

Vietnamese couple break cultural mold

They're politically active, plus work for a charity

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People long to get out of the crowded, messy conditions, he says, and he does, too.

"Yes, I want to. If I could, I would have been gone a long time ago."

John's mailing in San Jose went out to 35,000 Vietnamese Americans and supporters, a holiday plea for donations to the relief work in Vietnam that his employer, Franciscan Charity, does. It's a high-ceiling space beneath de Marillac Academy in the St. Boniface building on Golden Gate Avenue. John, its office manager, is also the charity's chief fundraiser.

He reorganized and revitalized the charity a few years ago, taking it from a one-man program — founded in 2004 by a Franciscan priest — into a \$3 million annual operation with a staff of eight. Its mission is to help disadvantaged Vietnamese children, and has 20 projects in place. A rate card in the office shows what earmarked donations provide: \$100 buys a wheelchair or eye surgery, \$3,000 pays for heart surgery, \$5,000 builds a water-purifying system.

"We make a big impact in Vietnam," John says. He's motivated by the thought that "there might be a boy out there like me."

His wife is project manager for outreach, which can mean assisting flood victims who lost their homes or grants for women to learn sewing skills. They work also with Catholic-run orphanages. One of the longest-running programs is aiding pregnant Vietnamese girls. Franciscan Charity supports their decision to keep the baby or give it to an orphanage.

"When they hold the baby, most keep them," John says. Then the charity helps them get on their feet financially. "But some don't and give it up. They don't want to face the shame" of being an unwed mother.

Charity is foreign to the Vietnamese, making John and Van's choice of employer a bit unusual. Philip Nguyen (no relation), director of Southwest Asian Community Center on O'Farrell Street, explains:

"There is no charitable consciousness (in Vietnam)," he says. "It's the thing we learn from this country. That's why a lot of Vietnamese go back to help out. Any charity in Vietnam comes mainly from the U.S."

John was born in Saigon the year after the North Vietnamese took over. Now, it's Ho Chi Minh City, but to those who have left, it's forever Saigon.

"It was a mess over there," John says, speaking rapidly, sometimes tripping over words. His parents had quickly married because his mother feared the Communists would make her marry someone she didn't even know.

"There was a lot of uncertainty and fear, but people thought the Communist regime would fall — a big mistake."

Party control made John's youth oppressive and barren. He was an only child, but there were shortages of everything. His family wasn't destitute, but nearly so. He describes his youth like scenes out of "Slumdog Millionaire."

"I remember standing on a pile of garbage looking up at the planes going overhead hoping for a miracle to get out of there. That was my childhood."

The Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians were the last of the immigrating ethnicities to come to the Tenderloin in significant numbers. As the city's cheapest neighborhood, it had the added attraction of being close to Chinatown

with its similar cultural roots.

The 2010 census showed 12,971 Vietnamese living in San Francisco. Philip Nguyen says it's higher. The Southeast Asian Community Center he runs was founded in the 1980s by Vietnamese refugees and immigrants to help their countrymen assimilate. Philip served on the committee overseeing the 2010 U.S. Census in San Francisco and Alameda counties.

"It's more like 14,000," he says, citing reasons for the disparity. A number of the immigrants are monolingual and reclusive. Still others identified as Chinese. The census doesn't call out the Tenderloin, but Philip estimates its Vietnamese population is around 3,500. The biggest community in the U.S., however, is in San Jose: 100,000.

When Vietnamese Americans in the TL hit a financial sweet spot, sometimes after years of living eight to 10 in a room, all adults working two, sometimes three jobs, they move out of the city to where "they think their social status will be better off. And they understandably want a larger house for an expanding family," says Philip. The choice three decades ago was Oakland, Philip says, then it shifted to San Jose, which was near Silicon Valley where "jobs were abundant."

Over his 19 years in the northwest section of the Tenderloin, the neighborhood's prosperous quadrant, Philip has seen dramatic changes. Vietnamese businesses have surged with an estimated 300 — 75 in Little Saigon — amid escalating homelessness in the ever-filthy streets. The TL's Vietnamese population has leveled off, he says, predicting that Sacramento will see the next influx.

The Tenderloin will begin to draw more "middle-income people," and the new California Pacific Medical Center on Van Ness should become a significant employer, Philip believes.

