

Jackie Huynh:

... all ready.

Trami Cron:

Okay. So I'll quickly introduce myself. So my name is Trami Cron and I am the executive artistic director for Chopsticks Alley Art. I'm also the editor for chopsticksalley.com, our online publication.

Nhu Dang:

So what culture to identify with?

Trami Cron:

What culture? I'm Vietnamese.

Nhu Dang:

Okay. So are there any other cultures that you can identify with, or just Vietnamese?

Trami Cron:

Just Vietnamese American.

Nhu Dang:

Okay. So tell me a little bit about your arts creative and what do you do?

Trami Cron:

My art creative... I'm sorry, what was that exactly?

Nhu Dang:

Your art endeavor. Why you're-

Trami Cron:

Okay. Okay. So I'm an author. I have published now two books, and then a few other forewords for other people's books. And so that's my artistic endeavor, if you will. And in my work, I run Chopsticks Alley Art, which is an art organization that supports Southeast Asian community culture, as well as artists. And we do so through art workshops, cultural events, and art exhibits.

Nhu Dang:

Okay. So what role do you have in promoting the art from?

Trami Cron:

Yeah, so within that, my daily work is promoting Southeast Asian culture and art. We make sure that mainstream America knows about our narrative, which is not often represented. You hear, you see a lot of Chinese art and Japanese art. And now a lot of Korean because of the K-pop movement, but you hardly hear about Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, all those Southeast Asian countries. So that's why we're here.

Nhu Dang:

Okay. Got that. So how do you express your cultural identity?

Trami Cron:

I think that I eat my culture, basically. I do that through Chopsticks Ally Eats!, which is a Facebook group that we have. I also, because of my book called VietnamEazy, Vietnam-E-A-Z-Y, it talks about mother-daughter relationships as expressed through food. And so I find that that's my main thing, that is very accessible to all cultures, so that's why I do that. On a personal level, I speak Vietnamese and when appropriate, I also wear my Vietnamese traditional ao dai, just to show how proud I am of my culture and that I'm not hiding it. In the past, when I was younger, I definitely did not do that because there was a stigma attached, or a shame attached to that. And I think that as San Jose is growing to be much more cultural and the Vietnamese community voice is getting stronger, I have found that we need to do that. We need to do that as a community, as individuals, in order to promote our culture more and be proud of it.

Nhu Dang:

And how does Chopstick Alley give you an opening to exploit your culture?

Trami Cron:

Yeah, it's through the art exhibit. So we would feature Vietnamese artists and not just through the visual arts, but also poetry, so spoken word, and also in literary ways. So we also have Vietnamese teachers that teach art classes through a Vietnamese lens. So for example, if we have basic drawing class, we don't just have them draw hands and faces. We have them draw Vietnamese cultural things, such as the dragon. How are dragons different in the Vietnamese culture, as compared to Chinese culture? And these subtle differences is how we instill our culture and teach our culture to others. So for Chopsticks Alley, when we were open at Olinder Community Center, we served a lot of Latinos. And so that's one way for us to share a culture through these figures.

Trami Cron:

These mythical creatures, like Lan, where people think of them as lions, but they're really not. They're actually lion/unicorn/tiger, that's unique to our culture. We also have the turtle and what does it represent? So that's how we instill our culture, through basic art workshops, but done with a Vietnamese twist or Southeast Asian twist. But personally for my culture, that's what I do.

Nhu Dang:

Thank you very much. Thank you. So I will leave the part for the next person. Okay.

Nicole Nguyen:

Hi. So in terms of placing community, where is Chopsticks Alley Art specifically located? There's Apple Town, like the big Apple buildings, but it's like a specific building that is located?

Trami Cron:

Yeah. We are actually now located at Gardner Community Center and come next year around February, we will also be at Olinder Community Center. And then in May, June, we will be Downtown at a place

that will be called Open San Jose, and that's Downtown. So we will have three locations by spring next year.

Nicole Nguyen:

Wow.

Trami Cron:

Yeah.

Nicole Nguyen:

Okay. And then are they... Oh, sorry.

Trami Cron:

Mostly, all San Jose.

Nicole Nguyen:

Oh, I see. Okay. And then are there specific locations in term for specific events, like your podcast or your art classes, exhibit?

Trami Cron:

Yeah, so because of COVID and everything, kind of bizarre, but we are offering art classes at Gardner Community Center. When we open Olinder, we will also have art classes there. We're also starting a Vietnamese theater group, and so that group will be there, because there's a black box theater at Olinder Community Center. So y'all, if you want to act, yeah, we're gathering that right now. We're working with a Vietnamese screenwriter/director. So he's going to be putting on a play that we're hoping will be showing in the fall of 2022. And it will be based on Vietnamese folklore, and legend, and fairy tales.

Nicole Nguyen:

Oh, wow.

Trami Cron:

Yeah. And then in our Downtown location is where our exhibits will be. But besides our exhibit space Downtown, how we've been operating in getting our narrative, and voice, and art out there, is we feature them in American museums. So for example, the San Jose Museum of Art, next fall, we're going to be at the Triton Museum, T-R-I-T-O-N. And in the past, we've been at Evergreen Valley Community College, and also at CreaTV at Downtown, the San Jose City Hall. So we're all over in mainstream location, so that they see our work.

