

# Elected to *make a difference*



**“I get to influence people from all walks of life, regardless of class, race, gender.”**

Madison Nguyen  
B.A. History, College Eight '97

PHOTOS BY JUDITH CALSON

By Jennifer McNulty

During her recent run for a seat on the San Jose City Council, Madison Nguyen was puzzled by the way her campaign signs were disappearing from signposts. Confusion turned to pride when she learned why: Young children of Vietnamese descent were removing the signs and tak-

ing them to school, boasting, “Look, it’s my last name!” Nguyen (“Nwin”) went on Vietnamese radio to beg residents to leave the signs up until after the election. She proceeded to win the seat handily, becoming the first Vietnamese American elected to the council in the nation’s 10th-largest city, home to more Vietnamese residents than any city outside of Vietnam.

For Nguyen, 30, City Hall is a long way from the farm fields of California’s Central Valley, where she harvested crops as a girl. Born in Vietnam, Nguyen was a young child when her parents fled the country by boat in 1979. Rescued at sea by a Philippine freighter, the family spent time in a refugee camp, moved to Arizona under church sponsorship, and eventually settled in Modesto,

where the Nguyens were one of four Vietnamese families laboring in the fields alongside Latino farm workers.

Nguyen says she has spoken out against injustice since she was a child. “I saw so many things I just did not like, and no one else would speak up,” she recalls. “Working in the fields, we were looked down on. We didn’t speak much English. We were working like dogs, and I didn’t like the fact that we were looked down on. I didn’t want to live my life like that. I decided at a young age that whatever I do in life, I wanted to change that.”

Nguyen learned early about government services because her parents volunteered her to translate for newly arrived immigrants. When she turned 18, she became a U.S. citizen and maintained the family tradition of changing her first name. She admits she was inspired to choose Madison by the Daryl Hannah movie *Splash*, which she watched over and over on video as a child—though her father prefers the association of Founding Father James Madison.

Nguyen’s parents encouraged their children to pursue higher education—eight of nine graduated from college—and Nguyen says UCSC was the perfect school

for her. “I’d heard it was one of the most liberal campuses in California, and that students could voice their opinions without discrimination or being looked down upon,” remembers Nguyen.

Although UCSC had fewer students of color than some other UC campuses, Nguyen says diversity is about more than numbers. “More important than a diverse student body is an atmosphere where you can say what you want to,” she says. “In most of my classes, I was the only Vietnamese American, and maybe there were one or two other Asian Americans, but it was an opportunity to educate the students in our class about our backgrounds and experiences.”

She pursued grassroots community activism, marching with farm workers during the drive to unionize strawberry workers, and she enjoyed working with faculty historians Gail Hershatter and Alice Yang Murray and sociology professor Helen



Shapiro. “They were pretty amazing women, immersed in the academy but with a realistic approach,” says Nguyen.

“I wanted to earn my doctorate and teach at the university level,” says Nguyen. “I thought that was my calling until I got into this political scene.”

An elected member of the Franklin-McKinley School Board, Nguyen was an outspoken critic of how the San Jose Police Department handled an officer’s accidental shooting of a distraught Vietnamese American woman. When a City Council seat opened up, Nguyen had the experience and credibility to make a successful run.

“As a professor, you do influence people, but it’s a very small circle,” says Nguyen. “What I do now, I

get to influence people from all walks of life, regardless of class, race, gender.”

Forty-five percent of the residents of Nguyen’s district are Latino, 35 percent are Vietnamese, and many are recent immigrants who work more than one job to make ends meet. “I don’t see race. I see a reflection of myself growing up in Modesto,” Nguyen says of her constituents. “I see the struggle and the desire to move forward.”

Nguyen knocked on each door in her precinct twice during her grassroots campaign—three or four times, if you count the primary and runoff races. “People who’d lived there 20 years said they’d never met a candidate before,” marvels Nguyen. Asked if she feels she is inspiring a generation of Vietnamese American girls, Nguyen replies, “Not just Vietnamese—minorities in general.” Children as young as eight years old joined her on the campaign trail after

school, and students in high school and college volunteered every day.

Because Nguyen was elected partway through the four-year term, she faces a primary challenge in June. For now, her agenda is focused on public safety, renovation of dilapidated community centers, building partnerships with neighborhood associations to improve blighted areas, and getting stalled plans for the first Vietnamese American Cultural Garden off the ground.

“I’ve read a lot of Gandhi, and my favorite quote is, ‘You must be the change you want to see in the world,’” she says. “That’s what I want to do. I want to have a positive impact.”

*San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales (B.A. Community Studies, Kresge ’73) was profiled in the Summer 1999 issue of Review magazine at: [review.ucsc.edu/summer.99/alumni-gonzales.html](http://review.ucsc.edu/summer.99/alumni-gonzales.html).*

