

IMMIGRATION: Working in America

Profile: Meiwah's Larry La

by Becki Young

Like his restaurant Meiwah ("Mei" for America and "Wah" for China), Larry La is a bridge between cultures. Born in Vietnam to ethnic Chinese parents, La and his family were among the wave of "boat people" who departed Vietnam following the Vietnam War in the late 1970s.

The entire family – La, his parents and eight siblings – landed at a refugee camp in eastern Malaysia, Kuching, Sarawak, after an arduous eight day journey at sea, along with 300 other refugees. During his 16-month stay in the camp, the gregarious La volunteered to assist Rene Van Rooyen, the camp's representative from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This would later turn out to be a fortuitous connection.

In 1980 the La family was sponsored by the First Baptist Church of Erwin, a town of 5,000 in eastern Tennessee. La, who had been a university student in business in Vietnam, took up studies in computer science at East Tennessee State University (where he now serves as a member of the Board of Directors).

La and his family were the only Asians in town, and the rest of his relatives soon departed for the warmer climate of Miami. Only La stayed on in Erwin, where he worked for the railroad CSX as an "office boy" while completing his studies.

In 1985 La became a US citizen, an event he remembers fondly. There was only one swearing in per year in the state of Tennessee at the time, and because La had become somewhat of a local celebrity, nearly half the town of Erwin attended the event, packing the courtroom like nothing that had been seen before!

La also remembers an earlier trip to Memphis with his entire family to get their green cards. Because they did not have the money to stay overnight, U. S. Senator Jim Sasser had arranged for all the necessary papers to be ready upon



Larry La

their arrival. All 14 family members traveled the 450 miles from Erwin to Memphis in two cars, received their green cards, then turned right around and returned to Erwin the same day.

La joined his parents briefly in Miami, where they operated an Asian grocery store. He officially began his restaurant career in 1988, when his brother-in-law, who lived in the DC area, introduced him to the chef at City Lights of China in Dupont Circle, who was looking for a business partner to run the front of the restaurant.

His love of people, and of politics, made La a natural for this role in the heart of the nation's capital. The restaurant already had a reputation for great food, and La made it a popular meeting place for Washington's powerbrokers. In a lucky coincidence, he learned that his old boss, Van Rooyen, from the UNHCR in Malaysia had been appointed to head the UNHCR's office in DC, right across the street from City Lights (above what is now Johnny Rockets). La went over to say hello, and from then on City Lights became the favorite restaurant of the UNHCR, hosting many official dinners over the years.

In 1998 La sold his share in City Lights, and returned to Vietnam for the first time in nearly 20 years. Two years later he opened Meiwah in DC; Meiwah Chevy Chase followed in 2003. His business partners were three former City Lights chefs, offering a continuity of cuisine in a contemporary atmosphere.

La attributes his success in the restaurant industry to a number of


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factors, including his great love of people (and his ability to recognize and acknowledge guests) as well as his English skills (which helped him to make the critical connection with Rene Van Rooyen, and later set him apart from other immigrant restaurateurs in DC). He admits that the language barrier can still sometimes be an issue with his staff, and has offered English tutoring to his staff at the DC and Chevy Chase restaurants.

Over the years La's restaurants have enjoyed great critical acclaim, and Meiwah has hosted many distinguished guests (www.meiwahrestaurant.com/images/photo_gallery/celebrity_guests1.htm). Meiwah has become a beloved fixture on the local restaurant scene, and with La at the helm, will

undoubtedly continue to provide delicious Asian fare to the DC community.



Becki L. Young has been working in the field of immigration law since 1995. Ms. Young's practice focuses on employment-based immigration law. She has represented employers in a variety of industries, including investment banking and securities, information technology, health care, and hospitality, providing advice on work permits and related immigration issues, and is the co-editor of *Immigration Options for Essential Workers* published by the American Immigration Lawyers Association. To learn more or to schedule a personal consultation, call 202-232-0983 or e-mail becki.young@blylaw.com.