Nicole Nguyen:

Oh, I see. Okay. And then in addition to the concern of COVID, how were you able to continue your organization's movement and growth during lockdown, when we didn't have a vaccine?

Trami Cron:

Yeah, we did everything virtually, so we held art classes virtually. So then we passed out or mailed out art kits. All of our lectures were done virtually, including our art exhibits. We created a virtual art exhibit, virtually. Yeah, all virtually.

Nicole Nguyen:

It's able to connect everybody, not within San Jose too, was pretty cool.

Trami Cron:

Yeah. We were able to get exposure, even people from Hong Kong would attend our class. We were like, "What?" Yeah. The only thing about the whole virtual realm though, is we left out the older generation. So Vietnamese elders who traditionally loved to come to our art classes and events, they couldn't do it. We tried to train a few of them on how to access Zoom. But very few are able to do that. But we left out a whole community, which was very difficult for us. And that's what led us to write a book called ARTventure Down the Mekong, which Jackie's intimately involved. He was a photographer for us. With that, we distributed art kits, and the book is translated into Vietnamese, so that it's really directed at our Vietnamese elders, so that they can have access.

Nicole Nguyen:

Oh, cool. And then how about personally, how did you balance your work and home life?

Trami Cron:

I would have to say that the first year, not just for us, but I feel like a lot of arts leaders were wanting to make sure that we are still out there. And so the first year of COVID, we were more active than ever. So between April, of 2020, through April, of 2021, we produced 70 virtual shows, which is a lot. So was I able to really balance my life of work and relaxation? No, it was actually the most work I have ever done, ever. When Chopsticks Alley Art became a nonprofit, which is the end of 2017 to now, these past two years have been the most work I have ever done. So recognizing that and feeling the pressure of all that, I finally started to take some time off this year. I want to say starting September, is when I started to take some time off.

Trami Cron:

But before that it was, it was almost like we didn't want Chopsticks Alley to die. We didn't want to be a statistic. And so we worked harder than ever, and it paid off. The 2020 and 2021 is the highest grossing in activity, as well as money, for Chopsticks Alley ever. So when people say like, "Oh, it's downtime or times are tough." "Oh, don't expect too much." It's actually the time where you can expect a lot and do a lot, because everyone else is slowing down. This is your moment, your time to shine, right? So the lesson I learn is, don't ever give up. Even when people say, "Oh, it's bad time. It's bad timing." That doesn't mean anything for me personally, because that's someone else's timing, not mine. Right?

Nicole Nguyen:

Yeah. Okay. And then in your own works, like your podcast, and your talk shows, and your books, what influences your culture have on what you do?

Trami Cron:

I would say how we approach things, because in our culture, we're not in your face. Right? It's to save face, is to be gentle, and to be kind. So I struggle between calling out the system, calling out the things that are not so good for our community going forward, but doing it in such a way that it's not offensive. So that's where our culture came in. It's about saving face for other people. Yes, we call out other people, but we do in such a way that's not so hard, yet effective. And how we do that is, when instead of only be criticizing, we soften it with saying, "They didn't know." So we're going to share with you our culture and that's how people learn. So it's not always like, "Call people out and say they're wrong," but why don't you start with, "Share your stuff"?

Trami Cron:

And the people who listen, they're like, "Oh." They have to recognize where they've gone wrong. So it's not always necessary to call out people. We can just do what we do, share our narrative, the positive things, and change their mind that way. Definitely, there's room for people who go ra-ra in your face. Right? So it's almost like we all play a part. Some people go at it hard. I respect and to admire them. That's not who I am. That's not who Chopsticks Alley is. So culturally, I've always been taught to do it gently, save face. Sometimes it's not so good but I'm so used to it. I have to remind myself to, at times, be a little stronger and not be so "Oh, dance around it." But yeah, that's where my culture comes in and affects what I do.

Nicole Nguyen:

Very humble. So how do other cultures, maybe not the one you identify with, influence Chopsticks Alley Arts works?

Trami Cron:

I would say the Mexican culture, the Latino culture. So how Chopsticks Alley, the concept, was made and modeled after MACLA, M-A-C-L-A. If you look that up, there's a very long name. So they basically have a space where they have exhibits. They have classes, performances, everything under one roof. And that's when I was first exposed to that model, and I thought, "Wow, that's so cool. If only we could have one full Vietnamese people." But the Vietnamese population's only about 120,000 in San Jose. So we have to make it a little bit more inclusive. So that's why we included Southeast Asians, to also serve that community.

Trami Cron:

But yeah, so we model ourselves after the Latino culture, because they have a lot of the same struggles, language issues, access issues, money issues, and also a culture that may not value the arts as much. Although I feel like the Latino culture values the arts more than the Vietnamese culture, because they sing and dance, and they're very out there, right? Where the Vietnamese culture, I watch our parents sing and dance karaoke, but they don't value the arts. They don't see it as an art form that's valuable. It's more like, "Oh, it's a hobby."

Trami Cron:

So the Latino culture, I feel like they do value art more than the Vietnamese culture, not as much as the European mainstream culture. And I think it's attributed to really finances. If you're too busy, earning money, raising family, and making sure you are able to support your rent, the last thing you want to think about is art and culture. Right? And so the Latino culture, Vietnamese culture, any culture that's still struggling financially, is not at that point yet.

Nicole Nguyen:

Okay. Right. And then what do you want the next generation of our Vietnamese culture to take away from Chopsticks Alley Art?

