

BUSINESS

How this Fall River business owner went from Vietnamese refugee to successful entrepreneur



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FALL RIVER – The sight of his cancer-stricken mother-in-law sleeping on a floor in Vietnam motivated David Nguyen to go into the bedding business.

That was three decades ago, and since then the owner of US Bedding in Fall River has positioned himself to be one of the major bedding manufacturers on the East Coast.

Nguyen was born in 1962 in Hanoi, capital city of the former North Vietnam.

Nearly 18 years later, in late 1979, after his mother had bribed local police officials to get him phony Chinese identification documents — so that Nguyen could board a small boat bound for Hong Kong with 100 other people — he had only one thought in mind: making his way to the United States.

It didn't matter that it was less than five years since the last remaining U.S. troops left what was then known as Saigon in South Vietnam — after a decade-long military conflict that led to the deaths of 58,000 American soldiers and as many as an estimated 600,000 North and South Vietnamese civilians.

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Nguyen, now 58, says he had just graduated high school and planned to go to college.

Surviving a perilous journey by sea

His father died when he was two years old leaving his mother, who ran a small market, to support him and his six siblings, all of whom helped her run the business after school.

His college plans were dashed after he got word that he would have to serve in the Vietnamese army either in Cambodia — where Vietnamese troops were fighting to oust Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge regime -- or on the northern border where Chinese and Vietnamese troops were clashing in what is known as the last Sino-Vietnamese War.

Nguyen says he didn't hesitate to leave Vietnam, despite the fact that he was leaving behind his mother and siblings.

“I didn't like the government,” he said. “It was too dangerous for me to stay there, and anywhere is better than living in the communist country.”

Nguyen says that he and his future wife survived their 43-day sea journey to Hong Kong, which at the time was under British control, from the capital city of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam where he had grown up.

“It would only take 45 minutes to fly there,” he said. “But we couldn't go on the open sea. We had to stay close to shore. And we hit the rocks two times.”

A year in refugee camps to get to America

After living for more than a year in two refugee camps, the young couple, who were allowed to live together and had plans to marry, qualified to travel to the United States.

Nguyen said they had earlier been offered safe passage to other Western nations such as Britain, Australia and Holland. But he said they waited until it became possible to travel by ship to America.

During his time in Hong Kong, Nguyen says he searched for his older brother who had also planned to escape from Hanoi. But he says his sibling was grabbed by police before he could leave and ended up spending a year in a Vietnamese prison.

His brother spends a year in prison

Nguyen says his two brothers and four sisters all survived and went on to lead what is be considered normal lives in Vietnam.

He attributes the improvement in the quality of life to the communist government adopting a more lenient attitude in regard to free-market capitalism.

After a total of two weeks of English language classes in the second of two Hong Kong refugee camps, Nguyen and his now-pregnant wife arrived in Boston where they were sponsored by an organization affiliated with a Catholic church.

Eight Vietnamese refugees share a one-bedroom apartment

Nguyen says their first residency was a one-bedroom apartment on Main Street in Charlestown where the couple shared space with six other Vietnamese refugees, all of whom were single men.

He said they all slept on pieces of foam mattress. After two months Nguyen and his wife and another couple moved into a two-bedroom multi-family house in Everett.

It was while living there that his wife gave birth to a daughter, the first of five children.

While his wife stayed at home with the baby, Nguyen found a job cleaning a wholesale marketplace where other workers had spent the day cleaning vegetables.

“I spoke no English, but I did a great job,” he said. “The owner offered me another job, so now I have two jobs, and I’m working 16, 17 hours a day, six days a week.”

After two years, Nguyen says he began renting a three-family house in a Dorchester neighborhood with a sizable Vietnamese population.

He began learning how to do construction work and repairs and became adept at installing hardwood floors.

Within two years Nguyen had started his own construction company. By then his wife had given birth to her second child.

Nguyen opens American Dry Cleaning

One day while working a job on Beacon Hill Nguyen says he spotted a full-service laundry business for sale complete with dry cleaning services and clothing alterations.

Not long after buying the business from the elderly female owner who wanted to retire, Nguyen sold his construction firm to a friend and eventually opened five more laundry and dry cleaning locations. He called his new business American Dry Cleaning.

Nguyen says he was able to buy a piece of land in West Roxbury where he built a house for his growing family.

The trajectory of his business life, however, took a detour after he made a return visit to Vietnam in 1989.

Nguyen says it was the first time he had met his mother-in-law, who by then was dying of cancer.

“She was a very skinny lady,” he said. “And she slept on the wooden floor without a mattress like a lot of Vietnamese.”

“I felt terrible,” Nguyen said. “I tried to get her a mattress, but I cannot find it anywhere. People don’t even know what it is.”

The moment his business plans changed

He said he finally found a piece of foam in a store.

Nguyen said he paid the equivalent of \$150 American dollars for that item, which struck him as absurd: “My sister was a doctor, and she made \$17 a month. No wonder no one had anything like that,” he said.

Returning to Boston, Nguyen says he couldn’t stop thinking about “that beautiful mattress.”

“In my spare time I would ask around, ‘Where do they make mattresses in Boston?’”

One day Nguyen walked into a mattress manufacturing company in Chelsea and asked the general manager for a tour.

“I just showed up at the front desk and said, ‘I want to learn how to make the mattresses, because I want to make them in Vietnam,’” Nguyen said.

The manager declined his request and suggested that Nguyen pick up a copy of Bed Times Magazine.

One of the ads he spotted in the trade magazine was for a Webster company called Jeffco Fibres, Inc. Nguyen said he asked for the founder and owner Alfred Lonstein, who referred him to his son Jeffrey.

“Jeff shows me around so I can see fabric panel and quilting. Step by step the whole process,” Nguyen said.

During a recent interview in his US Bedding office in Fall River, Nguyen answered a phone call from Jeffrey Lonstein’s son Eric, who now works in his family business and sells bedding material to Nguyen.

Returning to his story, Nguyen said, “I bought a machine and material and put it in a container and shipped it to Vietnam.”

The year was 1994, and he enlisted a brother in Vietnam to help him open what would not only be Nguyen’s first bedding business, but also what he says was probably the first bedding manufacturing business in the country.

“But I got into the market too early,” he said.

Three years later, after his wife underwent open heart surgery, and with five kids in high school, Nguyen said he sold his share of the business to his brother in Vietnam.

Nguyen said by the time his brother sold it in 2005 the business had proven to be “very successful.”

“It was amazing to people,” he said, adding that “there are many others now. If I had hung around I could be a billionaire.”

Nguyen said the first mattress made in the Hanoi factory went to his mother, who has since passed away.

“She was sleeping on that mattress when she died,” he said.

Nguyen opens US Bedding in 2000

Nguyen, meanwhile, in 2000 sold all six of his dry cleaning stores to his employees in order to open US Bedding.

He began by buying a 25,000-square-foot warehouse in Canton. Five years later Nguyen relocated after purchasing an old mill building on Quarry Street in Fall River.

Nguyen says the relocation move will allow his business to grow by leaps and bounds and eventually will result in his hiring an additional 100 workers.

He and his wife also plan to move from West Roxbury to Tiverton where Nguyen says he'll build a house on farm land he bought.

Nguyen says despite the recent political turmoil in the country he has no intention of altering the name of his company.

“America is the best country in the world,” he said.

“I always tell my friends and kids that if they work hard and are honest they basically can do whatever they want,” Nguyen said.