Son and Ne Dao

“It’s just a very long distance from not having anything, to get to this point,” says Ne Dao, co-owner of Ha Tien Grocery Store (353 University Avenue West, St. Paul). While Dao means as business people, St. Paul is also a long distance from where Ne and husband and co-owner, Son Dao, started out geographically.

This article is part of the series, Along the Corridor: University Avenue business owners navigating change, an oral history project funded through a State of Minnesota Historical & Cultural Heritage Grant.

Ne was born in Cambodia, Son in Vietnam. She and her parents, farmers, fled Cambodia for Thailand in the 1970s, where they lived in a resettlement camp for three-and-a-half years. In the camp the family received food, but no money to
buy anything else. “If you get to go to work that day you get paid, if you don’t, you don’t.” She and her family came to the United States in 1979. Their first stop was Houston. They relocated to Minnesota a year later.

Son and his family arrived in Minnesota in 1981, Ne thinks, following time in Austin, Texas. Son’s father purchased a boat and fished professionally. His children joined him. This became a problem because work on the fishing boat took Son and his siblings away from their studies. Moving to Minnesota was the solution, a way of ensuring that they received a good education without the distraction of other work.

From cosmetologist to store owner

Life in St. Paul has consisted of a series of changes, many of them revolving around the store that Son’s parents started at 800 University, a short distance west of its current location.

Son became actively involved with his parents’ store, which opened a couple of years before he and Ne married. Meanwhile, Ne worked as a cosmetologist, cutting hair, until they started a family of their own, at which point, she became a stay-at-home mom. That changed when Ne’s in-laws decided they were ready to transition into a new chapter.

Ne’s in-laws’ decision to sell the original store and purchase the building at 353 University, which had formerly housed the Frogtown Diner, coincided with Ne’s eagerness to return to work. “After that, I got in, and only my husband and I, and we started from scratch.”
There were many advantages to the five-block move. "It was more space," says Ne. "Nicer, with a parking lot, which is small, but for us, at that time, it was big." Now they can carry more items. "Everything bigger, longer freezers."

Still, it took time, a lot of hard work, and a good number of sacrifices, to convert the space from a restaurant into a grocery store. Half a year, Ne says, before they could open and then continuous work for more than five years.

*From when we first opened, we did not have any income. We just live from month to month, just enough to pay our mortgage, our electric, and buy milk for the kids. For five years, yes, we sacrifice even cable….It was bad, but it paid off, I think.*

Before they opened it was just Ne and Son. Then they added one employee to help them keep the shelves stocked. A few months later they hired a second, to help with vegetables.
Changing Central Corridor brings safety, more business

Today Ha Tien employs a staff of over 20. This growth is a reflection of increased sales, especially after an extensive remodel that was completed in 2013. “I ended up hiring about four or five more employees,” says Ne Dao.

Dao says that she’s pleased with the changes she has witnessed along University Avenue and is hopeful about the impact the trains will have on her family’s business.

The corridor is far different from the one she first encountered in the 1980s.

*It was slow, not a lot of cars. I used to live on Charles. Marion and Charles, corner right there. I used to walk to Sears all the time when I was in high school. I didn’t have to wait so long to cross the road. It was quiet. That’s all I remember. But now it’s a lot of cars. Busy. It’s busy.*

One thing that Dao cites as a major improvement is the dramatic decrease in prostitution along the Corridor. “One thing that I’m happy about is the prostitution. I don’t see them….Before they would stand around, they would just walk, back and forth, back and forth, and that’s all they do.” Once light rail construction began, in 2012, the prostitutes disappeared, she says.

Dao also feels a sense of safety now that she hasn’t in the past. “I’ve been here for almost 17 years. Everyday I didn’t feel safe. I think that’s a big thing for me,
because I carry a purse, but all of my I.D. is in my pocket. I’ve been doing that because I don’t have time if something happened. I’m protecting myself, but now I feel safe. I only see neighbors that have been walking for years, yes, neighbors.”

Recognizing that construction would be disruptive, Ha Tien’s owners took advantage of those months—and then some—to undertake a major renovation of their store. “We thought we wanted to do it at the same as them, so when they’re done, we’re done, too. But they got done first. So for us it took awhile.”

Son, she says, did most of the planning, meeting and making plans with an architect, plumbers, electricians, and various subcontractors.

The project took from May 2012 to March 2013, followed by a grand reopening.

**Being recognized, giving back**

Dao expresses some surprise that the couple’s work was recognized by the Neighborhood Development Center, which gave them an Entrepreneur Award. She recalls her son saying, “I didn’t think people who have small business have this kind of thing.” The recognition was gratifying.

*It was great that when we work hard, yes, we do work hard, we didn’t think that somebody was watching, you know. We didn’t think that somebody was looking and so, I think it was good, it was great. I think it help us to okay we’re doing this,*
not just ourselves. It is for community but then it’s good that they recognize how hard we work.

The community aspect of their work is what the Daos find most satisfying, especially the help that they can provide new immigrants. “I have Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, people from Burma. Right now I have a lot of people from Burma because they’re new to the United States right now. Some of them, they can speak Thai and I speak Thai so I can relate to them. They have questions because most of them don’t speak English, yet. And they can talk to me, they can ask me, so.”

These are the kinds of relationships that form in businesses where the owner is present. Customers come from far beyond St. Paul, including Eagan, Burnsville, Woodbury, and Shoreview.

Most of them have been shopping here for years, since we opened. So we’re like their family, so they can say anything that they want. Or they just open the door and come in and ask, ‘Do you have this, do you have that?,’ so they don’t have to go and look. They feel so comfortable, I think, so comfortable with my husband and I. That’s what most of the people I hear, they shop here they say because of my husband and I.

