

Vietnam native develops a life, buildings in Bettendorf

By Jack Cullen
The Quad-City Times

BETTENDORF, Iowa (AP) — When it comes to work, specifically construction, Davenport developer Hong Le does not procrastinate. Instead of hiring subcontractors, Hong, who owns Hong Le Construction LLC, says he would rather work side-by-side with his employees to get the job done.

“My attitude is different from other builders out there,” the 40-year-old said. “I don’t sit in an office, and if someone doesn’t show up, I’ll do it.”

And that’s exactly what he’s doing in Bettendorf. The *Quad-City Times* reports that since January, Hong and his crew have built and opened three businesses in a 5,000-square-foot strip mall at 2211 Kimberly Road.

“I think the guy works 21 out of 24 hours of the day,” Bill Connors, Bettendorf’s community development director, said.

Just to the north of his strip mall, Hong now wants to build a 4,800-square-foot commercial building at 2231 Kimberly Road, which abuts Duck Creek.

Prior to approving Hong’s initial site plan for the new structure, Bettendorf aldermen described his work on Kimberly as “exceptional” and “first class.”

“He’s not afraid to try anything, and I don’t think we’ve seen the last of Hong,”



Connors added.

In 1990, at the age of 15, Hong emigrated from Vietnam with “basically nothing.”

“It didn’t matter where we landed,” he said. “Anywhere would’ve been better than where we came from.”

Hong arrived in the Quad-Cities with his mother and two younger brothers, who all still live in the area. He learned basic English and graduated from Davenport West High School.

With his diploma in hand, Hong delivered pizzas for a few years and recalls getting robbed and beaten up on the job a few times.

From there, he worked in production at the Kraft Foods-Oscar Mayer plant in Davenport for four years.

In the early 2000s, Hong attempted his first development project. With some money saved, he saw an opportunity to buy a home in Davenport’s Gold Coast neighborhood and flipped it for 10 times

BUILDING A FUTURE. Davenport developer Hong Le, who emigrated from Vietnam in 1990, stands in one of his buildings in Bettendorf, Iowa. Le wants to build a 4,800-square-foot commercial building next to his 5,000-square-foot strip mall on Kimberly Road in Bettendorf. (Jeff Cook/Quad-City Times via AP)

the amount he bought it for.

Last year alone, Hong built 13 homes, and sold 12 of them, in the 1200 block of West 61st Street, Davenport.

At first, Hong said he worked alongside his employees to “save money.”

“But now I do it because I love my job,” he added. “Why not? You never know what will happen tomorrow.”

Before breaking ground on his Kimberly Road property, the former location of the Fortune Garden Restaurant, Hong had to obtain a special development permit from the city to build within the 100-year floodplain around Duck Creek.

In 1978, cities were required to produce flood-zone maps. The documents identified properties, including those along Duck Creek that would be subject to a 100-year flood, which is an event that has a one percent probability of occurring in any given year.

Hong, with design help from Chris Townsend, owner of a civil and structural engineering firm in Davenport, installed several flood vents around the perimeter of his structure to trap water during an event.

Talking Story: Big universe, little girl

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American wealth, security, and creativity have made big changes possible. Today, our daughter sits bedside and listens carefully to her daughter’s feelings about her father’s business trip to New York. Together they explore her sadness, even her mad-ness, about her father’s absence from her. Together, mom and daughter discover two good reasons for her true feelings — she both loves and misses him. I listen from my old-school distance, a crescent wrench among delicate brain surgeons.

I watch a world of feelings and a range of relationships open wide. Emotional territories expand for this pretty child and her parents, tools are set out for this girl to build a world of bigger and deeper relationships.

There’s an awful irony in all this, of course. My actual then my later emotional survival, my academic then professional successes, were no doubt due to a much-much smaller world of acceptable emotions and relations. When our tough and tender poppa suddenly went missing, I dismissed my love for him. I had to. Later, when we left our household’s safety for school and the streets there, dissociation from my pain and our family’s humiliation made possible quick-learning and snap-adapting. I did that.