Trami Cron:

I think it's to be brave, to share our culture without whitewashing it, or toning it down, or make it look like other people. We have to be proud of what we have that no one else does. So for example, one tradition that we have is sơn mài. You guys probably heard of that? Jackie knows it. Is this process... You guys know it, Nhu and [foreign language 00:16:14] Nhu, sơn mài?

Nicole Nguyen:

I'm not sure, no.

Trami Cron:

Okay. If you look at lacquer wear and then they embed shells and different things, and then they paint it with a black background, lacquer, and then they draw on it, paint on it, and put shells and different things on top. So it's a process that the Vietnamese has perfected. We've done it. I mean, to create a painting would take like six months to make, right? So it's a process called sơn mài, S-O-N M-À-I, so that's a process that is not made in America. So what European narratives, white supremacy, would say is, "Oh, anything that they don't produce, is not considered high art. That is craft. Low art, craft." And so things like basket weaving, or the weaving that we do, whether it be silk, or whatever we do, is considered craft.

Trami Cron:

So it's low, right? So sơn mài is a low process, where what they do, painting this and that, is high. So what happens is, a lot of the Vietnamese artists, or younger artists, would pursue what they consider as high art. They go with the art, and graphics, and all this, because white supremacy, white folks tell us that that's the better art. No one's really pursuing sơn mài, or the old craft, because that's looked down upon and that will be a dying art. So like water puppets, that's a Vietnamese thing, water puppets, you don't see it America, because that's considered, "Oh, touristy, low form." No, it's not. It's actually a very high form of art, that was produced way before my grandmother's time, that should be preserved and continued. So I want us to be brave and reestablish pride back into our culture, and not whitewash what we do, or look down upon what we have, because the white supremacy tells us that it's not good enough.

Nicole Nguyen:

Yeah. That's great. Okay. Thank you for answering all my questions. I'll hand it off to Jackie now.

Trami Cron:

Okay. Am I providing you guys with what you want to be hear? I'm not sure.

Nicole Nguyen:

Yeah.

Jackie Huynh:

Definitely. Definitely.

Nicole Nguyen:

Yeah, I know.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah. It is just interesting that you talk about, "Oh, the high arts," because I'm in art history right now. Oh, talking about, there's this grand narrative that everyone must go towards abstraction and whatnot. It's just like, "Eh, what about the other art?" Yeah. So I just ask questions towards Chopsticks Alley Art as a whole, could you tell me more about Chopsticks Alley's art missions and how do they fit in there, in San Jose, in the Bay area?

Trami Cron:

Yeah. So our mission is to share our culture narrative and support Southeast Asian artists, so that there will be more of us in the future. So to share, we do it through the exhibit, and culture events, and our classes. And then to support our artists, we pay them. So we hire artists to do all those things. We hire them to run the workshops, have exhibits, and have events. So how does it fit in San Jose is, San Jose, like I was saying, I think 14% are Vietnamese, 65% are minorities. And so if it's 65% of San Jose's minority, 35% of them are Asian. So Asian includes Indian, and everybody, Chinese, everybody. So if there's 35% Asian people, why do we not see 35% art represented? We don't. So we're just trying to make a dent in it. If we can make 10%, we're happy. And I think that we're doing that. Did I answer your question?

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah, no, definitely. I see it. Chopsticks Alley would just pop up here, and in every event that we could get and its great publicity.

Trami Cron:

Yep. Even at a farmer's market. Was it a night market [crosstalk 00:20:52]-

Jackie Huynh:

It was a night market. And could you explain the idea behind the name Chopsticks Alley?

Trami Cron:

Yeah. In Vietnam, things have happens in the alley, right? Gà hẻm, it's called, a lot of things happens in the alley, not just bad things. In America, bad things happen in the alley, where you get mugged. Right? But in Vietnam, because every home, all the streets are little alleys and you have little stands for food. You have place you can buy things, you see people gambling, a lot of crazy things happen in the alley that are not necessarily bad. So I thought, "Okay, for sure, it needed to be alley, something about alley. Well, what would be Asian?" Right? And so Chopsticks, Asian, especially I'm thinking Vietnamese, not so much like Filipino, because they don't really use chopsticks. But yeah, so the name came because I wanted conjure something more than just a name.

Trami Cron:

So we could be like Vietnamese Asian Art? First of all, because I'm also in marketing, that's my background. That's my degree. I wanted a visual. Right? So with chopsticks, you can do a lot. You can make the chopsticks have a voice, it can be a thing. It can be somewhere and then alley as well. So it has to be words that are visually something you can see. And so that was important. And actually it is interesting. So we started with Chopsticks Alley as a food group. So right after I published my book VietnamEazy, which is based in food, I started a food group called Chopsticks Alley. Then when we decide to have the publication chopsticksalley.com, we were going to name it Viet Current. But then it stood for VC, which is the Vietnamese Viet Cong.

Jackie Huynh:

Oh, all right.

