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Couple escapes Vietnam to, years later, open 9 Star Nail Salon in Pittsford

When LoAnn To and Kyle Van first met and became friends on a refugee fishing boat 24 years ago, their goal was to escape Vietnam and pursue the American dream. If they had been captured, they said, they would have gone to prison, but freedom and the possibility of a better life and education compelled them to try for something better.

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Submitted by Natalie Campbell Kircher

LoAnn To and Kyle Van have opened 9 Star Nail Salon in Pittsford.

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Pittsford, N.Y.

When LoAnn To and Kyle Van first met and became friends on a refugee fishing boat 24 years ago, their goal was to escape Vietnam and pursue the American dream. If they had been captured, they said, they would have gone to prison, but freedom and the possibility of a better life and education compelled them to try for something better.

"From darkness to light," Kyle said.

After 48 hours by fishing boat, they arrived at a refugee camp in Malaysia and both later came to America. Their journey and eventual reunion took several twists.

Finding their way

Just 15, Kyle was selected to come to Rochester through an American sponsor from Catholic Family Center, and spent three years with his sponsoring family until graduating from West Irondequoit High School. While in high school, he worked part-time for Wegmans and went on to Monroe Community College to study auto mechanics.

While Kyle was pursuing his studies at MCC and continuing to work part-time for Wegmans, his supervisor at Wegmans — who also happened to be Vietnamese — adopted him. Upon graduation from MCC, Kyle became a full-time mechanic for Wegmans.

Meanwhile, Kyle had lost contact with LoAnn since arriving at the refugee camp in 1988.

Fast forward 10 years and LoAnn had since made it from the refugee camp to Minnesota, where she later became a restaurant owner. On a trip back to Vietnam to visit her family in 1999, she tracked down Kyle's family and got in touch with him once she was back in the United States. A long-distance relationship blossomed.

"I asked LoAnn to come to Rochester to stay, and she accepted," said Kyle.

Building a family

The couple married in their hometown of Cantho, Vietnam, surrounded by their families in 2002. Kyle helped LoAnn get a job at Wegmans, and the couple started their family.

After their second child, LoAnn stopped working to raise her family, but, she said, her drive and passion led her to get her nail license. LoAnn worked as a nail technician for several years at Dream Nail Salon in Chili, where she learned the nail salon business, eventually becoming the manager. But, she dreamed of having her own nail salon.

Through a tip from a family friend, the couple learned about the old Star Nail Salon on Monroe Avenue being available for purchase, and LoAnn and Kyle jumped on the chance to start their own business.

Nine is the lucky number in Asia, and so the couple re-named the business, which opened this summer, 9 Star Nail Salon.

Kyle helps LoAnn with the business side, and LoAnn manages the store six days a week, with Kyle filling in for her one day.

A focus on customers

Page 2 of 2 - LoAnn and Kyle said they aim to please and offer special amenities, such as free beverages and personal nail polish for customers to take home with them and bring back for their next visit. If a client is in a hurry, LoAnn said, she can do a manicure while a nail technician does the pedicure.

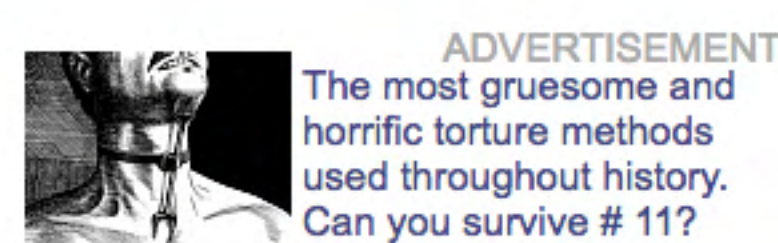
And they are quick to implement feedback from their clientele.

"When one customer mentioned that hot Chinese tea would be nice, I took note and added it to our beverage offerings", said LoAnn.

Manicures and pedicures come with a light massage, and intensive half-hour foot massages are also available.

"We see all ages coming in for manicures/pedicures: husbands and wives, girlfriends and boyfriends, mothers and daughters, seniors," said LoAnn. "We want to make 9 Star Nail Salon customers happy."

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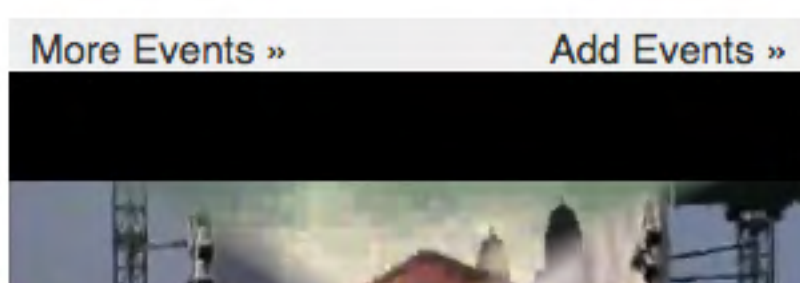
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