FROM REFUGEE TO ECO-INNOVATOR

CAN NGUYEN

Can Nguyen is the President and CEO of Nurture Growth Bio Fertilizer. He is one of the early Vietnamese refugees / boat people and is a true great Canadian success story.

It was 1975 and Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, was under siege. The Communists had taken over the country as well as our family business and property at this point. My parents, hoping to get us away from the chaos that was occurring in Vietnam, had me and my older brothers flee from our homeland. I was the fourth born of six sons and escaped from Vietnam to Thailand in 1980 by boat. I was one of the estimated two million "boat people" who fled Vietnam by boat and other means over the span of almost two decades – knowing the great risk of getting caught, as it was illegal to leave now that Saigon was now under Communist rule. We were at sea for over 10 days on a 30 ft boat with over 120 people. As we got closer to Thailand, we had to fight off Thai pirates on five separate occasions. Once we finally made it to Thailand, we stayed at a small refugee camp with extremely poor living conditions, holding thousands of refugees. I was eventually able to make it to North America with my brothers. We were definitely among the lucky ones as anywhere from 200,000 to 400,000 people who tried to flee Vietnam by boat never made it to safety.

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I faced a lot of adversity when first coming to Canada in my early high school years. Not only was there a major language barrier for me with a new life in a new place, I was also working two jobs to support myself. I was working as a packer at Spalding company and a dishwasher in order to be able to put myself through school full time. I finished a degree

in Electrical Engineering in 1985. Shortly afterwards, I landed a position at Macro Engineering as an entry-level engineer. Once again, I was in an environment where I was the only visible minority. To prove that I had the right work ethic, I would work over 40 hours a week. After a few years, I was promoted within the company and five years later I was the engineering manager. I worked for that company for about 17 years.

My father had ingrained in me the drive to strive constantly, always doing and being more – wanting to be better than I was yesterday. I began to feel like the job was no longer fulfilling, as I wasn't being challenged to learn more. At that point, I decided I wanted to open up my own business and become an entrepreneur. In 2001 I left Macro Engineering and opened Kentech Automation Inc. At Kentech Automation, we specialized in plastic machinery, automotive industry systems and water treatment for city projects.

In 2008-09, I began to see industries moving towards the green/eco and waste-free lifestyle. I created and patented a machine that took recycled tires and dirty plastics to convert them into gasoline and diesel. Unfortunately, this project did not go as far as I would have liked because it couldn't be commercialized here in North America against the big box gas companies.

I also founded Oil Screen Technologies in 2013 after identifying a problem in the restaurant industry that I wanted to help fix. Restaurants emit a high volume of oil vapour and mist from cooking. Regular filters remove about 40% of the oil in the air whereas Oil Screen allows one to filter up to 98.1% of the oil in the air (UL Approved). During this time, I also wanted to further my knowledge in Biochemistry and completed my master's degree in that field.

Still, with that little itch to do more, I saw another problem that I wanted to solve – efficient composting. We know that compost contains an abundance of nutrients that plants need and love. However, the issue with composting is that it can create problems as it is also a friendly environment for insects and fungi.



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The problem with fungi and insects and potential pathogens is that you typically have to use chemicals to kill all of these things. We wanted to find an alternative way that avoids the use of chemicals. What we came up was using biologicals to control fungi, bacteria and insects. We use powerful living microorganisms to do this work.

In 2015, we launched Nurture Growth Bio but it took us about three years before we were really able to establish a presence after waiting to receive all the necessary certifications. We eventually met all the government requirements and received all the necessary certifications from OMRI in the US, OMRI Canada, Pro-cert and Eco-Cert.

Nurture Growth's first commercial client was a winery in Grimsby. Since they began using Nurture Growth, they've noticed increased sugar levels in their grapes and they no longer need to use any pesticides or fungicides. Since then, we've quickly gained traction working with many fruit and vegetable farmers, greenhouses, cannabis facilities, ornamental industries and more, by offering free trials for farmers to test our product and observe the difference Nurture Growth makes to their crops. With the success for our Nurture Growth Pro, we decided to launch our residential line in 2019 called Nurture Growth Home.

We were approved in 2020 and are now carried in a number of major stores and online shopping websites. In 2019 we were one of 50 companies in Canada awarded the Ontario Agriculture Disruptor Award. We pride ourselves on providing our customers with a 100% organic and environmentally friendly fertilizer option.