Trami Cron:

So we were like, "Okay, maybe not VC, scratch that." And then so when I called for volunteers, all these people came and we had a meeting, and I'm like, "Okay, we can't have that name because of the Viet Cong reference. So what should we name it?" And somebody there was not aware that I also run Chopsticks Alley, the Facebook group, they said, "You know, there's this group on Facebook called Chopsticks Alley. That's such a cool name. It would be so cool if we could call ourselves." I'm like, "Hello, that's what we are. Let's call it that." So everyone loved it. It was really it weird. And that's how Chopsticks Alley came to be. And when we started the nonprofit, Chopsticks Alley Art, instead of starting all over, Chopsticks Alley, by that time already has a name. We started to help homeless kids in the Bay area. We would raise money to feed them. We would have feeding sessions, et cetera, et cetera. So we already had a name, so we didn't want to start all over. And so that's why we stuck with Chopsticks Alley.

Jackie Huynh:

Ooh. That's such an interesting story. Never knew about. Yeah, you tell us what year that may have started, in it's beginning?

Trami Cron:

Sure. 2014 is when we start Chopsticks Alley, the Facebook eat group, which is now called Chopsticks Alley Eats!. Then in 2016, chopsticksalley.com started and that's the publication, which has podcast, talk show, everything on there. Then Chopsticks Alley Art started at the end of 2017. We didn't start activities until 2018.

Jackie Huynh:

Okay. For sure. When you tell us that, now we're hiring artists to do art lessons and whatnot, but how did we find artists and their Chopstickers in the first place?

Trami Cron:

Yeah, it starts with one, right? So I was working at San Jose Museum of Art at the time, as a cultural liaison for them. And Cynthia Cao works for them as art teacher. So Cynthia Cao is a Vietnamese artist, she also does exhibits design. So she's the one that with the nail and hammer, and would hang stuff for ICA, which is a downtown art gallery. So we started with her. Really, she was the only Vietnamese artist I knew. Yeah. But then through SJMA we talked, we asked around, so we discovered a few more

Vietnamese artists. Some of them are quite world renowned and right among us, right? So Binh Danh for example, he's one of your professors, he's actually quite famous. So he was part of our first exhibit. Yeah, so it's just really word of mouth. And then eventually we have to do some research online, and now we feel like we're digging at the bottom of the barrel, and we have to now expand out.

Trami Cron:

So we're not doing Bay Area artists anymore. We're now going to LA. So our next exhibit, at the Triton Museum for example, the Vietnamese artists we found, one is in LA. The other one was in San Francisco, but he moved to Houston. So yeah, we have to expand out to find those really good Vietnamese artists. Not to say that there aren't any here, we're just not having a lot of success finding them locally, whether it be because of research, or lack of having a social media, or a website. And that's the other thing, when we help artists, now that we have more funding, by providing them with an online presence. So we may pay for their website for a year or two, help them establish that.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah, for sure. You say you work with Cynthia and I'm guessing you guys together comes up with events and art lessons throughout the years?

Trami Cron:

No. Cynthia, for us, she's an art teacher for us, and she is the person that hangs and designs our art exhibit. But as far as coming up with concepts and whatnot, it's me, but also I consult with you guys. Right? So we would have these little meetings where I'd give you some boba, and I'm like, "We need something. Tell me, what do you guys want?" And then they all come up with ideas. So we come up with ARTventure Down the Mekong together. We also have Adventure in Contemporary Art. So that's really fun, where we created these art classes, as well as tours, for Vietnamese elders.

Trami Cron:

We come up with how to make bún thang classes, because there's a need, which by the way, we're going to have another one in January. So you guys have to come learn how to make bún thang with a pressure cooker. So 45 minutes, you can have bún thang. Yeah. So we just really, by demand and from talking with the community too, we also have surveys. So we ask people like, "Do you like this class?" "You not like this class?" So they tell us what they like.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah, for sure. And does that community just involve with Southeast Asian Americans or just Southeast as a whole, when does diversity matters and when does it not?

Trami Cron:

Sure. I think it always matters. So our board, for example, so the board of directors for Chopsticks is very diverse. We have somebody from every walk of life right now. We're needing somebody from the Latino group, because we just lost one. She turned out. So when we pick our board of directors, we're very intentional about who we add there, and why it's important. It's not just because you check that box or you're diverse now. No, it's important because of their knowledge, experience, exposure, ideas, right? So because they grew up differently, they have different perspectives, they have different ideas, they have different connections, right? So we had a Japanese person, Indian, Vietnamese, Filipino, European,

Latino, and in our other committees, we also have African American. And so we try to be very diverse, because we're not going to expect white organizations to be diverse and we're not. I feel like that's not right. We also have to include the European Americans in the mix.

Jackie Huynh:

And-

Trami Cron:

And same way with our exhibits. Sorry, Jackie. So usually we want to feature Southeast Asian artists, but when appropriate or when we receive submissions from artists from other walks of life, that totally fits our theme, we include them. So one year we included Hadi Aghaee, who is... What is Iranian? Right? He's from Iran? This upcoming here, we're about to do the exhibit at Triton. We're going to include an Indian artist. So again, it's that we're not saying we're not going to include other people. Yes, at the forefront, it's Southeast Asian artists. But when appropriate, when there's room, we always strive to include other cultures as well.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah, for sure. And that is exactly what our class is talking about, is that deep diversity here in the Silicon Valley is vastly great. But we do need those connection all over the place. Yeah. And how does Chopsticks Alley get the fund for events and whatnot?

Trami Cron:

Yeah. We get them through foundations, grants, and also private donations.

Jackie Huynh:

For sure. You mentioned MACLA previously, are there any other organization that Chopsticks Alley is working with? I know you mentioned CreaTV as well.

