

Making room for business at Seattle's decision-making table



Photo provided by Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce

Marilyn Strickland

By Joshua Holland
NORTHWEST ASIAN WEEKLY

At a time when some Seattle business leaders feel embattled by local government, many have started to ask, is there a seat for them at the table when it comes to helping to solve some of the region's most pressing issues, like creating new housing and reducing the number of people experiencing homelessness?

At a recent Rotary Club of Seattle meeting, Marilyn Strickland, president and CEO of the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, delivered a speech to a crowd of Rotarians where she answered the questions on the minds of many business leaders.

As the leader of an organization representing more than 2,000 Seattle area companies, Strickland is bullish in her sup-

port of employers and strongly advocated for their active engagement in creating solutions that go beyond being the City of Seattle's ATM.

"We have to change the narrative," said Strickland. "When a lot of people think of business, they think of a handful of large global companies that take the headlines, and they don't look deeper into the fact that [there are also] companies doing good work in the community. And there are a lot of companies whose names we don't know, who are doing good work as well."

An unpopular head tax

Referring back to her arrival in Seattle in 2018, when the city was deeply embroiled in a debate about reintroducing the head tax, Strickland wasn't shy in

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Two Asian American female students win Amazon scholarship

By Stacy Nguyen
NORTHWEST ASIAN WEEKLY



Photo from Amazon

Annie Vo (left) with her computer science teacher

This week, Amazon announced the 100 recipients of its inaugural Future Engineer scholarships, which supports college-bound seniors in underrepresented and underserved communities. Three students from Washington state earned scholarships, two of whom are Asian: Annie Vo from Franklin High School and Hyeong Jeong "Ace" Choi of Matt Grant Olympia High School. The third recipient is Parker Landsman of Orcas Island High School.



Photo from Amazon

Hyeong Jeong "Ace" Choi

Winners of this scholarship receive access to computer science camps and classes as well as scholarships and internships at Amazon. A scholarship gives students \$10,000 a year for four years to students pursuing a computer science degree.

Vo is graduating from Franklin this year and is set to attend the University of Pennsylvania. She is executive treasurer for her school's associated student body (ASB). Vo is also treasurer of the Asian Student

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A unique restaurant and its new staff and leader

From machine learning to cheesecakes, entrepreneurs tell their stories of assuming the risk



Photo from Adaptilab

Adaptilab founders James Wu (left) and Allen Lu

By Jason Cruz
NORTHWEST ASIAN WEEKLY

Becoming an entrepreneur is like a trapeze artist performing without a net. One wrong move can cause a catastrophe. Yet, many take the leap without the fear of falling.

While the City of Seattle's Office of Economic Intelligence Advisory does not collect demographic data from business owners, they did indicate that, according to the Census Bureau's Annual Survey of Entrepreneurs, in 2016, the number of Asian-owned businesses in the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue metro area was increas-



Photo from Hood Famous Bakery

Geo Quibuyen and Chera Amlag, owners of Hood Famous Bakery

ing. Even with the increase, only 15.1 percent of firms were Asian-owned.

What is notable is that the statistics also show a slight increase of Asian-owned businesses



Photo by Lyndsey Brollini

Mitra Raman works from her computer in the Special Occasions Catering kitchen on placing orders for her start-up company, Buttermilk.

with "less than 2 years" in business.

"It's rewarding to see your own ideas turn into reality," said Lawrence Pang, a current director and the former president of the Greater Seattle Chinese Chamber of Commerce. "I see



Photo from Jason Tan

Jason Tan, CEO of Sift

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no particular reason why more Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Americans shouldn't become an entrepreneur! ... race [should have] no bearing on whether one should be entrepreneur."

While there is admittedly stability in working at an established company, four Asian American entrepreneurs took the leap into entrepreneurship and explained why the risk worked out for them. Asian Americans may not typically be known as 'entrepreneurs' in popular culture, but all involved wanted to create something on their own, and all have received support from family and friends.

Best friends start tech company

James Wu and Allen Lu met while at Tye Middle School in Bellevue, where both played saxophone in the school band, and have been best friends ever since. They are now spearheading their own venture, AdaptiLab, and are one of the many Asian American entrepreneurs that are making calculated risks in launching businesses.

The two went to Newport High School in Bellevue and ventured to the East Coast for college. Both graduated from their respective schools a year early. Wu graduated with a double major in computer science and statistics from Duke, while Lu went to Carnegie Mellon, where he majored in computer science with a minor in machine learning and language technologies.

For Wu and Lu, their business acumen, experience, and contacts supercede their age.