John disagrees that the Tenderloin's Vietnamese population is stabilizing. He sees a serious decline at church where he and Van sing in the 20-member St. Boniface choir for the Sunday afternoon Mass said in Vietnamese. He's been in the choir since he was 16; she joined four years ago.

"Young people don't come to the Vietnamese service anymore. They want the English one as part of their assimilation," he says. "And the old people are dying off. I feel (the population) is shrinking. At least at my church, it's in crisis."

Even so, the smaller congregation of 200 today swells to 400 at Christmas-time with Vietnamese returning to the Tenderloin from all over the city.

A major stumbling block to the hood for the immigrants has been language. Even those here 10 or more years have trouble, Philip says.

In John's middle school in Saigon, where two-thirds of the students were named Nguyen, Russian or English was the foreign language option. If you didn't take Russian, like the politically correct majority did, "you were looked down on." John chose English, anyway. But it was the king's English and didn't help much here because it caused pronunciation confusion.

It didn't dampen his desire for things American, though. Some Saigon families, despite book bans and risking harsh punishments, kept secret libraries. When John had saved enough pennies, he could rent the Jack London stories his father had recommended. "I read them all," he says. In Vietnamese.

And he concedes he perhaps orders too much food when he eats out be-



Thanh Quoc Nguyen and his wife, Van Le, top, review donation documents recently at Franciscan Charity on Golden Gate Avenue and, below, chat with Curran House manager Tammy Walker, left.

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Philip Nguyen
DIRECTOR, SOUTHWEST ASIAN COMMUNITY CENTER

cause of its scarcity in his youth, much like London's character in "Love of Life" who was starving in the subzero Yukon, finally got rescued, then afterward never seemed to get enough to eat.

John's path when he arrived in San Francisco was paved by his aunt and uncle. They had been translators for the CIA and got out with a U.S. attaché just before Saigon fell. Had they stayed, "they would have been condemned as spies."

The couple found jobs as restaurant dishwashers for three years. The aunt, who had better English, then became a bank teller. They sent money back so the rest of the family could come here and they became John's closest advisers in his assimilation.

John went to Newcomer High School in the Fillmore District. It was designed to improve immigrants' English speaking and understanding. He later graduated from Lincoln High.

His parents sent him after school to the Vietnamese Youth Development

Center on Eddy Street for two years. The Tenderloin nonprofit that now serves 500 mostly Vietnamese youth with a spectrum of language, job training and other support programs, was created in 1978 to serve the incoming Vietnamese youth.

"They wanted me to be a leader," John says. "But I was too shy, and my English wasn't that good."

John wrestled with nuances, too, like just saying no.

"(Vietnamese) people don't say 'no' to your face," he says. "It's disrespectful and considered uneducated. You have to find a way to let someone down easy. You're always looking to see that you don't offend the person you're talking to. It's so important in our culture."

He hasn't kept track of the teenagers who attended VYDC with him, but he knows some joined Vietnamese drug-selling gangs, some got married, and very few went on to college. His priorities were high, however, and he



John and Van Nguyen, regulars at Samovar Tea Lounge in Yerba Buena Gardens, love to sit at a window table and gaze across the street to St. Patrick's, enjoying the cityscape's 19th to 21st century contrast.

had role models from the church congregation and choir, the "well-to-do with a good moral compass," about 30 of them, doctors, dentists, scientists, real estate agents. He stays in touch to learn from them. "Good habits," he says, "rub off on me."

John went to City College, then to San Francisco State University. Computer-smart, he wanted to be a doctor but found in a chemistry class he was color blind. He switched majors and got a degree in corporate finance in 2007. It was a huge year in which he started paying off a \$40,000 student loan and moved his wife here from Vietnam to live with him and his parents, and they moved into Curran House.

He had met Van on a trip back to Saigon in 2004. They kept communicating through "chat rooms and messaging programs to avoid the Communist government firewall." He returned in 2006 to wed, but opened a can of worms. Van was a doctor, a liver disease specialist at one of Vietnam's biggest hospitals, where it was common for three patients to occupy a single bed and for supporting family members to be sleeping on the floor. With a shortage of doctors, Vietnam didn't want to lose any.

"They told me it would take three months (to get married)," John said. "I only had three weeks I could be away."

He was poor then, working at the Pizza Hut on Geary and Leavenworth. But he got his boss to guarantee his job, and his parents to pledge to take care of Van if he couldn't. Still, Vietnamese officials were reluctant to let her go. Then, ahead of a scheduled meeting between Van and officials from both countries, he wrote a letter explaining his difficulties. Van hid it in her clothing and it went undetected in a pre-meeting search. On the sly, she gave John's letter to a U.S. Embassy official who then maneuvered the approval.