Trami Cron:

Yeah. So CreaTV, so CreaTV.

Jackie Huynh:

Right? Yep.

Trami Cron:

Right. MACLA, San Jose Museum of Art, Triton Museum, The School of Arts and Culture, which is the Mexican Heritage Plaza people, Starting Arts, Teatro Nahual, so this spelled Teatro, T-E-A-T-R-O, right? And then Nahual is N-A-H-U-A-L. So these are some Latino group. We're working with... Oh, my god, it just keeps going. Every time I write a grant, its... So many, but basically anyone and everyone. Montalvo, we're working with them. We're creating a fellowship. You guys should apply.

Jackie Huynh:

I just saw that the other night. It's like, "Hmm."

Trami Cron:

Yeah. You have to share with Nhu and Nicole, hey? You guys have to apply. We're creating a fellowship where you get \$4,000 to spend a month with us. We're going to show you around, make you do stuff. It's all fun stuff. Jackie's been with us. He knows the stuff we do is super fun. There's nothing boring.

Jackie Huynh:

No pressure.

Trami Cron:

No pressure. But yeah, you have to apply. Oh, my god. But yeah, so we work with a lot other organizations.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah, for sure. And I know I've been in to one of the exhibitions. My most memorable one would be Salt Stained. What are your most memorable ones for you?

Trami Cron:

I think Salt Stained, the first one and the second one.

Jackie Huynh:

The first one, for sure.

Trami Cron:

Yeah, because that was our first. Yeah, the first one and second one, it was neat because I think people didn't know what we could do together. And people didn't expect that this little organizations could do it so well. And then what I also saw, was a change in perspective when people come out of the exhibit crying, because... I'll share with you a story because I think it's important. So in our first exhibit called Salt Stained, it was open in Japantown, which is an unusual place to have it. The Japanese culture is not all that welcoming, right? They're just like us, we're not... Vietnamese people are not that welcoming to the Japanese culture either. Whatever. So it's a very strange thing to do, but we did it. And the gallery was open and there was a Japanese man who was on his bike.

Trami Cron:

He was riding through and he stopped, and he saw the sign. He's like, "All right, I'll come in." And he went into the exhibit, and I usually let people roam around a little bit, and then I'll come in and asked them, "Hey, do you want me to give you a tour?" So he was in there for 45 minutes and I'm like, "Okay, I guess I better go check on him." And he was teary-eye by the time I saw him and I'm like, "Hey, would you like me to give you a tour of this and that?" He said he started to cry because he said that he's a vet from the Vietnam war. And he was taught to hate Vietnamese people, because that's the only way he could kill them. Right? So he hated Vietnamese people. And he had a son who was best friends with Binh Danh, when they were eight years old. Binh Danh was a little kid that got picked on a lot.

Trami Cron:

So his son would often defend Binh Danh and bring him home. And they're friends. So his dad would tell his son like, "Why do you bring that Vietnamese kid here? We're supposed to hate Vietnamese people. You know what would happen with the war? Why are you friends with them?" And the kid was like, "No, Dad, Binh Danh's great." It took a kid to tell him like, "Hey, this Vietnamese kid is fine." Anyways, fast forward. Now, first exhibit, Binh Danh's work was in that exhibit. And when he started to cry, because Binh Danh, it was his collection of when his family went to the island off of Malaysia. I forget the name now. But it showed the narrative of what being a refugee is like, and whatnot. And he said, "You know, because of my son and because of this exhibit, I'm changing my mind about hating Vietnamese people."

Trami Cron:

And he said, "Is Binh Danh around?" And I told him that we have a closing show and Binh Danh will be there. And he's like, "I'm going to bring my son there." So that night, a few weeks later, he brought his son, he came up to me, he's like, "My son's here's. Where's Binh Danh?" And I introduced them and they got reunited. So it was this amazing thing that happened, that I never expected. So to change a vet, by this time he's what, 60-something, 70 years old, to change his mind because of one exhibit, was amazing. Not only that, Binh Danh got reunited with this 8-year-old friend. What can I say?

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah. Even when you're telling this, I'm just like, "Ugh."

Trami Cron:

I know. Yeah, it's pretty incredible.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah. I know especially when we've first opened the first Salt Stained exhibit, we have a lot of food passing around. Are people in the audience open to these Asian food, that they may not be familiar with?

Trami Cron:

Yeah. They were. And we featured Chef Phu, David Phu, and he's the chef on... What is it called, Jackie? Top Chef. He was on Top Chef in Denver, 2018, '17? I forget now. I think 2018. So he started out as one of the riders for Chopsticks Alley and then ended up on TV and he was all famous. So he came back because he's one of us. He's always up to helping us. He volunteered his time, made all this amazing food. So yeah, people love Vietnamese food. I find that they're very open also. It's not just because of Chopsticks, but because this community here, Little Saigon, it's the best Vietnamese food outside of Vietnam around here, right? So people are familiar.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah, for sure. I know people travel every weekend just to come down in San Jose. Yeah. And you mentioned that the exhibition helps spreading a lot of Asian arts and Asian cultures, also food as well. I know you started with the food group. How are most of the respond to the sudden spread of Vietnamese culture?

Trami Cron:

How are people responding to the spread of Vietnamese culture?

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah.

