

Vietnamese Heritage Plaza fundraiser makes place in history

by Burt Levine – Saigon Tex News

Hopes to build a Vietnamese Heritage Plaza where what is now Houston Midtown's Elizabeth Baldwin Park became tens of thousands of dollars closer to reality Thursday evening, October 20 at the Kim Son Stafford during a fundraising drive led by State Representative Hubert Vo, bank executive Nicole Cao, insurance and real estate firm entrepreneurs Nguyen Le and Adam Tran.

"In 1975 there were 10,000 Vietnamese in Houston and by 2005 that has soared past 120,000. In Houston's Vietnamese American community we are successful entrepreneurs, professionals and politicians that lead the city's economic and social progress and by contributing \$100,000 to a five acre million dollar park near the city's growing Little Saigon we are truly making a mark in history," Cao said at the fun filled event that featured live music and artist renderings of the park.

"April 30, 1975 triggered the largest migration in human history. More than 200,000 died at sea and President Gerald Ford signed legislation to accept in 120,000 Vietnamese. The battle of war was followed by the battle of adjusting to new lives in America and to contribute back to this community that opened its arms to us we want to revitalize the park prizing its 100 year old trees. It was my idea for a Vietnamese Heritage Plaza in midtown because it was Vietnamese refugees to Houston that restored historic midtown and kept it alive when it was dying," said Cao who is serving as Vice President and Secretary for the Midtown Redevelopment Authority.

"We suffered. We endured and we prospered. We should have a place to celebrate our success there. Houston's historic midtown was the site of Houston's first Vietnamese owned pharmacy, first Vietnamese owned medical clinic, first Vietnamese owned dental office. I've fought back and forth with the city parks department to secure success for this park but I wouldn't concede. With the help of State Representatives Hubert Vo and Garnet Coleman and Council Member Gordon Quan we're moving forward on this important project that stalled because of efforts in our community regarding relief from the recent hurricanes," she said before taking out a personal check from her and husband for \$1,000 for the park project.

Vo, fundraising chairman for the park project, said its an important honor for him to be part of the project with Cao and Midtown Redevelopment Authority Manager of Development Projects Allison E. Bell before he took out a personal check for \$1,000 he contributed to the park project.

"I came here with my parents with little but the shirts on our backs and knowing almost no English. We built businesses, raised our families and contributed to every community

where we landed. We're proud to be patriotic Americans and freedom loving Texans," Vo said to applause.

"We're dedicated to giving back to Houston, Texas and America and keeping the nation strong and indivisible. We are a young community in America but we have integrated every profession and our children are the valedictorians at the finest university's in this country. Please open your hearts and your wallets to make this happen. We need to mark our place in history," he said in comments Vietnamese Heritage Park treasurer Pam Park said were the most "profound" comments ever made by the freshman legislator who won his seat exactly a year ago to become Texas' first Vietnamese American state house member.

"The Vietnamese Heritage Plaza was once but a dream of ours but now it's getting closer and closer to becoming reality. My two young sons Trevor and Victor are why I'm here tonight. This park will mark in history when we were foreigners in this country. My children are not foreigner. My children were born and are Americans but they must their Vietnamese heritage," Park said.

"This park is going to be for them and all their generation and the generations after them a reminder of what it is Vietnamese American suffered and succeeded in coming to Houston, Texas and America," Park said before beginning her counting of families contributing each \$1,000 checks to the project. She named physicians, business owners, anonymous donors and the Vietnamese American Real Estate Association and others contributing tens of thousands of dollars in checks to the effort is being touted as a tribute to Vietnamese Americans who thrived under adversity and challenges to contribute to the richness of American culture and society.

"The plaza at the park will honor Vietnamese Americans bravely made their way to this country in search of freedom and opportunities. The Vietnamese Heritage Plaza will signify our interest in providing to the next generations of Vietnamese Americans an embodiment of family values, high moral purpose, compassion and our love for God and Country," said Vietnamese American Real Estate Association President and Saigon native Adam Tran who sees Vietnam as the part of his past he can never forget and Texas the future he must work to make the best it can be for all those that call it home with him.

"The Vietnamese Heritage Plaza is one of the first being built in the United States which acknowledges the commitment and achievements of all Vietnamese Americans," said Tran who came to Houston from Vietnam because he "heard from relatives about Houston's hot climate I knew was similar to Saigon and its even hotter opportunities for career and business success."

Tran took English as a Second Language at a local high school, worked , saved and attended junior college. He studied engineering at UH, earned his biology BS and worked as a chemical analyst before earning his doctor's degree and then later his real estate license.

“Most important to me are my daughters. I want them to know their Viet heritage. This park will make that happen. I worked for large firms for more than a dozen years. With a classmate I opened a clinic in Vietnamese communities. In the past year I opened Advent Realty and have built the Vietnamese American Real Estate Association to hundreds of members. Investing in my building my business and investing in this country and community’s futures so other immigrants from Vietnam and across all Asia and all the earth is so important to me,” he said.

Insurance and real estate executive Nguyen Le is excited about the Vietnam Heritage Plaza that is going to be built on Elgin Street between Crawford Street and Chenevert Street as the cornerstone of the ongoing Midtown urban renewal process.

“New retail and residential development in the area is attracting people back into this inner city area that is becoming a national model of urban renewal. Midtown is just north of the Museum District which contains many of Houston’s most famous memorial and museums,” said Le whose father served as a South Vietnamese military police officer and whose mother sent him at eight to a boat to eventually make it to America and opportunity impossible to achieve in Vietnam.

“The Vietnamese Heritage Plaza is part of an \$800,000 renovation of Baldwin Park. The Plaza will be a main component of the park’s dedication. To build the plaza, \$100,000 is needed and all that donation a minimum of \$1,000 are eligible to for the Founder’s Circle,” Le said.

“I arrived with empty pockets and knowing no English. I completed Sharpstown and Lee High School with honors. In high school I sold hot dogs at Astroworld and earned an engineering BS at Texas A&M on full academic scholarships before designing US Army training simulators and eventually building his own businesses.

“My mom told me and I tell my children that despite adversities this is the best city in the best state in the best country on earth to raise your family, build a business and your future,” he said.