

Nailed: Life as an Orange County Manicurist and Salon Owner

by Rosaline Wong

It's 2:30 p.m. on a gloomy Saturday afternoon in Corona Del Mar. At Happy Nails Salon, a middle-aged woman lounges in a lush spa chair that includes an electronic heated massager with tan leather cushioning and a whirlpool footbath. Two women tend to her at the same time. One files her fingernails and the other scrubs down her feet. Another woman enters and also takes a seat in one of the four spa chairs to get her toes done. So far, it's been a slow day. Saturday is usually the busiest day of the week, but the chilly grey weather makes it less appealing for women to go out and show off freshly painted toenails.

At 2:42, Kimmy Nguyen greets three young women as they enter the shop. They all want pedicures, but only two spa chairs are free at the moment. One changes her mind; she'll get a manicure instead. At Happy Nails, a regular manicure costs \$12, a hot oil manicure costs \$17 while regular pedicures are \$15 and spa pedicures are \$18. They choose from over 180 different nail polish colors, ranging in pinks and reds to blue and lime green, while Kimmy calls over in Vietnamese to one of the nail technicians, who turns on warm water for the footbaths. The young women pick up magazines from the stacks, which includes *Modern Bride*, *Elegant Bride*, *Seventeen*, *Teen Vogue*, *People*, *Self*, *Gourmet*, and *Cosmopolitan*. They head over to their stations while Kimmy surveys the scene with her round bright eyes and watches to make sure every customer is accommodated and everything runs smoothly. She arrived at work today at 10 a.m. and has done four sets of nails so far. The women settle down and relax. Kimmy sits back down in her chair at her desk in front that is perpendicular to her manicure station. She too relaxes and begins to file her own nails.

Kimmy, almost 40 years old, is the co-owner and manager of Happy Nails Salon, which is nestled between Thai Del Mar Restaurant and Pacific Cleaners on East Pacific Coast Highway. The street is crowded with shops, restaurants, and salons and stretches for miles along the coast in this beach city. The beach amplifies customers' desires to come in and get their nails prepped and polished to be flaunted in sandals. During the summertime, tourists make up a large portion of the clientele. Happy Nails Salon is one of 13 nail salons that line up along one mile of Pacific Coast Highway. To Kimmy, this competition is no competition at all. "You don't need to compete with them. You do their nails and when you do a good job, they'll tell their friends or recommend other customers to you," she explains. Years of experience have garnered enough confidence and trust with her clients in this business.

Seventeen years ago at 22 years of age, Kimmy came to America from Vietnam with her mother, younger sister Helen, and younger brother Jay. She grew up in Biên Hòa, a small city in Southern Vietnam, where she always wanted to be a preschool teacher, but after the twelfth grade, she had familial obligations to fulfill by helping her family run a small shop that sold breakfast foods, bread, and little cakes. Her biological father was an American military officer, who was stationed there during the Vietnam War. Children of Vietnamese mothers and American soldiers were greatly discriminated against in Vietnamese society and were viewed as "children of the enemy" by the Communist government when they took over South Vietnam in 1975. They faced racial prejudice and were even limited in education and work opportunities by the government. In 1988, U.S. Congress passed the Amerasian Homecoming Act, which allowed children fathered by a U.S. Citizen during the wartime period to immigrate to the United

States and gain legal permanent residency. With the help of the United States government, Kimmy, her mother, and two siblings saved up enough money to come to America for the opportunities it offered, much like numerous other immigrants who come and search for the American dream.

Upon arriving in the United States, Kimmy attended a community college, Golden West College in Huntington Beach, part-time in order to learn English and obtain general education. Going to school was her ambition, but she had to work in order to support her family. During the second half of her days, she was a garment worker at a factory in Westminster, in which she sewed clothes, cut loose threads, and would even bring clothes home to work on up until two or three in the morning. She earned about \$25 a day depending on how many pieces she could finish. These were tough times for every one in the family, but they all worked hard in order to save up money to sponsor her two older sisters to come over to America and join them. However, Kimmy's father was not in the equation. He now resides in Texas and has his own family there.

The salon picks up again as two women dressed in sweats come in to get pedicures after having grabbed lunch together. Manicures and pedicures usually take around 30 to 45 minutes, so they use this time to catch up with each other as they relax and get pampered. Nail salons become social venues for women and even men, who show up to be groomed, but without the bright red lacquer. Chatter in English and Vietnamese alike fills the room. Around 3:07 p.m., Kimmy spots Maybelle, a regular customer, through the glass windows and rushes to help her open the door.

A nail technician passes by, smiles and asks her, "How are you doing?"

Another asks, "What happened?"