Trami Cron:

I think in a very positive way, because they didn't know. They didn't know that we had such good artists. They didn't know why we celebrate Tết, New Year, they're like, "Oh, I thought it was Chinese new year. Y'all do the same thing." So when we create an event, so whether it be for Tết, or the Tết Trung Thu, or Mid-Autumn Festival, we make it so that it's very easy for them to come. And that's how we share our culture. So it's not all Vietnamese, because even the Vietnamese Little Saigon Tết or Moon Festival events that they have, it's even intimidating to me, and I speak Vietnamese. Because it just feel like you don't belong if you don't speak the Vietnamese language. You go in there and everywhere is all Vietnamese, but it doesn't feel like it's for me, even the advertising.

Trami Cron:

So when Chopsticks Alley does it, we do what's called Under One Moon, is what we do for the Moon Festival. We did it at a Japanese park. It's called The Japanese Friendship Garden at Kelley Park. All the performers and acts were from different backgrounds. So we had Japanese fan dancers, Chinese dragon dancers. We had Japanese storytelling, and Filipino poetry reading, and then for the tables to make arts and craft, the museum put it on. And also we had Veggielution who came and help people grow things. So that's how we include these communities, is we invite different groups to join and create this event together called Under One Moon, because we're all under the moon. But while they're there, they get to learn about the lady in the moon from the Vietnamese culture. And then they learn how Japanese people celebrate Moon Festival.

Trami Cron:

So that's how we do it. So now they come and they feel like, "Oh, they see their own face. They see their own people, their own language," versus very intimidating cultural events, specifically for that culture group. If I have to go to a Mexican event, I would feel very intimidated, right? It's all in Spanish and I'm like, "Why am I there?" So I get it, right? So from personal experience, knowing when I am othered or when I feel uncomfortable, then we try to create events that makes people feel welcome and easy, and not too immersed in that one language or culture.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah, for sure. Would there be any upcoming events that you are working on?

Trami Cron:

Ah, my goodness. So we're opening all these art classes, Jackie, don't you know?

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah.

Trami Cron:

Well, I think that the lunar cake making, Banh Chung making, will be super fun to include people. We are going to participate with the San Jose Museum of Art in Lunar New Year. We do that every year. So we share a part of our culture or art when they have an event. So as far as for us to create a big event, no,

because of COVID, so we're not doing anything that has more than the allowed amount of people, because we just don't want to deal with that right now. Most recently we just participated in the Moon Festival with other Vietnamese organizations, yeah.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah. For sure. When it comes to the art lessons, which one is your favorite or the most memorable one for you?

Trami Cron:

Oh, it's mixed media and it was a class with Vietnamese elders. And the idea is for them to write down their most memorable thing in their childhood, whatever that memory is. Then we have them pick out a map from Vietnam, wherever they're from or whatever their favorite area, so they picked out a very old map. So these are old maps from way in the day, so not new maps. They put down the bottom. Then the second sheet is when they write down the memory, whatever that is, with a clear sheet, we lay on top. Then the third layers, they get to draw their favorite Vietnamese bird. So we give them images of Vietnamese birds, so they paint them. And then lastly, Vietnamese flowers. We give them Vietnamese flowers, and they that's the fourth layer that they paint on.

Trami Cron:

Then they put it all together and we scan it, or we exhibit it as these four Scantron acetate sheets together. Why was memorable, was the stories that they wrote. We didn't ask them to write the same stories. We're like, "Write whatever your favorite memory is." Every single one of them, there were 35 Vietnamese elders there, every single one of them wrote about their journey coming to America, every single one. How they miss Vietnam, they missed their childhood. They missed the life they had, and then finding a home in America. So there was a lot of trauma, right? Some of them had family members that died during the trip overseas and then some lost loves. There was a woman who was around 16 at the time, she couldn't be with her boyfriend anymore. And so just these things that no one really talks about, especially our elders, they don't tell their family, right?

Trami Cron:

So they put down their most painful memories, but the most beautiful memories they had as well, and their journey to America and finding a new home. And so it was really quite strange to me because we never asked them to do that. We never said, "Write down your journey." We're like, "Just write down your most memorable thing you want to write about." And that's because it's so forefront for them. So even though they eat, sleep in America, go to work, raise kids, do all this, but the thing that sits at the front of their mind, is what they lost and then what they have now, coming to America. So to me, that reveals the level of pain that our community still feels, that's not being addressed, right? When they picked out the maps, the maps of Saigon or South Vietnam, no issues.

Trami Cron:

But we put out North Vietnam maps, and central Vietnam. But as soon as they saw the maps from North Vietnam, they became very angry and agitated, where they were like, "I don't want this map. Give me another one." It was like that. That's how angry they got because they associate North Vietnam with communist, whatever, the region for communist. So even for those who are from North Vietnam, you can hear in their accents, they themselves did not want to see the map of North Vietnam. So it was really, I mean, when they were agitated, we were like, "Oh, my god." Thankfully, we had printers and

internet. We print out a bunch of South Vietnam maps. So the majority of the 35 folks who were there, they chose maps of South Vietnam. Not many chose North Vietnam. Yeah. So it was memorable because it was something we were not aware of, it would trigger, and then to see them share these really amazing stories.