Wu, 21, and Lu, 22, are young but decided to jump on an opportunity they saw in their industry. While in school, they performed research on machine learning and were planning on attending doctorate programs in computer science.

Machine learning, a subset of artificial intelligence, is the scientific study of algorithms and statistical models that computer systems use to effectively perform a specific task without using explicit instructions, relying on patterns and inference instead.

Wu and Lu participated in an incubator at Duke that focused on projects related to machine learning.

According to its founders, AdaptiLab is a business-to-business company using data-driven software solutions to solve the biggest problems in the machine learning and data science talent pipelines. The company recently launched the first coding interview platform for assessing machine learning and data science candidates.

"Our product automatically grades code for data analysis, feature engineering, model training, and algorithm tasks," Wu wrote in an email to the Northwest Asian Weekly. The product increases worker efficiency through streamlining the process for hiring candidates.

"The idea and vision [for AdaptiLab] did not begin until June 2018," said Wu. "We knew our second year in college that we were the right team to work together."

Both stated that their parents have been supportive about their decision to start their own business, instead of entering academia.

"For me personally, my parents were pretty cool about it," said Lu. "Technically [though], we are in our senior year. This year is our 'freebie.'"

The company, based in Seattle, has received funding through angel investors and Techstars. The latter provides an accelerated program which helps advise young promising companies with financial, human, and intellectual capital to fuel the success of their business. This year, AdaptiLab was chosen as one of the companies to go through the program.

As a result, the daunting task of finding funding for a young company has been made a little easier.

"We're in a pretty lucky spot in our lives. Obviously that we now have funding, there is less of a concern about a steady income, and [we] can focus on building out our company. We both love learning new things, and it continues to challenge us every day," said Wu.

While there still might be apprehension of not knowing what the future holds, both are enjoying the ride.

"You're going into the jungle," explained Lu. "It's a little bit scary. There's quite a bit involved. If we graduated and went into the industry, we'd have stable jobs." But he added, "I like not knowing. Every day I do something new."

For more information on AdaptiLab, visit adaptilab.net.

Former Amazon worker finds comfort in comfort food

According to a 2018 article in the Seattle Business Magazine, Seattle ranks second as the top location for female entrepreneurs. One of those entrepreneurs gave up her steady employment in the tech sector to do something completely different: starting an online food ordering business.

Mitra Raman followed the traditional path of a job in the software engineering industry after attending Carnegie Mellon, studying computer science. She worked at Amazon after graduating in 2014, but knew that she wanted to do more.

"I always knew I wanted to start my own business," Raman recalled she kept a notebook full of ideas for ventures. Raman's idea for The Buttermilk Company came when she asked her mother about her favorite food, rasam, a South Indian dish.

Her mom told her the ingredients and to just add hot water and she'd be "good to go." Raman's idea was born.

"I realized there was a small community to serve," explained Raman. It was not until a year later that The Buttermilk Company was born. In South India, buttermilk and rice is a common comfort food dish and it's also Raman's favorite comfort food. The company is a meal-delivery business which offers healthy meals prepared by just adding hot water. The tag line for the company is, "Real Indian food, real fast."

The recipes are crowdsourced to guarantee authenticity and bring awareness to a group of mostly immigrants who have honed the art of their traditional food.

"I had no experience in the food industry, and it was so different from software engineering," said Raman of the large learning curve that she had to master to start her business. "I started it very, very small instead of launching full force."

Raman continued to work at Amazon, dipping into her savings to get her company off of the ground. At a certain point, she realized a shift in priorities and interest in her newfound company, rather than the tech world.

She quit her job at Amazon last spring to build The Buttermilk Company. Raman was chosen to participate in Y Combinator, a well-known startup accelerator program in Silicon Valley. She spent three months with the program, refining her business and looking at ways to compete in the meal kit delivery business.

While excited about The Buttermilk Company, Raman was concerned about starting the new business. "I was very anxious for a while," said Raman of the first year of being a full-time entrepreneur. "It's been crazy. Lots of highs, lots of lows."

The Buttermilk Company started with one part-time employee and now has grown to two employees and four contractors. She notes that one of the greatest challenges as an entrepreneur is the hiring process, finding people to go in on her mission, who have the same passion and work ethic.

Raman stated that the support from her family has been amazing. She recognizes

the stereotypes for the second generation with immigrant parents is to have stability in income and vocation. But Raman explained that she is creating things for the next generation. While it's been stressful to create the business, she has found a connection with a community and a demographic that she is serving.

For more information on The Buttermilk Company, visit thebuttermilkco.com.

