

KC Entrepreneur: Seagull Environmental Technologies

Written by Administrator

Flying on Seagull's Wings

Determination and opportunities in a new land help entrepreneurial couple realize the American Dream.

by Kate Leibsle



Entrepreneurs: Hieu Q. Vu and Jeannette D. Le Vu

Company Information:

Seagull Environmental Technologies, Inc.
11905 Gillette St.
Overland Park, KS 66213
(913) 851-3919

www.seagullenvirotech.com

Type of Business: The company provides architectural/engineering and environmental services to federal, state and local governmental agencies and the private sector. The company's resume includes work on the 2001 anthrax investigation, Hurricane Katrina and natural disasters around the country.

Year Founded: 1998

Employees: 20

Keys to Success: "I just feel good that our people go and help people in need," Jeannette said. "When I see our people out working, I'm proud."

There's a lot of talk this election cycle about the American Dream: Is it still attainable? Can someone really come from nothing and make a mark in the world? What does it take? Walk into Seagull Environmental Technologies and the answers will be "yes," "most definitely" and "hard work, determination and never taking your eye away from the prize."

In just 10 years, Hieu Q. Vu, president, and his wife, Jeannette D. Le Vu, chief executive officer and chief financial officer, have built Seagull into a successful small business, specializing in the emergency response to and management of chemical release and natural disaster sites, Superfund site assessments, environmental remediation, lead and asbestos abatement and other support where the environment is at risk.

It would be easy to dismiss the company as just one of many started by entrepreneurs who were frustrated with their corporate jobs and longed to do things differently. But what makes Seagull different is the story that led the Vus first to America, then Kansas City and, finally, to building their company.

Building a New Life

Jeannette Vu was eight years old when she left Vietnam in the last days before the fall of Saigon. She remembers running amidst bullets to reach a helicopter at the airport. She, her mother and two siblings were airlifted from the country and sent to Alabama. Reunited there with her father, who had been in the Vietnamese air force and wanted to stay to defend his country, they were soon sponsored by a church in Ottawa which brought them to the community just south of Kansas City.

Hieu Vu was 15 when Saigon fell in 1975. For three years his family lived under the Communist regime, witnessing atrocities of all kinds.

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"I really saw how badly people can treat one another," he said.

He was forced to attend Communist meetings, saw public executions and experienced how government leaders took over all aspects of Vietnamese life.

In 1978, by then a medical student, he and his family made the decision to flee. They, along with 46 other people, climbed aboard a boat and spent the next seven days and nights on the South China Sea, before coming ashore in Malaysia. In Malaysia, they were but a few of the thousands of refugees looking for new homes. Initially, his family didn't qualify for a trip to the United States. In late 1978, however, when America hadn't yet met its quota for Vietnamese immigrants, the Vus, sponsored by Trinity Lutheran church in the metropolitan area, made the trip to America and Kansas City became their home.

Hieu spoke no English when he arrived here, but figured out quickly that he needed to be in school. A chance meeting through his pastor with a chemistry professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City led him to take classes there, where he translated everything from English to Vietnamese himself.

He left UMKC for UCLA when he decided to major in chemical engineering. Why UCLA? In a word, basketball.

"UCLA ranked as No. 1 in basketball at that time," he said. "We saw UCLA on TV all the time, so we thought it must be a good school."

He and his older brother drove the family's one car to California, enrolled and graduated from the university. A week after graduation, tragedy struck when his brother was killed by a drunk driver. Hieu decided that California wasn't the place to be and returned to Kansas City.

Hieu went to work for a company as a chemical engineer and found his passion.

"I found my passion as a chemical engineer," he said. "I'd wanted to be a doctor to save lives. I found something that I could do to help save lives: to be involved in the cleanup of situations that saves lives."

Seagull Starts

In 1998, many companies, including the company he worked for were facing a tough time, cutting budgets and employee benefits. Hieu decided at one point to quit and form his own company, Seagull. It was an impulsive move that didn't scare him, but did fill his wife with trepidation.

"I was pregnant with our second child and was working myself," she said. "It was scary." Still, they decided to make a go of it and, along with Lynn Parman, who serves as operations manager, founded Seagull Environmental Technologies in October of that year. Initially, the company had no contracts and the Vus could only afford to pay Parman, but not themselves.

