

The Price of Success

story by Beverly Fast & photography by Sean Francis Martin

What would you risk to make a better life for your children?

They say there's a story behind every successful business. Meet Rose Tran, a petite woman of middle years with a gracious smile and razor sharp business sense. Hers is the story of how Saskatoon came to have its first Vietnamese restaurant, the Saigon Rose. A humble topic, maybe, but the story has all the ingredients of a good yarn: perilous flight, danger on the high seas, family sacrifice, days of despair, days of triumph.



The adventure begins in Vietnam in 1979, four years after the fall of Saigon. The country is whole again – North and South are united for the first time in more than twenty years – but life is harsh. Private business has been abolished. Jobs are scarce and good positions are going to those with ties to the new regime. One-time professionals, especially in the once American-friendly south, hold menial jobs. Many find themselves among the millions sent to ‘new economic zones’ to work as peasant farmers, reclaiming land scarred by decades of war.

Refugees had been leaving Vietnam since ‘75. But in 1979, the number soared to the hundreds of thousands. It was as if someone had opened the floodgates. By 1981, an estimated one million Vietnamese had fled their homeland. Rose was among them. Her family had been comfortably middle class in South Vietnam. Her father was a respected herbalist, or doctor. Before her marriage in 1972, she had been a teacher, her husband a hospital worker.

Imagine how bleak the future must have looked in order for them to make the extraordinary decision to run. They had two sons: six-year old Andy and four-year old Tung. It would have been easier to stay put. Instead, 15 family members gathered what possessions they could, crowded onto a motorboat and headed out into the South China Sea in search of a better life.

In the decades since, some have called the boatpeople economic opportunists. It’s an odd argument, as if it’s noble to want freedom but bad manners to want economic freedom. Rose doesn’t deny she wanted a better life for her children. To her, freedom meant access to an education and the chance to work hard and succeed.

She remembers their first attempt to leave Vietnam failed. The boat lost power and they found themselves adrift not far from shore, with the tide coming in. They hid until a second attempt could be made.

This time they got successfully away, but then came days with little food or water ... and the threat of pirates. The wave of refugees was like chum to a pool of sharks; the pirates were in a feeding frenzy. That year, the United

Nations estimated that close to one-third of all boats leaving Vietnam were attacked. By 1981, the estimates were in the 80% range. The U.N. code for it was RPM: rape, pillage and murder.

Rose doesn’t talk about their days at sea. Her story picks up when the family safely made landfall in Malaysia. Even this was a test of nerves. There were more than a dozen refugee camps throughout Malaysia and Indonesia, with more in Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore and even as far away as the Philippines. But the sheer volume of boatpeople was overwhelming their resources. The Malaysian government put soldiers on its beaches, with orders to turn boatpeople back.

“We did not stay on the beach, we went straight into the forest,” Rose says of their arrival. “And we met people who warned us not to trust the Malaysian officials. They said, ‘they will tell you they’re going to take you to a refugee camp, but they’re going to put you on a boat and send you out to sea.’”

It was a catch-22. Their only hope of getting to the West was getting into a refugee camp, where they could be interviewed by sponsoring countries: the United States, France, Canada and Australia chief among them. To do that, they had to go to the officials. As it turns out, they were put back on a boat. Rose is sure that it was only the intervention of an Australian official that kept them from being set adrift. Instead, they were transported to an island refugee camp.

It was tremendous good luck, but Rose remembers their time in the camp with a shudder. There were 10 hour line-ups for water, little food, poor sanitation and make-shift facilities. “You just go day by day.”

Fate was on their side. “We had been in camp maybe a month when we were interviewed by Canada. We were so lucky. Some people stayed there months, maybe years,” Rose says. “I remember the official saying, ‘if we sponsor you, what would you do?’ I said, ‘anything.’ We would learn any skill.”

Rose, her husband and their young boys were sponsored to Canada. “At first, I had an idea

of this wild place, you know, with cowboys and Indians and wild animals. Like you see in movies. I didn’t know anything.”

She vividly recalls the day they arrived in Saskatoon, one of the key destinations in Canada. “We landed at the airport around one o’clock in the afternoon. By four o’clock, I had a job. It was at a Chinese restaurant answering delivery calls. But I didn’t have enough English, so I couldn’t understand the orders. It was awful. I quit.”

The next day, Rose went to the government employment agency. “I asked to enrol in English class but the man said no. He said, ‘you can say your name, you don’t need to study.’ I was angry. I was frustrated because I wanted to learn. But I didn’t push because I wanted to keep my promise. I wanted to show that my people are hardworking. So I said, ‘then I need a job right away.’”

She got one at the SAAN Department Store. By summer, the family was settled in their own apartment, she and her husband both had jobs, and their boys were enrolled in school. Now came the long process of getting the rest of her family over. Family is absolutely central to Vietnamese culture. There was no way Rose could leave them in the camps. She went through bureaucratic hoops to get government sponsorship for her parents-in-law. For her own parents, who were older and not candidates for the government program, she found a private sponsor through a local church. Sponsors were required to provide newcomers with material and social support for one year, so it wasn’t a trivial commitment. One of the last to come over was Rose’s brother.

“We needed to find him a job. He had a restaurant in Vietnam. There were no Vietnamese restaurants in Saskatoon, so we decided to open one. We didn’t know if it would succeed, but we decided to take the risk.”



In 1982 when they opened Saigon Rose on Avenue A. The whole family helped out. They only had enough savings to pay the rent, so everyone kept their day job. Sometimes Rose would be there till four in the morning, then back at 6:00 a.m. to prep for lunch. The work took its toll on every family member, but Rose's heart seemed to break watching her parents. "I felt so bad for them, for my father. He was an herbalist in Vietnam and now his hands were numb from cooking and washing up."

After about a year, Rose was ready to give up. In despair, she went to her father. "I said it was too much, it was too hard. But my father said not to quit. My grandparents were Chinese. They came to Vietnam and worked hard too, and they told my father, 'work hard and save and you will succeed.'"

Slowly, the tide began to turn. Vietnamese customers brought their sponsors, their sponsors brought their friends and soon the word spread. Today, Saigon Rose is a successful

enterprise. The family owns the building it's located in on 25th Street as well as other real estate around the city. Her sister has Saigon II on 33rd Street, her nephew has the Saigon on Third Avenue.

"Something is returned from all the hard work; something good," she says. "But you pay a price. I kept doing it because I didn't want my kids to have to work so hard."

Her children are grown now. Tung, 28, just moved to Ottawa while Andy, 30, returned to Vietnam several years ago. Rose recently made her first trip back to see the birth of her grandchild. Which brings our story full circle. What would you risk to make a better life for your children? 🌹



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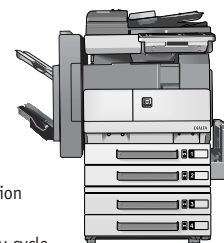
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