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**Dr. Tuyen Nguyen**

Overcoming Challenges to Achieve a Dream

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# Dr. Tuyen Nguyen

## Overcoming Challenges to Achieve a Dream

By Loren Swanson

As I read the news of the day and see all the transient people migrating from the Middle East and Africa toward Northern Europe, I can see that the future they face is indeed in question. Then I hear that many of them have advanced degrees in law and engineering, and I begin to think this is not only a migration but also a “brain drain” from their countries of origin. Many of the refugees leave with some assets, but much of what they bring gets usurped along the way by people rendering services. Then I imagine the difficulty they must face in a new country, having limited language skills, trying to find a job and trying to provide for themselves and their families until they find a balance in life again. In many cases, their monetary resources have vanished, and any retirement plans they had have gone away. Now, they are starting over from a difficult position, often at an advanced age.

Hopefully, the refugees will gain a new hope and a belief in a new system or country to get their lives back on track. In their plight, there are many similarities to what Tuyen Nguyen, DDS, experienced as he migrated from Vietnam to the United States to begin his new life. Let’s consider where he came from.

Imagine that money equals sin. Having money shows you have taken advantage of your countrymen by accruing more than your share. Imagine that we are all equal to the extent that we all live on the same amount of money per week. Imagine that there is no incentive to work hard or succeed in your life because any money you have beyond subsistence will be taken by the government. Imagine that a representative of the government comes into your home on a regular basis to check for any accrued cash you may be hiding, and if they find any beyond about a \$200 limit, they not only take it, but also punish

you for having it. Imagine making a trip to the river to dump bags of money representing your labor and accomplishments over the years. You do this so you will not be caught with the “sin” and punished for it.

For Dr. Nguyen, the previous paragraph is not his imagination, it is his memory! Recently, I had the honor of sitting down with Dr. Nguyen and listening to the story of how he got from his childhood home in Biên Hòa, Vietnam, to practicing dentistry in his own practice in Rush City, Minnesota. He was born before the end of the Vietnam War as we know it. The first of his memories is of the process of the Communists taking over the country and imposing their system on the people. The Communists control people with the most basic of needs, food. There is an allotment of rice that people are allowed. Occasionally, they have the luxury of some beans, oil, fish or meat; however, if they ever accrue too much of any of it, they are back in the “sin” category.

Dr. Nguyen was lucky because his parents had worked hard through arduous situations to get their educations so they could become schoolteachers. As teachers in pre-war Vietnam, they were able to earn a good living and support their family. After the Communists took over, their teaching would give them a subsistence lifestyle at best. Hence, they had the motivation to become entrepreneurial. Dr. Nguyen’s mother was the most industrious. First of all, she had to wait for years after the Communist takeover until some of the restrictions on the people were less enforced. She would buy peanuts in bulk, process them and add value. Then she would sell them, including the added value in the price. She would also buy and sell sugar, oil and rice, helping to add to their family income. Later, she would buy sewing machines and fabric and make clothes for exporting companies. She

hired local workers to help out. This was a family business, and the children were also involved up to the limits of their abilities. Remember, she was still officially a teacher by trade, and all the entrepreneurial activities were a sideline! Or was it the teaching that was the sideline?

All the time, she paid as much attention as possible to her six children — of whom Dr. Nguyen was the fifth. Education was important in this family because of the learning and the teaching skills of the parents. Learning was important, but resources were so scarce that notebooks were composed of used paper, and the children wrote on the backs of the pages. When full sheets were no longer available, scraps were used and included in the notebooks. In spite of this shortage of materials, the learning progressed.

**Providing quality care with the latest technology is a high priority for Dr. Nguyen.**



PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. TUYEN NGUYEN

Eventually, Dr. Nguyen had the opportunity to go beyond his parents' level of learning and take the college entrance exam. This test is the event in Vietnam that is truly life-changing, as it will determine your lot in life! In preparation for the test, Dr. Nguyen and his family determined the odds were best if he took a test preparation course in Saigon. Saigon was about 20 miles south of Biên Hòa, and cars were not available. Public transportation was poor at best. Dr. Nguyen had a bicycle, and pedaling it to Saigon was the best and fastest option. His commitment was so intense that he pedaled the 20 miles three times per week, rain or shine. It was during this pedaling time that Dr. Nguyen separated himself from the rest of the populace. When riding a bike, it is easy to fall into the routine of pedaling blindly and becoming numb to the rest of the world; however, Dr. Nguyen did not do this. He kept his mind active and his attention alert, noticing the planes flying overhead from time to time. He knew of the situation in which he lived and of none other; however, he also innately knew that there had to be a better life than the one he was experiencing. At this point, he formulated his dream. He dreamed of being on one of those airplanes and traveling to another country to get a good education. Then he began to actively look for ways to accomplish that dream. Hold that thought.

In Vietnam, college entrance exams are college-specific — one exam will not be shared with or applied to more than one college or university. Each individual is limited to taking one exam per year. Scores will be enhanced if your parents are members of, or support, the Communist Party. Scores will be decreased if your parents worked in opposition to the Communist Party. The good news on this front is that Dr. Nguyen's parents were neutral. The bad news is that Dr. Nguyen got no extra points and wanted to go to medical school, which was difficult to get into! The net result is that he did not qualify. However, he did get into a physician assistant (PA) course and, after three years of training, he graduated and qualified for a job as a PA that paid him about \$25 per month. Had he gotten into medical school, he could have qualified for a job as a physician that paid \$50–\$100 per month.