The freestyle rapper heads tech firm

Jason Tan lists freestyle rap as one of his interests. It is something that he's picked up and been doing for eight years and counting. He's been known to share a verse or two with his employees. "It's important to have creative hobbies," said the head of Sift, a Bay Area-based tech firm.

Tan was born in Taiwan and moved to the United States with his family, relocating to Mercer Island when he was 12. "My impression of America was that the only cities that mattered were New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Seattle was very foreign to me." However, Tan grew to love the area. He attended the University of Washington (UW) when he was just 15 through the UW Academy of Young Scholars, a prestigious early-college entrance program.

"I think it was an unexpected choice," Tan said. He had thought of going to "brand name" schools like Harvard, Stanford, or MIT. "It changed my philosophies," Tan said of going to the UW. "Success can be found anywhere you can go."

Despite his youth, Tan enjoyed his time at the UW. He graduated cum laude in 2006 with a degree in computer engineering with a math focus. After graduation, he worked at Zillow, a small startup at the time with around 60 workers. However, the startup world was not his target. "My decision to work at Zillow was born out of failure," said Tan. "I bombed all of my interviews at Google, Facebook, and Microsoft. It forced me to consider the road less taken."

"I really believed that the critical path to success was landing at a big company. As I look back now, the opposite could not have been more true."

In 2011, Tan founded Sift, a digital trust and safety company. The company protects businesses from "bad actors" (i.e., chargebacks, fake accounts, spam, account takeovers, etc.). Its customers include LinkedIn, Twitter, Airbnb, Match.com, and other retailers, financial services, marketplaces, and content sites.

Last year, it raised \$53 million in a round of funding, which raised the total funding to the \$107 million mark. The company now has 200 employees with offices in San Francisco and Seattle.

Tan's decision to start his own company was for a "very selfish reason," he admits. "I really believe you have so many hours in a day and life is short. You should spend it with people you enjoy, that challenge you and learn from."

In starting the company, Tan has enjoyed watching the evolution of the "tribe," as he described his employees. While he doesn't interview every new employee, he knows that the criteria for hiring are based on his beliefs.

For more on Sift, you can visit sift.com.

From pop-up to Hood Famous

UW grads Chera Amlag and her husband, Geo Quibuyen, ran a monthly pop-up dinner series entitled, "Food & Sh*t" for three years, spanning from 2013 to 2016. One of Chera's creations crafted with Filipino and Asian-Pacific flavors, the ube cheesecake, became a popular item.

In 2014, Hood Famous Bakeshop was born as a way to wholesale her popular dessert. "We produced cheesecakes for

wholesale accounts from a shared commissary kitchen, and Uwajimaya was our first account," wrote Geo Quibuyen in an email to the Northwest Asian Weekly. "We added more accounts and more cheesecake flavors and by early 2016, we began to outgrow the kitchen and began to look into building our own production kitchen and small retail space. In late 2017, we began looking for a second location with seating, and scouted Chinatown-International District as our dream location. By early 2018, we thankfully secured a space and began planning buildout throughout the year."

The Hood Famous name is based on the original dessert from the pop-up dinners, Chera's Hood Famous Ube Cheesecake.

"We honestly couldn't run the business without the support of friends and family," Quibuyen said. "They've been so helpful not just in vocal encouragement and word-of-mouth, but also directly being involved in so many ways. Our first staff members were family and friends, most of whom remain working with the business today."

Newcomers to the food industry, Amlag and Quibuyen had some apprehension about starting Hood Famous. "We are relatively new to the food industry and have had to learn how it works very quickly. We're very aware of the food industry's high failure rate. Chera and I go back and forth between being very calculated, very risk-averse on one hand, and on the other, taking leaps of faith and making high-risk decisions."

Despite the knowledge of the failure rate in the food industry, neither are deterred. "As the children of immigrants, we're inspired by risk," explained Quibuyen. "The risk that both of our parents took in leaving their homeland to pursue economic opportunities is something we've inherited and while pursuing a business is certainly risky, it pales in comparison [to our parents' experiences]. We're definitely aware of the risks of entrepreneurship, and we hope to honor our families' sacrifices by creating opportunities for ourselves, our families, and our community."

To find out more about Hood Famous Bakery, visit hoodfamousbakeshop.com.

As for those who have yet to take the big leap? Pang has this to say to business-minded APIs: "Be prepared to work five times harder [than you ever have before] and be prepared to get no pay. But your first bucket of gold is in front of you — stretch out your hands long and far enough, and you will reach it."

Jason Cruz can be reached at info@nwasianweekly.com.

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