Van's medical credentials are worthwhile in the U.S. She tried to obtain her records, which might have given her some credits toward a degree here. But

that, too, was a conundrum. Officials in Vietnam demanded \$3,500 just to locate the documents.

"Then it would be much more (in bribes) to get them — a problem in backward countries," John says.

Still, Van has chosen a route back to medicine. She's taking premed night courses at San Francisco City College. She'd have enrolled sooner, but missed two years recovering from being hit by a car in a crosswalk. There was no settlement. The driver, a student in a junker, was destitute and had no insurance.

"We couldn't pursue that," John says. "There was no money."

Politics is dormant in San Francisco's Vietnamese community. There are no elected Vietnamese American officials here. San Jose City Council has three, in a city with 100,000 Vietnamese. Philip Nguyen believes it will be another generation before a Vietnamese could be elected in San Francisco. John Nguyen sees a depressing stone wall when he tries to speak to Vietnamese members of the St. Boniface congregation about democratic power.

"Many come from a country (where) if you speak out you get arrested," he says. "If they're not distrustful, they are timid and unaccustomed to political freedom. They choke themselves off."

"But we are part of the country. I say, 'Speak out — nobody's going to speak for you.' But they are not listening. I see it right away when I talk to them."

John's own voice has grown in the community along with his political awareness. Sharen Hewitt, Curran House's former building foreman who has suggested interview subjects for The Extra's diversity series, earlier this year asked John to find residents to hear a political speech downstairs by former Supervisor David Chiu, then a state Senate candidate. About 20 showed up, but not many had been recruited by John.

Hewitt, who motivates Curran residents to get involved with neighborhood issues, lobbied the school board to create a Vietnamese language pathway

Maybe most popular name in the world



John Nguyen's last name is far more common than Smith, Jones or any other culture's most ordinary monikers — even Kim in Korea. And its popularity is growing — including in the U.S.

In John Nguyen's middle school class more than 25 years ago in Saigon, two-thirds of his classmates shared his surname. Today, an estimated 40% of Vietnam's population, 36 million — are named Nguyen.

In formal settings in Vietnam — unlike the American custom — people are addressed by their first name. "Use the last name," John says with a laugh, "and nobody knows who you're talking to. When I first came here (to the U.S.) it was confusing."

Dating back to 1232, Vietnamese began taking the family name of royalty to show their favor and loyalty, and sometimes for self-protection against discrimination or worse. Over generations, the names stuck. Nguyen, the most common, is likely a translation derived from a Chinese surname.

Nguyen is the seventh most common family name in Australia, 54th in France. In the U.S., it is the 57th most common, according to the 2000 census, a major leap from its 229th place in 1990, according to Wikipedia.

In Vietnamese, Nguyen is sometimes abbreviated Ng. Trying to pronounce Nguyen, English speakers usually say it as "win." Pretty close, but devoid of nuance.

According to Wikipedia, "The voice first drops from a mid-level to the bottom of the speaker's range of pitch, then rises back to mid."

—Tom Carter

K-12. The board passed a resolution in May to begin that initiative in 2017. Currently, 1,100 SFUSD students of more than 60,000 speak Vietnamese.

She persuaded John to apply for a vacant seat on the Tenderloin Community Benefits District board. He applied as John Nguyen, forgoing his Vietnamese name, Thanh, though that appears on the CBD website.

"I don't think of myself as Vietnamese anymore," he explains. "I'm an American. I don't want to go back. It's me they deal with, not a name. I'm willing to adapt." He adds with a smile: "Thanh in Vietnamese means success."

In September, he was elected to the CBD board and Executive Director Susie McKinnon said she was glad to have him.

"We were all so impressed with John's desire to work for the neighborhood," she said.

He was assigned to the District Identity and Streetscape Improvement committee, which now is called Community Engagement and Communications. John had been unaware of the CBD until Hewitt came knocking, but now bristles with anticipation for the work to be done, from landing improvement grants to getting the CBD widely known.

"To me, marketing is where you make money," he says. "And the CBD doesn't have a marketing team. My goals are to change that."

The CBD is dedicated to promoting cleanliness, beautification, street improvements and job training among other objectives for a 29-block area with

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