Maybelle had broken her foot, but she still makes it to her manicure and pedicure appointment that she has every two weeks. She has been a client at Happy Nails for the past 10 years, even before Kimmy started to work there. Vivian, Maybelle's usual nail technician, is busy, so Kimmy helps out and removes the deep red polish off of Maybelle's fingertips with a cotton ball soaked in acetone. Maybelle sports a navy track suit with yellow stripes and has her curly hair pinned in a clip. Every five minutes she answers her ringing cell phone in Spanish. She'll have the same color polish painted on that she had on before. Vivian returns and Kimmy gets right up to look around the room. She spots a middle-aged woman with a short blond bob getting a pedicure, who has come in with her daughter. "You want a brow waxing?" Kimmy asks. The woman agrees and sits back in a comfy black leather chair as Kimmy preps her eyebrows and another employee works on her pedicure. Kimmy pulls out a tweezer and begins plucking the small hairs away. She stares off, scans the salon, and gives the woman a head massage. Along with a manicurist's license, Kimmy also has an aesthetician license to do facials and waxing. In her salon, eyebrow waxing costs \$12, a bikini wax is \$20, and the prices go up to \$45 for waxing legs. Customers file out, so the other nail technicians are free to give a pedicure to the woman's daughter. Mother-daughter duos often come into the nail salon to be pampered together.

Dating back to the 1920s, perfectly manicured nails on women represented upper-class social backgrounds. This notion was also perpetuated in the 1960s, when manicures could cost up to \$60 dollars. However in the late 1970s and 1980s, Vietnamese immigrants came to America and sought to open small businesses to make a living because of limited opportunities in the job market, language difficulties and discrimination. By the 1980s and 1990s, Vietnamese Americans fulfilled consumer demand and opened up numerous discount nail salons, which

allowed women even from the working class to get pampered as well. Vietnamese Americans are not the only immigrant group since Korean immigrants also dominate the nail business and own 85 percent of the nail salons in New York City. More recently, Vietnamese have even transported the nail business over to the United Kingdom where numerous Vietnamese-owned nail shops can be found in London. According to *VietSalon*, a trade journal magazine for Vietnamese salon professionals, Vietnamese salon owners and nail technicians have expanded the overall industry from 118,576 nail techs in 1990 to 361,424 in 2006. Moreover, at least 40 percent are owned by Vietnamese in the U.S. and 80 percent are owned by them in California. California is home to half of the nation's Vietnamese nail techs with 79,582 and all have propelled it into a \$6 billion industry.

In order to maintain this momentum, social networks are vital in the Vietnamese nail salon business. Many Vietnamese women get into the nail industry through friends or family members. In this case, Kimmy had numerous friends from church that did nails and referred her to the occupation. She attends the Vietnamese Presbyterian Church in Garden Grove, which also helped her family in the beginning of her years in America by receiving used microwaves and blankets from them. Also, Kimmy had an aunt who was already a manicurist when she first arrived. Working in a nail salon gave better opportunities by allowing women like Kimmy to move out of more labor-intensive jobs like garment work and into self-employment. As Kimmy claims, "This is a very easy job. You can talk to the customers. You do their nails. It's just customer service. It's easy." It also appealed to her because through the job, she could learn to communicate in English when dealing with clients, earn more cash from tips, and save up money in order to start a family. She was able to acquire more money and have better hours compared to her previous job as a seamstress. Most importantly, Kimmy was also able to earn more money through the nail industry in order to allow her two older sisters to come to America. By 1997, her family accumulated enough and all were reunited in California.

More than 15 years ago, Kimmy walked several blocks from her home to attend cosmetology school in Garden Grove for six months, which offered bilingual education that was taught in Vietnamese and English. Learning English allows hopeful manicurists to be able to interact with customers and pass the licensing test. After cosmetology school, Kimmy's aunt referred her to Lovely Nails Salon on Pacific Coast Highway, less than a mile away from Happy Nails Salon. She worked there for two years until she moved to work at the Lovely Nails Salon in Tustin for seven years. She started by doing manicures and pedicures until she gained more and more experience in doing acrylic nails, which are artificial nails glued to the tips of fingernails in order to elongate them. For four years at the salon in Tustin, she was the manager, answering the phone and talked to customers. At 27, she got married and while in Tustin, she worked off and on throughout her pregnancies, after which she decided to stay home and care for her children.

Finally, for the next six years up until now, she has been working at Happy Nails Salon. Her younger sister, Helen, worked at Happy Nails and eventually became the owner of the salon. Their Happy Nails Salon was originally the first shop that was part of the major chain, which includes over 60 nail salons, but the owners decided the space was too small, which gave Helen the opportunity to take over. Once she became the owner, Kimmy became the manager of the salon. Then, Helen became pregnant, which made it difficult for her to run the salon. After having saved up enough money, Kimmy became business partners with her sister and they became co-owners of the store. Kimmy explains, "I always wanted to start my own business and manage my hours." Now, Helen and Kimmy's two other sisters are all in the nail business and

currently work at Lovely Nails, another major nail salon chain in Tustin. At Happy Nails, Kimmy runs the salon by answering the phone, calculating the receipts at the end of the day, supervising customer service, and doing manicures and acrylics along with various other tasks while her husband, a computer technician, deals with all the paperwork.

