

# Nicole Cao's heart invested in Vietnamese Heritage Park

by Burt Levine – Saigon Tex News

Nicole Cao, Saigon native and veteran Houston banking, business and community leader, is on a fervent push for Houston's Vietnamese community to contribute to bringing a nearly \$1 million Vietnam Heritage Park to the heart of Houston she helped in 1994 get designated "Little Saigon."

Cao came from a family rooted deep in Vietnam's rice fertile soil. Her mother grew up in Saigon and her father was an industrialist known for his real estate, factory and banking businesses. She earned her University of Saigon BA in English and University of Dalat MBA planning to serve at a bank her father named for her in Saigon when her family's next-door-neighbor who was the US Ambassador told them Communists were coming. It was time to leave all they had behind.

## **Q. How is being Viet American inspired your commitment to the community?**

**A.** My father believed in America and South Vietnam's destiny to keep Vietnam free. We did not leave until we were on one of the final helicopters fleeing Saigon because my dad believed so strong it would not happen that we would have to leave. My father loved Vietnam freedom. My parents taught me to love my Vietnamese people, free enterprise and the freedom they sacrificed so much to secure for their families and their future.

My father had family in France and following US Armed Forces taking us to Subic Bay, Guam and Fort Chafee, Arkansas he insisted on going there but I returned to America and earned full academic scholarship and work study programs to complete at the University of Texas at Austin my MBA where I'd heard Texas' open skies offered more opportunity than the limits in France.

## **Q. Growing up what do you remember that led to where you are today?**

**A.** I may have grew up proud to be in Saigon but I'm a born again Texan. I lost everything I had growing up when we came to America but I remember we loved freedom and business building that was not allowed under Communism. I was told Vietnam was Asia's balcony. It welcomed to it the best Asia offered. I'm a proud Texan. Texas welcomes the best of America and the world.

Prior to earning my UT MBA financial firms because of my high grades and skills in Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, French and English flew me to interview for prestige positions from New York to Chicago but I had dated a pharmacy student who was also a refugee from Saigon while at UT and was already working at the Texas Medical Center. I

was accepted into Texas Commerce Bank's management training, married the next year and worked there until our daughters' births.

**Q. How did midtown Houston volunteerism become such a motivator to you?**

**A.** I couldn't start a bank so in 1979 my husband and I saved pennies to buy a vacant building to open a pharmacy in a deserted area near downtown where Asian criminal gangs drove business out of town. In effort to attract community interest we volunteered space to physicians so patients would buy from Cao's Milam Pharmacy. I went to nearby property owners who laughed when I'd plead to them that we must work together to combat crime that was causing us to lose customers.

**Q. As a Vietnamese American how else is your perspective different?**

**A.** I led efforts with Steve Bancroft, pastor of Trinity Episcopal Church on Main Street to form the Midtown Redevelopment Association and we joined the work that propelled so many of the small Vietnamese shopping centers to spring forward. Houston City Council noticed and signs were posted with the names Nguyen Hue, Hai Ba Trung, Tu Do, Phan Thanh Gian. A huge real estate revival was celebrated in 1999 followed by urban gentrification generating trendy homes.

This is what has compelled me now to follow now the remake of Kelly Park in San Jose at the Elizabeth Baldwin Park which is one of Houston's oldest parks. The Vietnamese Heritage Plaza bordered by Elgin, Crawford, and Chenevert is my and our community's way of contributing the amenities of jogging and walking trails and a small focal point dedicated to Vietnamese values.

**. Q. Have you reached out beyond Vietnamese to those of all backgrounds?**

**A.** .The board of the Midtown Redevelopment Association is proud to attracting those from all backgrounds as among it biggest assets including it leadership from State Representative Garnet Coleman, Mayor Pro-Tem and Council Member Carol Alvarado and many African American, Hispanic, Caucasian and Asian American business and community leaders from throughout the world banded by an interest in keeping alive an attraction to the heart of Houston.

Catastrophe followed me at every corner. My car was stolen and our store was robbed. The building behind was burned down twice once from homeless from different races attempting to keep warm from the cold and once by a drug addicted arsonist but I would not concede. I have learned to love Houstonians from all races as Houstonians welcomed us with their arms open.

**Q. How has your work made a different in mid-town revitalization efforts?**

**A.** I worked and successfully brought midtown Houston businesses folks together to do more than solicit to our church. We raised funds together to declare midtown a Tax Increment Finance Zone. We studied revitalization projects in other cities and worked around the clock to convince local property owners to want change. My banking experience and Viet ties brought it together.

**Q. And what does providing a Vietnamese Heritage Plaza there mean to you?**

The park honoring Vietnam will touch the heartstrings of all Americans. It will be a place where America's most fundamental commitment to freedom was put to a terrible test. Americans have a deep emotional attachment to Vietnam. The park will be a physical embodiment of that emotion. It will be a place where Americans, Viet Americans and Vietnamese connect to peace and look to the future beyond simply harboring a regret for the past.