Trami Cron:

We've created a podcast from their stories. So we translated it and read them. So if you guys ever get a chance to check out the podcast, its soundcloud.com/chopsticksalley, you can hear it. And then we create an exhibit from all the works they create and it was exhibited at San Jose Museum of Art. And that exhibit was called up Ấp Ủ. Ấp Ủ Is a Vietnamese word that means when you cherish and treasure something, you protect it, like a mother bird doing it to her children, baby birds, children. So Ấp Ủ it's the things that you treasure, and keep, and save. Right? And that's what these memories are for them.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah. Definitely, all the stories. I definitely heard a few here and there, and I just can't imagine the journey that they go through. Even now, I think my parents are yearning for Vietnam, but they have to sacrifice themselves everything that they had, just to come here, just for their children.

Trami Cron:

Yeah. And it's not just what they have physically, but what they have as far as standing in society. So imagine if you're in Vietnam, your mom, your dad, your grandparents, they were somebody. Right? They were shop owners. They were lawyers. They were whatever. As soon as they come to America, because of language barrier, and because of how society view refugees and immigrants, they're now reduced to nothing. Immediately, everyone starts at nothing, unless they come with a bunch of wealth, then whatever. But if you come as a normal person, you instantly lost your place in society. And I think that's the hardest part for these elders to deal with.

Trami Cron:

I mean, I'm imagining myself. Right now I'm like, "Executive artistic director." So let's say I go to Mexico, or some foreign country, I don't speak the language and now I'm waiting tables and working in the kitchen. That's hard. And nobody knows. Nobody's going to ask me, "So Trami, what were you when you were in America?" Nobody cares. Because I can't speak Spanish or I speak with an accent. So immediately I'm reduced to idiot, because we don't speak the language or we speak with an accent. So it's very hard for them. And when you talk to them, they were intellectuals. They were somebody in Vietnam and now they're nobody. That's very hard.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah. It's very hard. And I think that's sounds like there's just different, separate, communities all together and it's great that Chopsticks Alley is trying to bring everyone together. And how does Chopsticks Alley find especially groups of people like the elders and young artists, how do you guys bring them together?

Trami Cron:

So there's a center called Vietnamese American Cultural Center. So in the early years when we did not have a location to hold our classes, we go there and we ask them, "Hey, can we teach classes out of

your community center?" And they love it. And they already have people going there to use their facility, right? They take dance class, exercise class, they get food there, whatever. So that's how we found the Vietnamese community immediately. And we put out our flyers, they RSVP'd, they come to class and all it takes is one, then it's all word of mouth. And so how we connect the artists through that, is now we have Vietnamese artists or these different artists teach the Vietnamese elders. So now they get to meet a young person that teaches them. And at the same time, the young person learns from the elders about different things, so that's how we multi-generationally connect them. Same with different cultures. We had a Filipino teach classes for Vietnamese elders. So they learn a bunch about the Filipino culture. So that's how we try to bridge that.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah, for sure. Yeah. Can anyone just join these art lessons?

Trami Cron:

Anyone.

Jackie Huynh:

Anyone?

Trami Cron:

Oh, gosh. Anyone. So we have a class this Wednesday, y'all should come, but we have a schedule. You just click on it, whatever's available. But as soon as we released it, oh, my god, it's almost full. We even included a traditional classical Indian dance and I'm like, "I don't know. It's full, completely full with Vietnamese women and men," but mostly women, who signed up, because they're going to learn Indian dance. Yeah. So it's crazy. It's for anyone.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah, for sure. What are some of the future goals for Chopsticks Alley's Art moving forward?

Trami Cron:

We would like to be financially sustainable so that we can continue when I die. Well, when I retire, I mean, come on, I can't do this forever. No, we want to continue. So we want to raise enough money, in order to continue to pay our artists, pay our administrators, pay the rent at places that we're going to be open, continue open exhibits. And so financially, we want to be able raise more money so we can become sustainable. Yeah. So it will be here forever.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah. Yeah. I can see.

Trami Cron:

It's not going to end when I die, Jackie, you're taking over. And then Nicole, and Nhu too, you guys are taking over.

Jackie Huynh:

I'm definitely coming back.

Trami Cron:

All right.

Jackie Huynh:

And that being said, do you see Chopsticks Alley Art changing the way that organization do things, or we just can continue this flow of stream?

Trami Cron:

Oh, I think we're changing how people do things. When we have other organizations reaching out to us, to partner with us, you know when large organizations come to you saying, "Hey, can we work with you?" You know that you're doing something. So yeah, we're definitely changing the art scene in San Jose.

Jackie Huynh:

Yeah, for sure. And I can't wait to work on some of the future stuff.

Trami Cron:

Yeah.

Jackie Huynh:

And yeah, with that, we'll go ahead and move on to final thoughts.

Nhu Dang:

Okay. So I know that because right now everything is virtual, so how can you get in touch with everybody?

Trami Cron:

Sorry. Can you say that again, because it's cutting it out?

Nhu Dang:

So right now everything is online, so how can you get in touch with everybody?

Trami Cron:

Ah, okay. All these classes are in-person now, just as long as we limit them to a certain number, and social distance, and wearing masks. And so we are offering in-person things now.

Nhu Dang:

Okay. So is there any other platform that you advertise for your organization?

Trami Cron:

Well, on social media, that's mostly where we do it and the website. Yeah.

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Nhu Dang:

Okay. So could you share a photograph of the work that you would be please to share?

