

Mom, daughter have facts of nail salon safety at their fingertips

By Ngoc Nguyen - Special to The Bee

Published 12:00 am PDT Tuesday, August 12, 2008
Story appeared in OUR REGION section, Page B1



Cat Bao Le, left, was inspired to offer health and safety training to nail salon workers by concerns for the health of her mother, Helen Thi Nguyen, a manicurist – and translator.

When Cat Bao Le visits nail salons in the Sacramento region, she knows she's walking into workplaces that often have a language and culture all their own.

Without her manicurist mother, Helen Thi Nguyen, on hand to help, Le might get blank stares from salon workers when she brings up such technicalities as California's salon sanitation rules.

"What are their fears when it comes to the (state rules)?"

Le works for the Asian Law Caucus, which sponsors health and safety workshops at Northern California salons. She selected her career path after growing up watching her mother trim nails and scrub feet in Sacramento salons, all the while working with strong chemicals.

These days, as questions arise about health risks of salon chemicals, Nguyen has become Le's valuable aide in informing the Vietnamese women who comprise 80 percent of California's salon work force.

Nguyen began working as a manicurist in Sacramento 18 years ago.

As a teenager, Le suspected the chemicals had something to do with her mother's persistent cough and hand tremors. Back then, however, Le felt unable to help.

"There was no information about nail salons. ... You thought everything was your fault as a manicurist," Le said.

She learned that chemicals commonly found in salons, such as dibutylphthalate, formaldehyde and toluene, have been linked to cancer or reproductive harm.

Focused mission

Le's mission now is getting salon workers and consumer health on the radar of regulators, and workers talking with elected officials and the nail products industry.

Today Le shows workers masks that filter dust or fumes, and she hands out health materials she helped translate.

In flawless English tinged with a British accent, Le can represent salon workers before regulators.

And she knows she can turn to her mother for help reaching out to salon workers.

Nguyen is soft-spoken, and she exudes a natural ease that lends itself to work in a salon, where success often depends on establishing a relationship with a customer.

In Vietnam, Nguyen was a teacher. In America, with limited English skills, she settled on manicuring.

A niece and friends were already in the business when the family arrived in Sacramento two decades ago.

A new culture

Nguyen said her customers became her windows to a new world.

"I learned about American culture. They taught me English," she said.

Nguyen, her husband and a daughter left Vietnam by boat in 1978. They hoped to reunite with her in-laws in the United States. Their boat, however, was intercepted by a British vessel.

Thi Nguyen gave birth to more children in England, including Le. A nun suggested naming them after Catholic saints, to help them integrate. Le's siblings became Teresa, Ann, Joseph and Maria.

Later, with immigration paperwork in order, the family moved to California. Le was 9.

"There were fireworks because it was the 4th of July. ... I didn't know anything," Le said of her early days in Sacramento. "I thought there must be a party every day in America."

Nguyen enrolled at My Le Beauty College in south Sacramento, where she took classes in Vietnamese. Soon she was renting work space in beauty supply stores, hair salons – even a convalescent home.

Le recalls eating ice cream at one salon on Mack Road while Nguyen filed and painted acrylic nails. Dizzying fumes of acetone and nail polish filled the room. Nail dust swirled in the air.

Looking at consequences

Le said her mom's cough and the hands that would suddenly start shaking started her thinking about potential health consequences of salon work.

Le's father smoked for decades, so she figures that aggravated the cough. She's sure, though, that years of inhaling dust and fumes played a role.

As a teenager, Le recalled, she saw her first mainstream media coverage of nail salon workers.

Le had anticipated news about health conditions but instead saw a report she thought "demonized nail salon workers," portraying them as unhygienic and irresponsible.

That motivated her. She majored in ethnic studies and took intensive Vietnamese language classes at UC Berkeley.

Reaching Vietnamese workers is critical, Le said, because of a growing concern over exposure to chemicals. Studies are under way on whether Vietnamese women are at increased risk for breast cancer, and if there's a link to nail products.

A feeling that people cared

Meanwhile, California occupational health officials said exposure inside salons they've tested are within permissible limits. The agency conducted enforcement inspections at 34 nail and beauty salons over the five years ending in October 2007.

Cal-OSHA regulators said they have jurisdiction only over direct employees of salons. A majority of manicurists in California are hired as independent contractors.

Such things never mattered to Nguyen until she attended a recent forum on exposure to chemicals.

"Nail salon workers felt for the first time that people cared about us," Nguyen said.

At that forum, salon workers surrounded Cal-OSHA Director Len Welch. Le and other advocates translated tough, rapid-fire questions.

How can workers know what to do? What are they doing wrong? Why can't they find materials in Vietnamese?

The meeting was the first time Nguyen saw her daughter in action. She said she realized how important Le's work has become.

"They still want me to do something that is more financially well off," Le said of her parents. "But (they) understand more now in terms of what I do and why I work with community."