For acting on his pain, for letting loose his ancestral and familial and personal rage, Lane County’s circuit court convicted my best college bud of attempted murder. Steven got Oregon State Penitentiary. I got grad school then law school, two brave children then three bright granddaughters.

Our expanding universe

Like I said 700 words ago, for most old guapos, arriving at 60 is pretty good. Though bluesy chords are constantly in play. But even for these, there’s relief. Even redemption. Brought us by two extraordinarily creative American minds, physicist Albert Einstein and astronomer Edwin Powell Hubble. According to those manong, our universe is expanding. We always have been and always will be.

Following their science, our internal and relational worlds are no doubt growing wider as well. Indeed, it follows that



Granddaughter Oci stands under the gaze of her great-great grandpa’s likeness.

everything we know and everything we can be, are likewise getting bigger. Getting better too. Insh’allaah.

Dr. Hubble’s 1920s to ’30s research at the Carnegie Institute’s Mount Wilson Observatory on the theory of our expanding universe, is now confirmed by 12 more years of stunning photographs of near and far swelling solar systems, snapped by that awesome orbiting instrument named after Dr. Hubble — NASA’s Hubble Telescope.

And there you have it, from the picture of Edwin Powell Hubble beneath his big Mount Wilson telescope at the top of this essay, to little Oci under a likeness of her great-great grandpa in a San Francisco alley, at this column’s close. With everything — our expanding internal geographies and our widening worldly realities, our Old World stubbornness and our liberating American creativity — in between. All of that, guiding our ridiculously optimistic immigrant nation. Our America.

“You sleep now, pretty baby,” I whisper into each granddaughter’s fragrant little scalp. “All our world’s birdies and doggies, our fishies and elephants, are aal-ready sleeping. You sleep now too. Tomorrow morning, bright and early, we can think and talk and do again. Tomorrow. Mimpi manis, anak manis kami.”

♦

The Asian Reporter’s Expanding American Lexicon:

Explanations:

Djatung (Indo patois): Story. As used here, an oral tradition of truth telling. Bringing forward our elegant past, examining a current vexing issue, proposing a shared future. Meant to be recited, so please find a back iron staircase or wait until you lay down with someone you love, and read aloud. Djatung are sounds and rhythm, not a head thing.

Italics. In written English, italics are used to denote “foreign” words, as determined by a no longer robust-enough mainstream standard. In expanding what is “American,” we include many human experiences that have no adequate English words. So no italics, here.

Definitions

(in order of appearance in this column):

Jah tentu (Indo patois of Dutch and Javanese): Yes, of course. Certainly!

Pero (Indo patois, Tagalog, and Spanish): Except for. You know, all that’s smart and good, but ...

Time flies when you’re having fun. First found in Geoffrey Chaucer’s prologue to the *Clerk’s Tale* (1386), according to <www.phrases.org.uk>.

Time flies, fun or not. Time and pain are passing illusions. Basic tenants of Mother India’s Vedic metaphysics originating 1,500 B.C.E.; further articulated by the Hindu Religious Tradition, beginning 500 B.C.E.; adapted by Buddha Dharma 400 C.E. These metaphysical and psychological disciplines migrated in successive waves of merchants, families, and armies through our 3,000-mile Indonesian archipelago. Locals modified each into daily usefulness. The modern Indonesian Muslim nation of about 700 vigorous distinct cultures, retains many core Vedic tenants.

Joh (Indo patois, from Portuguese *sinho*, or Spanish *señor*): Son or boy. In colonial East Indies, address for educated mixed-blood kid.

Manong (Indo patois. Ilokano. Filipino. Feminine form: Manang.): Big uncle. Grandpa. Elder. Respectful and affectionate address.

Insh’allaah (Indo patois, from Koranic Arabic): Of course, if this is God’s will. Existential relief by surrendering egotistical will and knowledge, to our Creator’s knowing what’s best for small-minded, flat-footed, me.

Mimpi manis, anak manis kami (Indo patois): Sweet dreams, our sweet child. Practice this melodic phrase. Whisper as a bedtime blessing to everyone’s children.



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