

Mai Nguyen, Mai Village

Interviewed by Laurie Stern at Mai Village, St. Paul, June 28, 2012

Q Can you tell the story of you and this restaurant?

A My name is Mai and I own this one together with my husband – his name is Juan. We both started like 23 years ago at the other place, but somehow we opened this one almost nine years ago. Yeah, this big one.

Q And the other one I remember was very small.

A Well, yeah, the other one compared to this one is small. And we leased that one and they have about 150 seats. And this one is around 300 seats. So it's kind of double.

Q And how is the business going?

A Right now, we are going through tough times because of the light rail, the construction. So customers have a hard time to find, even though they are very loyal to us, they love to come and support us but they are confused with all the construction around here. So the business is down.

Q Will you be ok?

A I don't know. I don't know. Because we have the big building and so our business so far we go down like 50% at least. So it's hard and right now we just go day by day. We cannot predict what will happen tomorrow. Before we could predict like a month or so ahead, but right now no. We just go with whatever, you know?

Q That must be very hard.

A Yes, it is. It is very hard. But we are the fighter and so we will try our best. And I have to say thanks to all of the customers who love us and support us through this time. It's very important to us.

Q I think of you as one of the pioneers on University Avenue.

A I will be, let's say I will be the second one because the first one would be Mr. Kim Long. That is 30-some years ago and we are here now like 24 years. And we are the biggest restaurant and we are the...and I think that because of us and because of the City of St. Paul, the police, with Chief Finney at that time, so we turned this area around, you know? We make it better and so a lot of the other businesses followed and come here since like 1991.

Q So is that – for Mai Village – is that competition or is that a good thing to have other ethnic restaurants and such a busy community?

A You know it's competition but it's also good because then you can try...with me, everybody has a different way to cook. Some of them will like mine better than the other

and some will like the other better than me. So I think somehow if it can make this area a chance to be better, then I will be happy to compete with the others.

Q What do you think about light rail? In the long run will it be good for business owners like yourself?

A We - I think not only me, but the people along this corridor – we have no experience with the light rail. So we hope if we can survive until that, we hope it will be the busiest area, we would have more people come and visit this University Avenue and so on. But like I say, because I don't have experience, so I have no idea and we just hope. And for me to hope, not just to fight, until I can see the light rail stop and then customers step out from that and come here. That is what my wish is.

Q What do you need? What would make a difference between your business being ok and not being ok?

A Everything goes down to the finance because like I say, my business lost at least 50% so we don't have enough money to pay the bank, the property tax and the wages and so on, so it's very hard. So things just go down to finance. The money.

Q Do you own this building?

A Yes we do. And when we built this one, the second floor we planned to lease then. But since...we have to say it's hard; it's not easy. Back then they require a lot of the parking space so we have a little hard time with that. And then since 2007 that is when the economy start having a little trouble and so we have a hard time to lease upstairs. So you know the restaurant has to carry everything from the mortgage down to the property tax and the energy and the utility for the whole building to run. So it's kind of hard.

Q How do you do it?

A We just put in a lot of hours and we...like my family and my kids and so on, we work a little longer hours with less pay to try to survive. And besides that I also have some of the loyal people who help me, who work with me and helps me. So together we hope that we can pull through this hard time. It's not easy, but we will try our best.

Q What was it that attracted you to University Avenue in the first place?

A Well, if we go a little back then, because my husband thinks I am a good cook. So when we saw the International Mall, you know they have a space and even by that time this area – the Frogtown – is terrible. But we, the money, it's not easy. By that time nobody would like to finance for a restaurant. So we just wanted to lease that space to make a living and we thought that if our family working hard, we may survive. And so I think that is the result for the hardworking people like my family. My parents, my kids, my husband, myself and my uncle – we all work over there with no pay so we can survive. And then after that the word of mouth and customers start coming in. And like I say, with the help from the St. Paul Police and to have to assign some policemen to help so they can bring safety for my customers, and after that the word kept coming out and then we got more and more customers.

Q What brought you to St. Paul in the first place?

A Why do I come to St. Paul? Well, like I said because Kim Long had a space and the lease is cheap and the space that will be close to my house and I'm more familiar with St. Paul than Minneapolis or anything else.