Today, the company boasts a resume that includes working on some of the most newsworthy events



and catastrophes in the country. In 2001, the company assisted in the anthrax investigation which followed 9/11. After 2005's Hurricane Katrina, the company, under the National Response Plan, responded to sites in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Texas for environmental assessments and recovery efforts, including locating and characterizing orphaned chemical barrels floating in water, monitoring oil spills and analyzing the overall risk to the environment from the hurricane's aftermath. This summer, Seagull employees were dispatched to Kansas and Iowa following the tornadoes and flooding, respectively, which affected those states.

Seagull Environmental Technologies specializes in emergency responses to natural disasters around the country



The company has an ambulance, repurposed to hold its equipment for travel to job sites.

We Are Family

Both Vus are quick to lay Seagull's success at the feet of their employees and are conscious of rewarding that.

"We try to select the right people with the right attitude," Jeannette said.

Hieu concurs that hiring for attitude and not necessarily job training is important to him. It's one reason the company offers to pay training reimbursements for employees. "If a consultant (in this business) isn't certified, that's like walking down the street naked," Hieu said. "We pay for professional certifications. Eighty-five percent of our consultants are certified."



Laura Moore, Hieu Q. Vu, Lynn Parman, Rick Clayton, and Quan Do are just a few of the 20 staff members.

And that's just one of the benefits offered that Hieu said makes Seagull stack up well against bigger companies.

Seagull offers the usual: 401k, health insurance and disability, but it also plans an elaborate holiday celebration complete with limos to drive employees from their homes to the party, and hotel rooms so no one is driving following the event.

Every year, the entire staff and their families go on vacation 'together' paid for by Seagull. And we're not talking about a weekend trip. These are weeklong adventures to places such as Mexico, Orlando and Las Vegas.

The Vus know that their work often keeps employees away from their families for weeks or months at a time, and they want everyone to know they value that effort.

"I can't have fun at work without treating it like a family," Hieu said.

Another family friendly benefit Seagull offers is the option for many employees to work from home, with a home office set up and paid for by the company. Again, it's about treating his employees as family, Hieu said.

"Yes, it costs more, but it enables our employees to take their kids to games or to work at night if they prefer," he said. "They can take care of business and their families. They understand how we care about quality. As long as quality work is getting done and they are contributing to the team, it's a good thing."

Speaking of working at home, how do the Vus separate their business life from their home life? It's a work in progress, they acknowledge. One thing that helps is that they long ago clearly divided job

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responsibilities and respect those boundaries. Jeannette handles human resources, benefits and accounting, while Hieu runs the technical and operational side.

"It is hard to turn it off, but we do have to," Jeannette said.

Lessons, Challenges, Future

The last 10 years have been good to Seagull, but there have been and continue to be challenges for the company. Finding affordable insurance to offer employees is one, Jeannette said. Another is, as with most small businesses, financial stability.

"I feel like a parent," Hieu said. "I'm always looking for a source of income to feed my 'kids.' I feel a lot of 'if I die, what happens to my kids?'"



To ensure a stream of work, Hieu has established alliances with large firms such as Tetra Tech, Inc., for subcontracting work. He also tries to switch the contracting model so that Seagull does not always come in as a subcontractor by bidding for jobs on its own. With existing relationships with large firms, Hieu can bring in other teams to supplement what Seagull can offer, so the team can provide full engineering and environmental services.

It's part of a long-term strategy to keep the company growing, but not forgetting its roots.

"We don't want to get too big to remember how to treat employees right," Jeannette said.

Or, to remember where the company has been. The seagull on the company logo represents a time of great struggle for Hieu: day by day on the refugee boat he would search the sky for a seagull, a sign that land was nearby, but never saw one. The logo shows a seagull flying in a "window of opportunity." For the Vus, that represents freedom and hope. It's the image Hieu flashed to when he quit his last corporate job and decided to strike out on his own.

Jeannette and Hieu, both naturalized citizens, see America as a land of unlimited opportunity and feel it's their responsibility to make the most of their place in it and to share with their employees.

"I just feel good that our people go and help people in need," Jeannette said. When I see our people out working, I'm proud."

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