At Happy Nails salon, a total of eight nail technicians and Kimmy work at the shop. All are Vietnamese women ranging in age from 30 to 43 and all are married with children. On weekdays, six nail technicians work, allowing each one to rotate and take a day off. The salon is open from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. from Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturday and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday. Being the owner, Kimmy comes in around 10 a.m. and takes off Sundays for church and time with her family. Like many other Vietnamese salons, contracts are used with their nail technicians since all are self-employed. Technicians buy their own supplies and rent their space from the owner. They earn 60 percent of the service fees, plus tips they receive from customers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in May 2006, the mean annual wage for manicurists and pedicurists in America is \$21,280. Off the top of Kimmy's head, technicians earn about \$50 to \$60 dollars a day depending on how busy it is. Moreover, technicians at Happy Nails do not have to compete with each other in the salon because they rotate, so that customers are assigned to an employee who is next on the rotation. That way, everyone gets an equal chance of earning money. According to Kimmy, "We get along very well. We don't show any problems at work. Like if there is a problem in the way someone treats customers, we talk about it and help each other to be better."

It's 3:10 p.m. and the salon is filled with women. A middle-aged woman and her mother, in sweatsuits and matching short haircuts, walk into the salon. The woman wants a pedicure.

"All the chairs are filled, but it will only be about a 10 minute wait," Kimmy says.

The women nod and stand idly in the front of the shop for 10 seconds.

"No, no I can't wait..." says the woman and they both exit the salon.

Clientele during the winter usually consists of regular customers, but walk-ins often come by as well. The salon is alive with friends socializing and people relaxing. A flat-screen television hangs above the private room, a lounge for employees, in the back of the salon. A CNN program on presidential election plays. No one pays attention. For five seconds, the room is silent. The CNN anchor mentions presidential candidate Barack Obama above the clip, clip, clip of the nail clipper. Then, the conversations start up again. There are 10 customers in the salon, seven women are having their nails done, while another three dry their nails under ultraviolet lights. Every technician has her hands full.

Kimmy goes back to the frequent customer, Maybelle, and files her nails on the manicure station desk. Most women do not need to get their nails clipped since they come so often, but filing is important in creating a good shape, either square or oval depending on the customer's preference. Often times, new customers can be demanding. Kimmy explains, "They can be picky about the shape or the curve of the French nail [when the tips of the nails are painted white] and you can't file too much when cutting acrylics. But when they get to know you and see that you do a good job, they don't say anything."

Kimmy grabs a petal-edged pastel yellow bowl filled with warm water and soap to soak Maybelle's hands in, in order to soften up her cuticles, the skin around her fingernails. That way, it is easier to push back and cut any excess dead skin in order to have the largest surface

area possible to paint on polish. Since Maybelle is getting a pedicure at the same time, Kimmy has to squat down and repeat the process for her other hand.

A pungent smell permeates the room. The fumes smell like a mixture of alcohol, aerosol spray and nail polish remover. It is a mixture of all the chemicals that they use daily in the salon, which contain numerous ingredients like ethyl methacrylate, acetone, toluene, ethyl ether, formaldehyde, xylene and benzoyl peroxide. Many of the chemicals used to apply acrylic nails are especially harmful and can cause health problems such as asthma, bronchitis, dermatitis, eye irritation, respiratory problems and even unconsciousness. In the article, "Under the varnish: Vietnamese nail salon workers face the highest exposure to dangerous chemicals--but who's responsible for their safety?" Momo Chang of *ColorLines* magazine discusses the health risks associated with the numerous toxins and chemicals that are in the products nail technicians use. Chang writes, "For workers and consumers alike, knowing what chemicals are toxic requires knowledge of chemical names and diligent reading of microscopic labels. Some common chemicals found in nail salons are toluene, formaldehyde and a group of chemical compounds called phthalates. Toluene and formaldehyde are both deemed by the EPA to cause cancer, and phthalates are linked to birth defects and have been banned in Europe from cosmetic products – yet all are still used in cosmetics sold today in the United States, right at your local Walgreen's." According to Chang, cosmetics are not regulated by the FDA, so many of these harmful chemicals are included in the products. Since most nail salon workers are self-employed, it is up to them to buy their own health insurance. Some are also unaware of the dangers or if they are, they often have few other occupational choices and stick with it to pay the bills. Without regulation or protection, nail technicians are left to fend for themselves. Some health and law groups have been trying to inform the workers with bilingual materials in order to improve conditions. Chang also includes the account of a community health worker: "Thu Pham has seen 32 women who work in nail salons with chronic asthma, fungal infections and skin rashes. Six other women miscarried."