Trami Cron:

A photograph of our work for what?

Nhu Dang:

That you want to share with us?

Trami Cron:

Ah...

Jackie Huynh:

I think it's more of, if you're comfortable with sharing, maybe some of the photos of the art lessons that you have had, or even the meditation event, or anything?

Trami Cron:

Yeah. We have a lot of photos. Jackie has them all. No, we have a lot. Yeah, totally. Whatever you guys need, we can send them to you.

Jackie Huynh:

Okay. For sure. We just may need to have you sign a photo release form. That's all.

Trami Cron:

No problem. We can use Jackie's photos.

Jackie Huynh:

Thank you.

Nhu Dang:

And if people were to see this work on the cultural [inaudible 00:55:01], what would you like them to know about it?

Trami Cron:

So if they were look at the work, what do we want them to know about it?

Nhu Dang:

Yes.

Trami Cron:

We want them to know we're having fun. We just do things to have fun, otherwise it's not worth it.

Nhu Dang:

Okay. And now you have answer all the questions and have the better end of the interview. So is there anyone else that you think we should contact?

Trami Cron:

No, I think this is it. Or Jackie, Jackie knows about us.

Nhu Dang:

Okay. So yeah. I will interview him later.

Trami Cron:

Good.

Nhu Dang:

Yeah. Finally, there is the last questions. Is there anything that you would like to tell me about your work, or your art and your life, that I haven't asked about that?

Trami Cron:

Okay. So the question is always, no one really asks why, right? Why do we do this? There's the, "Oh yeah. We want everybody to know about us," but why I do this is, when I was a refugee, I went from Vietnam to France, I was eight years old and I didn't speak French. Our family didn't really explain to us why we're in France. It was one of these things when your grandparents, your mom, dad, whatever, it's like, "Okay, we're going to go on a trip now. You have to give away all your toys." We're like, "Okay." So you do that. Next thing you know, you're in France. And you're like, "Why?" But you can't ask adults, right? You go, "Why?" They're like, "Oh, just shut up, sit down. You're causing me too many issues." Now as an adult, I know why, because they're so scared themselves, they don't know what to tell you.

Trami Cron:

So when we arrived in France, my family knew this uncle, this guy that we call uncle, who lived in France. And so we decided to go visit them. He has two kids, the same age as my brother and me. So I was eight. My brother was 10. And he's like, "My kids are going to this art class down the street. Why don't you guys go with them so the adults can talk?" So I'm like, "Okay." So we went to this art class, not knowing the language, and these two kids, even though they're mixed Vietnamese, half French, half Vietnamese, they don't speak Vietnamese. They only speak French, but it didn't matter. So when I arrived at this art class, which happens to be at someone's home, it's a woman, French art teacher, and I remember there was a window, lots of art on the wall.

Trami Cron:

And she just gave us paint and paper. She's like, "Here. Paint." And we didn't understand, but we knew enough, right? So I just started painting whatever I wanted. And during those two hours, I think it's probably two hours. I don't know, as a kid, it's whatever, how many hours that's been. I was able to not have anxiety. I was able to paint without anyone telling me it's wrong. I didn't need to have to know language. It's just like two hours of being a kid. And that changed my life. And I feel like what I do now, is to help elders do the same thing. So for two hours, they're not stressed out. Or for people who don't speak English, to be able to do it, right. So not just elders, but you guys too. Anyone who come to us, it's

basically for you to spend couple hours having fun and not have to be told that you're wrong. Right? There you go. That's why I do what I do.

Nhu Dang:
I'm so sorry.

Trami Cron:
I'm sorry. Sorry, Jackie. I'm supposed to be executive director, but this is why I do what I do. Yeah.

Nhu Dang:
And now we know the other side of why.

Trami Cron:
Yeah. Yep.

Nhu Dang:
Yeah. I know about that because right now, I am an international student. I come here to study a lot, not like a refugees. I still like, I'm my parents. But even now, but sometime here I feel very, very lonely because I do meet the Vietnamese, but they really don't like me because... Not really don't like me, but they talk about a lot, like, "You are like Viet Cong," something like that. And we are rich and right now, so that we have the money to come here, but it's totally different. I just sometimes just wonder why they have to do like that. Because right now, we are in a new generation. We didn't do anything to them. Why they still blame me for that? So I feel it's very, very, very bad.

Trami Cron:
Yeah. I'm sorry that happens to you. I'm really sorry, because it's not your fault. It's not your generation. It's just, our elders have so much trauma and pain that they can't process. All they know is hate, and they have to take it out on somebody. They take it out on their own family, and then on this new generation. Come join us, Nhu, because we're not like that. Just come hang out with us, all of you, because I get it.

Nicole Nguyen:
Thanks for sharing.

Nhu Dang:
Thank you. Thank you so much for your time. And I appreciate very much.

Trami Cron:
Yeah. And Jackie, please connect our ladies, okay? So they can come hang out with us.

Jackie Huynh:
Yeah, for sure. And I already sent them the creativity sign up forms.

Trami Cron:

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Oh, good, good, good. Very good. Yeah. Right. Anything else?

Jackie Huynh:

I think that concludes our interview. I can go ahead and stop the recording.

Trami Cron:

Okay. And then if you need more stuff, let me know. If you need certain images, let me know, and we can send them to you. We have a lot videos and images as well.