

## PROFILE

TRUNG VAN TRAN:

## The Epic Road to Cosmopolis, And Beyond

By Ed Kromer



Trung Tran (top left) is responsible for delivering his entire family to North America.

Ten days adrift in the South China Sea, out of food and water, Trung Van Tran (EMBA 2005) sat on the tipping point between life and death. Yet instead of despair, he found himself feeling... happiness.

"It's difficult to understand until you realize the desperation I left Vietnam with in 1980," Tran says today from the comfort of the Bank of America Executive Education Building. "But with all the dangers and desperations on the boat, *this* was what I wanted. Either I would make it to shore, or I would die. Either way, I would be happy."

Growing up in the southern part of Vietnam in 1960s and 70s, Tran had known only war. When the south fell to the Communist north in 1975, his father, an officer in the army, was sent to a Communist reeducation camp in the nation's rural midland. Tran had to grow up fast, working in the family's grocery, studying hard and learning to screen propaganda. "It was difficult to go to school and hear how bad my father was," he recalls. "But most of the children had fathers in the same circumstance. We knew the truth."

The truth for Tran's family was there was no future in Vietnam but labor and poverty. When the economy collapsed, they began planning to get out. The family savings were enough to hire a boat that would carry Tran, then 17, his father and 15-year-old brother to freedom. But they were double-crossed and sent to a nearby prison and horrifying conditions. "We lived under constant fear," Tran recalls. "In the countryside, you came to really understand the Communist system, where they were not opposed to thinning people out."

Tran and his brother were separated from their father. They lived for six months in a claustrophobic room with 300 other prisoners, sleeping sideways on the floor and subsisting on watery soup and a bit of rice every day. "A lot of people died before our eyes," he says. "After a while, your body just can't take it anymore."

After more than a year imprisoned, Tran, his brother and father were released. The hardships only increased Tran's thirst for freedom and a better life. "I was more determined than ever to leave the country," he says.

His family supported his quest, regardless of the sacrifice. Spending the last of their meager savings, they paid for passage on a crowded vessel and sent Tran on his life-or-death journey.

After ten harrowing days at sea, a Malaysian fisherman rescued Tran's boat, and guided it to a refugee camp. A few months later, Tran landed in Vancouver, BC. He emerged from the plane into a new life of possibility. He was reborn.

Not that he ever left his old life behind. Tran quickly found a painting job and began working to sponsor his family's immigration. He found a better job at a bicycle factory, then enrolled at the University of British Columbia, studying English and mechanical engineering. In 1986, he finally welcomed his parents and younger brother and sister to Vancouver, the first of many sponsorships.

After graduating from UBC in 1988 and marrying, Tran worked a series of jobs in remote Canadian coal mining,



A young Tran (top right) at 14 with his family in Vietnam.

canola processing and, finally, pulp paper plants. In 1997, though, he decided to move his growing family closer to civilization, and took a job as a project maintenance engineer at Weyerhaeuser's Cosmopolis, WA, pulp paper mill (he commutes from Olympia, which suits his wife and teenage kids just fine).

A few years ago, Tran was promoted to manage the mill's power recovery department, which reclaims the chemicals used in the pulping operation and recycles energy for use throughout the mill's processes. While honing his leadership and strategic thinking in the Executive MBA program, Tran implemented several changes to improve the department's productivity and reliability.

Now with his EMBA in pocket, he hopes to move into a more strategic role, possibly with Weyerhaeuser's international operations. Ultimately, he'd love to bring jobs and commerce to places like his home country that could use a boost.

"I'm so lucky to have been born into a family that focused so much on the value of education, hard work and leadership," Tran says. "I was lucky when I got the chance to leave Vietnam. I was lucky when I crossed the ocean to Malaysia when so many others lost their lives. I was lucky that I came to North America, and a system that allowed me to find a job, study English, go to university and find a good job—the ideal place for a new immigrant who starts out with nothing. I've had so much luck in my life, I feel like I must owe someone something. I want to leave this world a better place."

Tran has already brought his parents, two sisters and three brothers to a better place, which gives him immense satisfaction. "Of all the achievements in my life," he says, "I consider bringing my family over the biggest of them all. I feel a part of each of their successful lives in North America." ■

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PANCHO CHAVEZ:

## Líder de la Banda

By Ed Kromer



Sometimes opportunity knocks. For Pancho Chávez, it sounded more like the crack and thump of timbale and conga.

Chávez emigrated from his native Peru in 1997 to study at the UW Business School. When money got tight his junior year, he decided to form a salsa band with a Colombian friend studying at the School of Music. And Cambalache was born, of fiscal necessity. The plan was for Chávez to manage the band only. Until the singer quit, that is. A natural performer with a charismatic voice, Chávez stepped up to the mike.

Before long, Cambalache was *en fuego*. Chávez tabled school to take advantage of the huge opportunity

at hand. "When we started the band, there was a lot of competition that we needed to break through," he recalls. "I thought, 'What have I learned at business school that I can apply?'" The marketing has helped draw a fan base. Accounting is very important for the musicians, who are not used to getting paid regularly. And management is important to the people who book us. They don't have to worry about us being flaky. They don't have to worry about anything."

"We're musicians," he adds, "but this is a business."

Today Cambalache is a tight unit of expert musicians from North and South America, laying down infectious Latin rhythms and gathering devotees around the Northwest. The band's first CD, *Clasiqueando*, was mixed, produced, marketed, distributed and, of course, sung, by Chávez.

He plans to finish his business degree someday. But for now, a certified salsa impresario making a comfortable living in music while only in his 20s, Chavez can't imagine doing anything else. "It's amazing to hear salsa music when it's played by a band that's so tight," he says. "Going to work, for me, is going to play." ■