



PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

Thuy Huyen, 42, was a child when her family escaped from Vietnam. About 10 years ago, she became a U.S. citizen.

HUYEN, from page 5

Although they both had college degrees from Vietnam, it meant nothing in the U.S. They both enrolled in Northeastern Illinois University and earned degrees in computer science.

They also saved enough money to open and operate several businesses – two clothing stores, a gift shop and a perfume store. Huyen and her sister would print price tags, dress mannequins and fill out orders. Her little brother would man the cash register.

At the same time, her parents also began to sell insurance for MetLife, with her father becoming a regional manager and her mother a top seller.

By the mid-1990s, when Huyen was about 20, her parents bought a house in the suburbs of Chicago. They'd finally made it. In Huyen, her parents instilled the importance of helping their fellow Vietnamese, many of whom were struggling.

Her father was awarded the Republican Senatorial Medal of Freedom in 1994 for his service to Vietnamese Americans, and in 1995, he was awarded the Eternal Flame of Freedom Brass Medallion by Sen. Bob Dole – two medals he wears proudly to this day.

Ms. Oregon

Huyen came to Portland in 1999, when her father was invited to speak at a large Vietnamese festival.

By this time, she had graduated from college, earning a degree in psychology from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and was working as a director at a children's activity center in Chicago.

Huyen immediately fell in love with Oregon.

"Everyone is so nice and caring in Oregon," she said. "If I lose a pair of earrings on the street, I have at least one person looking for the pair without asking. No one turns their back on anyone. Everyone just wants to help one another."

It wasn't long before she returned to Portland for another vacation, and in search of a husband. If she found a husband in

Portland, she could make the move.

Being the beautiful and alluring 25-year-old woman that she'd become, this didn't take long.

"I was in a coffee shop, and I saw this guy. He was in a suit and really handsome, and I was like: Oh my Gosh! How do I get his attention?" She sat across from him, the two exchanged smiles, and four months later they were married.

About a year later, on a whim, she entered a model search at the Portland Convention Center. There were hundreds of girls competing. She felt out of place – she was the oldest, the shortest and, she said, the chubbiest. So when she was handpicked by Princess Diana's longtime hairdresser, Richard Dalton, as a winner, she could hardly believe it.

"My self-esteem went way up," she said. "I beat all those girls! From then on, it was always in my mind – if I can beat all those girls, I could probably win again if I had another chance." But she was busy, working in child care and as a teacher, and she didn't pursue it.

Her marriage lasted about five years before Huyen decided to end it. She wanted children, and he wasn't ready. Her clock was ticking, and they had differences, she said. She never told her husband the story of her escape.

She eventually took a job in accounting at Portland State University, where she's been working for the past 14 years.

A devout Buddhist, she goes to temple every Sunday. She also goes to Christian Bible study every Wednesday on her lunch break. She's a private person, who avidly reads books and magazines in her apartment downtown. She also loves nature, recently scaling Mt. St. Helens, and now she's training outdoors for Iron Man. Aside from parties where she said she's a social butterfly, she prefers to keep to herself.

In November 2015, she was thinking about that model search all those years ago when her younger cousin – Nancy To, Miss Illinois 2012 – told her about how much fun it was to be a pageant winner.

"It was always in the back of my head, but

I was like, no, you're old now, you're in your 40s," Huyen said. But then she discovered the Ms. America pageant and thought, why not?

Four months later, in February, she got a call from the pageant's CEO, former Ms. America Susan Jeske.

"I thought her story was amazing," Jeske said. "And she does a ton of volunteering, was on the dean's list in college, there are so many awards she's received – she's just so talented and so diverse."

And it's true. Huyen showed Street Roots some of her awards and certificates. The little girl who was afraid to speak English in second grade went on to excel in high school and college and continues to earn recognition for both her contributions to the Vietnamese community and her volunteer work.

About 10 years ago, she became a U.S. citizen and has taken an interest in local politics, most recently donating her weekends to A Better Oregon, the group behind the November ballot measure seeking to raise the minimum tax on corporations making more than \$25 million per year in order to fund K-12 education, health care and senior services.

In her new role as Ms. Oregon, she's already given speeches at dozens of events where she's encouraged her audiences to do their part in the fight against world hunger and poverty.

"We are spoiled," she said. "We buy an expensive purse, not me, but in general, like a Louis Vuitton purse – they could save somebody's life with that money! Or even a little, just a dollar could help a kid in a Third World country."

She said she wants to use her title as Ms. Oregon to make a difference, and she said while her platform is world poverty, she won't have to travel far.

"We have a lot of homeless people on the streets, and I would love to help Oregon first," she said. "One step at a time and one person at a time would mean a lot to me. Everyone counts."