

Monday, June 03, 2019

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BUILDING: FROM REFUGEE CAMP TO GAFCON ROLE, HE EMBRACES CHALLENGES

Seaport Part of Builder's Amazing Journey

By [Ray Huard](#)

Sunday, June 2, 2019

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Canh Tran knew he wanted a career in construction from the time when a seventh-grade teacher told him he'd done a good job on a drafting project.

"I was drawing and he would come up next to me and say, 'you're pretty good,'" Tran said. "It was back in the day when we still had these big(drafting) boards and T-squares."

The T-squares are gone, and Tran's latest work is a far cry from the drawings he did at **Hughes Middle School** in Long Beach.

As senior project manager for **Gafcon**, Tran is in charge of what many say will be a defining project for San Diego — the \$2 billion redevelopment of a 70-acre portion of the city waterfront that includes **Seaport Village**.

Updated designs for the project are scheduled to go to the **Port of San Diego** for review in mid-June.

Seaport's Attractions

Renamed simply **Seaport**, the project will tentatively include a 480-foot tower, an aquarium, a learning center, an urban beach, hotels, a variety of shops, a public market, parks, plazas, a blue-tech incubator and a revitalized commercial fishing basin.

"It's the type of project that everybody in the industry would love to be involved in, and I just happen to be the lucky guy to have the experience and the credentials," said Tran, who has a bachelor's degree in architectural engineering with certifications and licenses from several organizations related to engineering and construction management.

Seaport is by far the biggest and most complicated project of Tran's career, although it is one of many that he has done with **Gafcon**.

Among them were overseeing several projects **Gafcon** did for the **San Diego Unified School District**, including overseeing the construction of a \$5 million audio learning center, the \$4.5 million modernization of **Carson Elementary School**, the \$8 million modernization of **Linda Vista Elementary School** and \$45 million projects at **Gompers Preparatory Academy** that included a new gym and new classrooms.

With each new project, Tran said he strived to expand his knowledge of the construction industry.

"What I'm learning now is the financial aspects," Tran said. "It's an industry where if you don't keep learning, you fall behind."

Seaport will put his skills to the test.

"It's a massive undertaking that requires a person to be experienced in so many different areas," Tran said.

"Failure is not an option," adding that he feels a special responsibility because **Gafcon** CEO **Yehudi "Gaf" Gaffen** sees **Seaport** as his signature project.

"Knowing that this is Gaf's legacy project, I want to do whatever I can to make sure it's successful," Tran said.

Having the Skills

Rick Trummer, who was Tran's supervisor in the early 2000s when Tran worked for the San Diego County Regional Airport Authority, said Tran is well prepared for the Seaport job.

"Canh is a very competent engineer," Trummer said, but what made him stand out is that he is "willing to learn a lot of things."

"I'm talking about soft skills," Trummer said, like listening to a variety of viewpoints and collaborating with a mix of people.

Engineers are good at fixing things and solving problems, but Tran goes beyond that to see how what he does fits in with the real world and what affect it has, Trummer said.

"On a project like this (Seaport), it requires an enormous amount of collaboration, even more than most people would want to think about," Trummer said. "The fact that he listens and internalizes things, I think that's what sets him apart."

'Boat Kids'

Quang Trac, a college classmate who was Tran's best man at his wedding and shares a similar background as an immigrant and refugee, said Tran "worked his butt off to get where he is."

"We came from nothing as boat kids," said Trac, who studied architecture and engineering with Tran but switched careers to become a financial manager.

"I'm so happy for him that he's finally getting recognition for all the hard work and dedication he put into it for all the years," Trac said.

Richard Nagtalon, a college classmate, said Tran was always "motivated to do bigger and better things."

"He's very calm, he's very quiet. He kind of does what he needs to do and doesn't cause any waves," Nagtalon said. "He's very well grounded. He knows what's important and how to prioritize things as far as family or work."

Tran came to the United States in 1979 at the age of seven.

Tran said his father, **An Quan Tran**, was a police chief in Saigon — now Ho Chi Minh City — until the government fell in 1975.

An Quan Tran was imprisoned for 13 years by the communist government that took over, and didn't make it to the United States until 1999.

In his absence, Tran's mother, **Mai Tran**, obtained false identities for herself and her five children and fled to Malaysia — spending time in a refugee camp until a family in Lansing, Michigan, agreed to sponsor them so they could come to the United States.

"I really enjoyed Michigan," Tran said. "There was snow. When you're a kid, it's fun."

His mother thought otherwise. She was learning a new language and trying to adjust to a new climate and a new culture.

"She was like, 'I need to move to an area where there's more Vietnamese to not lose that culture,'" Tran said.

They wound up in Long Beach, where his mother supported the family as a seamstress, selling what she made at weekend swap meets and later, opening a video store featuring videos from Hong Kong.

There wasn't much money, and when an older brother wanted to play tennis on the school team, he and Canh found a \$5 old-fashioned wooden Jimmy Connors racket at a garage sale.

"With that racket, he was still beating all these kids with these fancy graphite rackets," Tran said.



Canh Tran leads a discussion on plans for Seaport.

Taking on Adversity

"That's how our family is, we deal with the cards we're dealt."

Tran used the same racket to play on the school team for a year, but wasn't the star player his brother was.

"I wound up the most improved player," Tran said.

He quit tennis when he learned of an after-school engineering program that was offered by what was then the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission. The program came with a paid internship for those who stuck with it. He interned with a construction company.

"That was my first experience in working in a professional environment," Tran said.

From there, Tran went to California Polytechnic State University, where he met his wife, Doan — who also studied engineering and now works part-time for a Poway engineering firm. They were married in 1999 and have three sons — Tyler, 18, Trevor, 15, and Tommy, 12.

Tran and his wife still live in the three-bedroom, two-bedroom house they bought in Rancho Penasquitos when they were first married.

"We obviously outgrew that home, but we made it work," Tran said.

Tran could afford to move to a bigger house, but friends and former colleagues said that staying in that house is typical for Tran.

"He is definitely not full of himself," Trummer said. "He's got a fantastic family. He's a very, very motivated family man and I think that helps keep his feet on the ground."

Next Chapter?

After Seaport, Tran isn't what will come next.

"If I'm able to pull this off and successfully deliver this project, it will be hard to find another project of this magnitude," Tran said. "I'll keep looking for the next challenge to keep learning."

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