Q Did you, were you born in Vietnam?

A Yes.

Q So can you tell me the story of leaving Vietnam?

A We left Vietnam in '75 then my parents came here to Minnesota like about three months before me. I arrived here in Minnesota in November of '75. The reason we chose Minnesota to be our home because my father used to travel and he must have read about Minnesota because he said, the Minnesota people they are very open and easy and besides that we have four seasons and we have a good company over here. So he chose here. And we left a week before the fall of Saigon.

Q How old were you?

A By that time I think I am 25 years old and I came here. I left Vietnam with four kids and my parents and my siblings. And I not aware that I am pregnant until I arrive in Philippines. Then I gave birth to my daughters on the way from the Philippines to come here to the United States. So up in the air. In the airplane.

Q So you have five children.

A Yeah, I have five children when I arrived here in Minnesota.

Q And are they all healthy....

A Yes they are. And I have three more over here when I married my second husband. So I have eight kids and my husband has three so we always say we have a very big family – we have all eleven. But two of them are deceased. Two of them died, so now we have nine of them. That's ok.

Q Thank you for making time for us.

A You are welcome.

Q Is there more that you want to say?

A No, that's ok. I'd just like to say that if this can catch the attention of people then just have us and have all of us along this area so that we can survive, so we can see the result of the light rail. That is what I want.

Q It doesn't seem like it should be too much to ask.

A Well, but you know it is not easy. Even not too much to ask, but it's not easy that it will happen. So not only me suffering but all along this one and I think you know that if

you were truly out there. We're all the same. And I think that we have to stick together but we don't know how we can help each other, except for the opportunity like today to be, to give some of our voice so that hopefully we can live through this and see the result of the light rail.

Q Thank you.

Aand so like this place it's nobody's fault because this is, we think this is opportunity for us to build a nice place so we can share our culture with the American and some other countries as well. But somehow because of the economy, because of the recession everybody... even if they love us or they love my place – they cannot eat like before. They cannot come here like they used to. They even come and tell me. They say, Mai we love your place, but we cannot come here often like before because I don't know how long I can have my job. And some others come and say, Mai we will have to move. I ask why. Because we lost everything – my 401K and everything I lost and I cannot afford to even...I lost my house too. So things happen like that. So you know it's nobody's fault. I don't blame anybody. But we just try ourselves very hard how we can survive. With my husband, he had a stroke nine months ago because of the stress so with me I have the panic attacks sometimes but I try to think everything happens with a reason. And I just keep my faith strong so I can go on every day because right now my family, all of the people who work for me – they look up to see how is my reaction. I cannot just yell at them or I cannot just cry or I cannot...so when some customers come in they look at me and they say, Mai you look good today; you're smiling. And I say, yes I have two faces. I have to put on, so that when they look at me and they see I smile and I can say some joke and just give them the energy, just give them something they can smile too, they can joke too, with no fear. Otherwise if I cry they feel bad and when they are like that the food comes out and it's not good or the server is not great. So....

Q But that's extra responsibility and pressure for you.

A Yeah, but you know if you have faith and I believe it – I have my faith very strong and I believe like I say everything happens with a reason. So when you think like that, yes sometimes I am down. But I just let it happen when I am by myself, you know? Because I don't want my husband to see it; we don't discuss about that because I don't want him to get upset and he may have another stroke. So when I pray at night and when I'm alone, that is when I let it happen. Then I will cry but I will beg God and I will just ask, just give me the strength to go on. And I believe that I will have the bright future like tomorrow will be better than today. So that things escape you and when I close my eyes to sleep, I completely block everything out of my mind because nothing I can do by that time.

Q You're doing everything in your power.

A Yes, exactly. But I believe that people out there, I know that a lot of people want to help me and I just hope that they will come here and support us. That is all we can ask. We don't mind to work, like me I can work harder. I don't mind. But if we can keep this place because this is just like one of our, it's like our baby. Everything we have is in here. You know, if we lost this place it means we lost everything. I have the collateral on my house. I sell everything that we have. So it's really hard if we lost this place and right now we try – me and my family we try very hard to keep them. And I'm always

counting and thinking that I am still luckier than a lot of other people, that at least I still have my health.