

Captain of her Own Destiny



Believing everyone carries the potential to achieve great things, Chrys Huynh opened a spa in Loreto Plaza named Qui Si Bella, which means "beauty from within."

"I'm very interested in helping women achieve what is the best in each of them," she says. It's a philosophy she doggedly pursues, not only for herself, but by helping others attain it as well. When she was young, her mother took her to a fortuneteller who said, "She wants to grab at the moon."

Born in Saigon and educated in a French school, Chrys (named for the native flower of her country, the chrysanthemum) followed a determined path. After furthering her education in France, she returned to Vietnam to open her own school. At age 23 and full of energy, she decided to enter the shipping business and purchased four ships from a Japanese businessman. "When I decide to do something, I really put all my strength, my mind, my spirit into it," says Chrys. "I love challenge, because challenge will really help you grow."

All was lost in 1975, however, when Saigon fell to the communists.

Her husband, an army officer, was imprisoned, as were all South Vietnamese soldiers. He was never seen or heard from again. "I had to donate my property, my school, my ships to the government; everything became government property," she explains. By that time, her business had grown to six ships and she employed twenty-two men.

Chrys turned over all but one ship, explaining to government officials that its engine needed repair. That ship conveniently maintained a history of "breakdowns," which required her expertise for three more years. A sea trial typically followed each repair, a trip that would take the ship off its normal route. During those years, she stole diesel fuel—gallon by gallon—for a planned sea escape. Finally, using the stolen fuel, Chrys helped 137 friends and family members, ranging in age from 10 days to 81 years, escape from Vietnam on that very ship.

To make the trip, she packed three buses with pigs, chickens and rice. She hung banners on the buses

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proclaiming they were relocating to the New Economic Development Zone. They went instead to a secluded spot on the coast where they boarded small wooden boats that would rendezvous with the ship during a scheduled sea trial.

"We were in a system where everyone is watching you," she explains.

"If something is out of the normal you had to report it. You couldn't trust anyone. If they found out, they put you in jail. People die without family knowing where they are."

Only heads of family knew of the escape plan in advance. The children were given sedatives to keep them quiet. They boarded the boats and rendezvoused with the ship and sunk the wooden boats. Everyone hid in the cargo hold. To avoid detection by Russian vessels, they flew a makeshift Japanese flag and fled to Malaysia where the group remained on the boat for three months before finally given permission to enter as refugees.

Chrys translated papers and organized the refugees. Rather than go to France where her mother resided, she wanted to immigrate to the United States. Nine months later, she was offered a job with U.S. Catholic Conference, which took her to New Orleans and the San Francisco Bay area, where she assumed the role of a lifestyle

counselor, helping immigrants settle, find work, arrange day care and learn English. "I didn't want the Vietnamese people to be looked on as a burden in this country," says Chrys. "I wanted to promote pride and self-confidence for my people."

Chrys saved her money, earning extra income by teaching piano and French. Eventually she put herself through beauty school and bought the LaRoss Academy of Health and Beauty in Ventura, the proceeds of which allowed her to open Qui Si Bella.

"I've been in the U.S. since 1978, a single mother with two young children, without any government help," she says. "My goal was to provide my children with the best education. I have already fulfilled my mission for my children. This is my time to extend my passion in health and beauty for the community."

Chrys has always considered herself a leader and has tried to set an example. If she's sick or scared, she tries not to show it to her clients or employees. "Like a captain on a boat, you must be there for them," she says.