Acrylic nails are Kimmy's favorite thing to do. Many of her frequent customers for this procedure are businesswomen who believe it enhances their professional appearance. Kimmy first glues the fake nails onto the fingernails. She then mixes acrylic liquid and a powder formula to form paste that is applied on top to provide a durable finish. Lastly she sands the nail down, scattering millions of pieces of dust that she cannot completely avoid inhaling. "I'm used to it," she says. She is aware of the risks health risks of her job through her acquaintances with other nail technicians from the first salon where she worked. Some have suffered allergies, stuffy noses and even miscarriages. However, these problems do not concern her. The only worry she has is in keeping the nail salon clean. State board inspectors come once every six months without prior notice. They have been fined before, which makes Kimmy more aware of having everyone clean their tools after every use, to wash their hands every time, and to wash the numerous towels used. "The more money we've paid [for the fines], the cleaner we get," she adds. She explains that the fines are all the result of not having properly labeled every single container.

A client scheduled for 5 p.m. arrives at 5:20 p.m. and her daughter arrives even later at 5:50 p.m. Kimmy and two other employees must stay past closing time in order to complete their manicures and give 30 minute neck and shoulder massages that cost an additional 24 dollars. The day winds down and the salon is practically empty. Three nail technicians remain, along with Kimmy, as they finish their last manicures of the day. The room is oddly silent, but the nail technicians begin to speak softly in Vietnamese. Kimmy translates a bit of what another

technician says, to make her client, Stephanie Gilly, feel comfortable and included. Sometimes, Kimmy teaches her clients Vietnamese words like *cám ơn*, *chào cô*, and *Đẹp lắm*, which mean thank you, hello, and beautiful, respectively. Although clients never say it aloud, Kimmy is aware of some customers' annoyance when they speak their native language. She remarks, "They don't like it. They think you talk about them."

A walk-in from earlier today, Jane Rutelidge*, who asked that her real name not be used, has gotten her nails done for the past 10 years every single week at the Lovely Nails salon down the street, but came in to Happy Nails because her technician took another client when she was supposed to have her appointment. She is an older woman with short blond hair and wears a gray cable knit sweater over a crisp white shirt. She gives her take on the language issue: "Sometimes it's annoying when they're talking at the same time, but on the whole I don't mind. It's because I don't understand. I have friends that won't come because they feel like they're talking about them." A young Latina stand-up comedienne, Anjelah Johnson, has even parodied her own experience in an Asian-run nail salon, which has amassed millions of views on YouTube. In reality, Kimmy explains, the technicians simply talk about their husbands, children, or work and essentially make the day go by faster.

Kimmy's client, Stephanie Gilly, a resident of Corona del Mar gets manicures and pedicures done by either Kimmy or another technician, Diane, once a week and has been doing so for the past two years. Stephanie explains the appeal of Happy Nails, "Everybody is nice and friendly. It feels comfy because it's smaller than some of the bigger places where you just feel like a number. This feels like a neighborhood nail place. It's also an escape for an hour and a half. We live in a world of sleep-deprived stress junkies so it's a place to transport ourselves. It's also something social you share." Kimmy works on her nails like a surgeon. She turns on the mini-lamp for better vision and looks intently at Stephanie's cuticles. She snips pieces of the skin off and wipes Stephanie's fingers off with a white towel. Then, she applies a base coat, two layers of the bright red polish and finally a top coat to seal it all in. Once Stephanie's nails are bright red and shiny, Kimmy moves on to the massage. Stephanie sits back against a small pillow and closes her eyes as Kimmy works her hands over any aching muscles. The room is silent again. Only sounds of cars whizzing by can be heard. Stephanie looks like she's off in a dream world, while Kimmy continuously rubs her shoulders and maybe thinks about her kids or when she'll get back home. Stephanie and her daughter get their manicures and massages finished and Kimmy finally leaves the shop at 6:45 p.m. and heads home to Westminster.

The night before, Kimmy and her children, Paul, 13, and Melody, 11, went to Barnes and Nobles Bookstore in Huntington Beach, an activity they often do together. They stayed reading books together until closing time at 11 p.m. Kimmy has always dreamed of being a preschool teacher due to her love of children, but as she laments, "You need to go back to school to learn all that and to be able to do something else." At the moment, returning to school is not affordable for Kimmy, but hopefully, one day she will fulfill her dream and take advantage of the opportunities she sees in America. Kimmy ponders, "I want them to think, 'Mom goes to school, so can I.' It's never too late to go to school. I can be a good example for them. They have to finish college because it's good for them. I think it'd be hard for them to look for a job if they don't. I can support them when they go to school. They don't need to work hard like their mom."