The scene was chaotic, Vu said, with people thrashing and yelling out for their families in the dark. But she managed to keep her grip on the basket until she was pulled

aboard.

The boat was small and rickety. It was also overcrowded, with 51 people, including a baby and Vu's older brother. After being tossed for six days on the ocean, they were rescued by an oil rig.

"It was just luck that it came by," said Vu, not least given the exposure to storms, starvation, and pirates trolling the seas that had taken the lives of an estimated 250,000 boat people between 1975 and 1987, according to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees—more than a quarter of those trying to escape.

Vu had left behind her mother and seven brothers and sisters, her impoverished village, and the Communist regime that had oppressed her country in the wake of the Vietnam War. Her father, a soldier for the American army, had been killed in 1971 when Communist forces bombed a car transporting him and his unit in a mountainous region.

Because Vu was too

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Van Nguyen (left) and his wife, Kim Vu (right), at their business, A & M Foreign Car Service on Forbes Avenue on the New Haven-East Haven border. Photo by Arnold Gold.



Success: Vietnamese couple find a better life here

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enough to take care of herself, her mother decided that she should join her brother in the quest for freedom and the possibility of a better life.

The oil rig brought them to a refugee camp in Malaysia. The average stay was a year. But Vu's mother had shown foresight. Most families destroyed any papers documenting their involvement with the previous government for fear of retribution. She didn't. Instead, she sewed the papers into her son's clothing. Those papers, along with the sponsorship of an uncle in Connecticut, had Vu and her brother boarding a plane after only three months. The year was 1981.

Vu entered middle school in North Haven knowing only a handful of English words. She must have caught on quickly. She graduated from high school, then earned an undergraduate degree in psychology from the University of Connecticut in 1991. Shortly after, she secured a position teaching math in the Hartford school system.

By then, she had married the wiry, well-mannered Nguyen (Wen) who had also escaped by boat from Vietnam in 1981, leaving behind his parents and six younger sisters. She had met Nguyen in 1987 among a small group of Vietnamese Americans that congregated at St. Barnabas Parish in North Haven.

Even back then, Vu said, Nguyen, who was working at a Hamden company that bought and resold airplane parts, was displaying the rare skills that make him essential to A&M's customers. "He didn't have any training in auto mechanics but he was always tinkering with engines, taking them apart, putting them back

together," she said amid the faint smell of oil and the strains of a pop radio station filtering in from the garage.

Nguyen, 50, who grew up on a small farm, recalled a small machine to pump water that had transfixed him as a boy. "When I got here, there were so many more machines," he said, his dark eyes lighting up, "and they just drew me in." In his early years in Connecticut, he had bought a 1975 Mustang which he disassembled and reassembled, trying to figure out "how this worked, how that worked." Once he pulled out all the electrical wires. A few times he burned the engine. But all along he was learning from his mistakes, he said.

The department head of the adult-education training program in automotive technology at Eli Whitney Technical School, where Nguyen enrolled in 1989, took notice. "He was naturally gifted," he said. "Just amazing skills with his hands, with his mind." A student with that kind of talent, drive, and commitment, he added, "you always remember."

No wonder, then, though he's never taken an advanced training course on newer Volvo models, Nguyen has been stumped only a few times since 1990, when Augie Iacomucci, then owner of A&M (short for Augie and his partner Mario), contacted Eli Whitney in search of an intern, through 2005, when Iacomucci on his retirement sold the business to Nguyen, and in the seven years since. That's 22 years.

These days, with the help of Vu, who left her teaching position to join the operation, A&M is thriving—this, in spite of the sputtering economy and, more remarkably,

the fact that Nguyen and Vu don't advertise. Literally. Unless you include the Yellow Pages.

Indeed, ask any of their growing customer base how they learned about A&M. The invariable answer: a relative, a friend, a co-worker. Take Greg Sirianni, a professor at the University of New Haven. A self-proclaimed "do-it-yourselfer," he found himself at a loss in his early attempts to restore his 1984 240 Volvo wagon. A friend recommended A&M. What struck him first, he said, was "how genuine and capable they were and their clear dedication to their craft."

The word-of-mouth business plan is by design. "We want loyal customers," said Nguyen, taking a break from replacing a side view mirror on a 1998 Volvo S90. "Customers who come to us again and again because they know they can trust us to give them good service at a reasonable price."

For Nguyen, it's really quite simple. "The better the quality of our service, the way we treat our cus-

tomers, the better the business will do." And the better the business does, the more financial support he can provide to his elderly parents and six sisters in Vietnam. "Of course our family here comes first," said Nguyen, referring to Vu and their teenage son and daughter. "But anything extra goes back there."

With that, he nodded at Vu, who was hanging up the phone. She had just finished talking a distressed Volvo owner through a crisis. "She turned her wheel too far and heard a rubbing noise," Vu said. But there was nothing wrong with the suspension. "That kind of noise is common with her year, make, and model."



Nguyen, 50, who grew up on a small farm in Vietnam, now specializes in repairing Volvos at his business A & M Foreign Car Service on Forbes Ave. in New Haven. He learned car mechanics here after he fled Vietnam, and, his wife, who grew up in a village where bicycles were the primary form of transportation has become an authority on Volvos. Photo by Arnold Gold.

And that, perhaps, is the most extraordinary part of this quintessentially American success story. The girl who grew up in a village where bicycles were the primary mode of transportation

has become an authority in most matters Volvo.

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