Seeing that there was no bright future in this line of work, Dr. Nguyen trained for two years as a goldsmith and learned to assess the purity of gold. This came in handy, as he went back to Biên Hòa to work with his mother, who had now gotten into the business of banking, taking in money from her peers and lending it out to those who needed it — and hopefully had the ability to repay it. Again, this was a business she ran from her home. As some of the business was done in gold, his training as a goldsmith certainly worked protect their interests. His mother's investors got some

interest, and she got some fees. However, there were those who did not repay, and then she lost fees. In today's terms, I would call her a micro lender. During the same period, his mother would hire other people to run the sewing machines and produce the clothing.

Eventually, Dr. Nguyen discovered a way to live his dream and apply to the U.S. government for a chance to immigrate to this country. He was accepted by the U.S. government, traveled to the Philippines in 1992 and then moved on to the U.S. in 1993. He had an aunt who was a registered nurse in Richfield, Minnesota. She encouraged education. His aunt had gone through the community college system and was able to help Dr. Nguyen get started with his education in America. His English skills left something to be desired, so he took English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. He could read, write and speak English; however, he needed work with his listening and understanding skills. He also learned about the South Hennepin Adult Program for Education (SHAPE), now known as Metro South Adult Basic Education. This organization provided him with many of the tools and support to get his educational start in the U.S.

**Dr. Nguyen at his practice in Rush City, MN**





Even though Dr. Nguyen had a high school diploma from Vietnam, he still needed one from the U.S. He got that in 1993 and called the process a breeze. At the same time, he also got a job with SHAPE, working to help others in the ESL program. He got a second job as a nursing assistant and worked in that capacity for about 18 months; however, realizing he would have to lift heavy people, Dr. Nguyen knew that his slight build would be limiting in that profession. He considered nursing, teaching math, being a hygienist and going into business as possible careers, and he finally settled on being an electrical technician and headed for Saint Paul College to gain the skills. He was ready to go there when one of his prime supporters appeared. This supporter was a Vietnamese refugee who was disabled by polio and was going to engineering school at the University of Minnesota. He said Dr. Nguyen's skills were equal to if not greater than his engineering skills, and that Dr. Nguyen should set his sights higher.

As a result, Dr. Nguyen went to the University of Minnesota to apply to the dental hygiene program; however, he did not qualify because of the lack of a microbiology course. It was back to SHAPE and Normandale Community College to complete the microbiology course. He did that and was accepted into the hygiene program. Then came two other of his prime supporters; one eventually became his wife, and the other was an undergraduate friend, Bruce Cornelius. Cornelius told Dr. Nguyen that he was going to medical school and that Tuyen was on par with him. His wife encouraged Dr. Nguyen that, instead of hygiene school, he should raise his sights again and apply for dental school. She encouraged him all along the way.

Dr. Nguyen likes some form of security, so he called the University of Minnesota admissions office and asked for a delay of one year before starting the hygiene program. His request was granted, so he had a safety net. He then went to work to gain admission to dental school. There were a few prerequisites that Dr. Nguyen needed, so he took those courses and qualified to take the Dental Admission Test (DAT). He took the DAT and did very well in the math and science areas; however, the reading section of the test was his nemesis. It was back to the books to learn to read faster and with better comprehension in English. He retook the DAT. His reading improved a little, but it was still not good. Eventually, he got in touch with Gail Shea about his admission to the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry. Gail saw the potential in Dr. Nguyen, and they agreed that if Dr. Nguyen took four or five English classes and passed with a B-plus or better, he would be admitted to dental school. Dr. Nguyen took the classes in novel, linguistics and writing, passed them all with A's and was accepted into dental school in 1998. After the first year of dental school, he ranked 17th in his class and qualified for a scholarship! This was a true relief to Dr. Nguyen, as now someone else was helping pay his tuition — a cost that must have looked daunting at this point in time. In 2002, he graduated from dental school and could begin working to utilize his newly learned skills.

At this point, he had fulfilled his dream of going on that airplane to a foreign country and getting a good education, and he needed a new dream. His new dream was to have his own dental clinic. He wanted it to be modern and up to date with the latest technology to provide the best possible services to his patients. In 2005, he bought a practice in Rush City, Minnesota, that had an excellent patient base to work with. I recall Dr. Nguyen asking about the level of technology in this practice and also telling me of his desire for the most up to date practice he could find. I told him that this practice had an excellent



**Dr. Tuyen Nguyen**

PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. TUYEN NGUYEN

reputation and an excellent patient base, but he would have to add the technology himself, and so he did!

In January 2009, I traveled to Rush City for the grand opening of Dr. Nguyen's new clinic and saw that one more time his dream had become reality. It is an entirely new facility equipped with all the latest technology. The practice has grown to be significantly larger than when he initially bought it. Now my only question is, "What is the next dream?"

Dr. Nguyen realized he could not do all this on his own. He was not too proud to ask for help along the way. He is very thankful to his aunt in Richfield for her support, the people at SHAPE for their encouragement and support, and the friend who is now a chemical engineer and who had encouraged him to raise his sights. He also acknowledges his wife, who believed in him and encouraged him to apply to dental school. Dr. Nguyen has found many people willing to help him out of the goodness of their hearts. He is appreciative to the people of Minnesota for their support. Through all the work, the adventures, the dark moments, the unknown, the joys, and the trials and tribulations, Dr. Nguyen's perseverance has enabled him to realize his dream. He loves dentistry. He loves the people he works with, and he truly believes he has found his calling in life.

*About the author: For the past 27 years, Loren Swanson, DBA, AFTCO, has worked in the dental industry, helping dentists buy and sell practices. He works in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota and South Dakota. In working with Dr. Nguyen, Swanson has developed a true appreciation for the long, hard path that Dr. Nguyen has traveled to arrive at this place in life. ■*

*"My intention through this article is to encourage others to be their best and always try hard for every opportunity in life. Don't give up. I have inspired and encouraged six individuals to become dentists since I was in dental school."*

~ Dr. Tuyen Nguyen, DDS