She contrasts this with the experience of chain stores. “They have managers, and you know, my customers, when they come in here, if they don’t see it on the shelf, they ask and they’re waited on, like if you go to Target or Walmart, if you
don’t see something, you just walk away. My customers don’t do that. They feel so comfortable that they know that we’ve got it, but no one take it out. So they kind of ask us and they wait. We go and get for them. I think that’s why. If they go to another store they don’t do that."

Seeing young children grow up and start having families of their own has also been satisfying.

Ne credits Son’s determination with carrying them through the most challenging times. “This is something that he wanted to do. He never say he’s tired. He wanted to do so bad and he like to be his own boss so bad.”

**Bigger, nicer store and deli awaits new customers**

Light rail construction has been one of the biggest challenges Ha Tien has faced. 

*It was very hard. The first three months when they close the other side, our business jumped up because if there’s any other store on the other side that they couldn’t get to they came here. We were like yeah, the construction’s helping us. For those three months. But after three months that’s when it just went down hill. They close our road and they went to the other side. So we had the entrance in the back. But our parking can fit only a few cars, and then it’s hard for them to go back to that road when there’s no access to the other side.*

Sales declined around 40 percent.

Now, with the construction finished, trains set to begin running, and a new, improved store, kitchen, and deli, Ne Dao is optimistic. “I think that this coming year, I think that it’s going to improve a lot. We are confident that it will be better, a lot better.”

Of the store, she says: “The kitchen, it’s a little bigger, more space for them (customers) to stand, to buy food, it look nicer. Plus if a holiday is during Chinese New Year we sell a lot of fruits, we can sell a lot more fruits. More products for the new year because we have space now and that’s the part that I feel is going to be a lot better.“

Being on the light rail line should draw new patrons, Dao says, particularly business people from downtown, who can hop on a train, “grab a sandwich and go back to their office.” Branding the area as “Little Mekong” could also help. “Hopefully just the name of it will attract people to come check it out, the restaurants and grocery, and we have food to go, too.”
Customers will discover the wide variety of products Ha Tien sells. “We have all kinds of vegetables. Produce, some particular vegetables for particular, say Chinese, Vietnamese they use something together there but like Thai, Cambodian, Laotian, Burmese, they kind of use the same, so eat the same.”

And then there are the sandwiches, including a ban mi with a special sauce that softens the French bread.

“It’s easier to eat and the sauce is very good, too. So it gets very popular and I have customers from Hawaii, Hawaii, Alaska, when they come here to visit their family and friends, they try it and when they go home they get 20, 30, put it in a box to take home.” She tells of one person, “I have one customer from Florida, he used to live here. Every year he comes to visit his daughter or his relative. Every time the plane lands, he would come here first.”
In addition, the deli sells chicken with oyster sauce, fried shrimp, ribs, and pad thai. This puts them at capacity, unable to do any catering. “Right now we are thinking of changing our oven, maybe make it a little bigger so we can sell more. To cater it’s kind of difficult. We don’t have enough supplies.”

“He loves this place”

The volume of business they do means long days, especially for Son. Ne says that she loves returning to their Woodbury home each night. “My home, even though I’ve lived there for 10, 11 years, it’s still new to me because I’m hardly there.” Her days typically start when she opens at 9:00 a.m., and end at 4:00 or 5:00 p.m., when she leaves to prepare dinner for Son.

“He doesn’t want to eat cold food. He working hard, he want to eat hot food every day, so I do that, to go home to prepare food, and we eat together like that every day, warm, hot, nice food every day.”

Son’s days include doing paperwork, going to the bank, running other errands, and picking up items for the kitchen. “He pick all of those up and then he comes here and then he stay and close. So everyday.” Ha Tien's doors close at 7:00 p.m., but it’s usually well past 8:00 when Son returns home. “He likes to take it easy….He check things out. He loves this place.”

To learn more about Ha Tien, listen to an audio version of the interview with Ne Dao and read the full transcript here. You may also watch a short video, featuring
Ne Dao, produced by Jose Luis Morales Alegria. Additional assistance was provided by Luce Guileen-Givens and Mary Turck.

To see more photos and to keep up with news and future plans, visit Ha Tien’s Facebook page.

Ha Tien Grocery Store is located at ----353 University Ave. W., St. Paul.

This article is part of a Central Corridor small business oral history project funded through a State of Minnesota Historical & Cultural Heritage Grant.

Articles in this series include: • Along the Corridor: University Avenue business owners navigating change • Dubliner Pub: "Do you think I have a crystal ball or something?" • Russian Tea House: "Will light rail bring me thousands of new people? I don’t think so" • Flamingo Restaurant: "We feel like we’re home" • Homi Restaurant: "If you like our food, come support us" • Best Steak House: "When they told me business would go up…I couldn't figure out how, but it really has" • Ngon Vietnamese Bistro: "We knew this was right for us, and we knew light rail was coming" • SugaRush: "I just hope that corporate America don’t come in and take us all out" • Big Daddy's Old Fashioned Barbeque: "I would just like to see a better mix of things” • Bangkok Cuisine: "When this opportunity came up, we just had to take it" • Ha Tien Grocery Store: "We are confident that it will be better, a lot better"

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Ha Tien Grocery Store
Following in his parents’ entrepreneurial footsteps, Son Dao, along with his wife, Ne Dao, opened Ha Tien Grocery Store on University Avenue in 1996, now employing 22 neighborhood residents.

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