

My Dental Career Journey

Thi Do, DDS

- Practicing since 1993
- Been in private practice since 1995
- Own my practice since 2003



Personal Life

1975 – Immigrate to America from Vietnam

2nd of 5 children (eldest of 3 daughters)

My father was a mechanical engineer who worked as a “salad girl” in a Chinese restaurant, in Maryland; my father eventually got promoted to waiter when his english was understandable;

My mother was a housewife without a highschool education; who worked as a clerk at 7/11;

I grew up very happy in a low income family with plenty of love and warmth. We all worked to help our parents with household chores when we can.

When we were old enough to earn a living outside of the house we did.



Academics & Training

1. High School Diploma
2. University of Maryland (UMCP), College Park – Bachelor's of Science
3. University of Maryland School of Dentistry (UMSOD)– Doctor of Dental Surgery (DDS)
4. VA Hospital, Pittsburgh PA – General Practice Residency (GPR)
5. Medical College of Virginia (MCV) – Post Graduate Training in Prosthodontics

High School

16 yrs – I got a job with my dentist – I worked the front desk and in the back assisting him. I enjoyed this a lot. The pay was not as good at (\$3.35 / hour). The job was interesting and not labor intensive. The key here was I like the lifestyle my dentist had. A family, and he was his own boss. Something I wanted.

I took a skill test during my Sophomore year in highschool. That test steer me toward MATH and SCIENCE – or what we would call STEM field today;

I took all the math and computer courses that were offer at my high school along with graduation requirement;

I graduate with my highschool diploma and got accepted into the University of Maryland, College Park

I major in – Computer Science But I also dream of being a dentist.

Why was Dentistry a dream?

- Long academic journey; Undergraduate (4 yrs);
 - Dental School (4 yrs)
 - General Practice Residency (1 yr)* not required
 - Postgraduate training (1 yr) *not required
- Very costly; (2024 – \$500,000)
- It require skills;

University of Maryland, College Park

- Major – Computer Science (1 semester)
- Switch to Electrical Engineering (until graduation)
- Took my DAT (Dental Aptitude Test)
- Graduated – Bachelor's of Science in Biology



The key is to do well in all your classes. But be flexible enough to pivot to another field if you need to.

Financial Burden of Investing in Your Future

- Scholarships (Do not have to repay)
 - Womens and Seamstress
 - Women in Space (Christa McAuliffe)
 - Women in Teaching
 - 7/11 Corporation
- Federal Grant (Do not have to repay)
 - Pell Grants
 - Other Grants
- Federal Student Loans- lower interest rate
- Private Student Loans-higher interest rate
- Work Study Program - work for an approve academic program and get paid

What Dentistry means to me?

- Way to earn a living;
- Provided a lifestyle that I can raise a family;
- Proud of myself that I achieved a goal I only dreamt of;
- It allows me to be artistic and creative;
- It allows me to be a teacher of the oral health to my patients;
- It allows me to be financially independent;



Dentistry in the future

- You will find more and more big chains of dental clinics with lots of dentists working in it;
- You will have to manage your care more carefully;
- I think more shortage of dentist in the future;
 - Why? Lots more women going into health field and dentistry – when you are older when you graduate you tend to take time off to raise a family and start later in the workforce;
- I graduate got married had a baby right away and
 - took a 3 years break before returning
 - Part-time
 - 2003 – 10 yrs later – open my office



How I started my Dental office Business



- Business Plan
 - What business you want to set up.
 - How you would attract clients.
 - Is there a need for your services.
 - How to pay for the business.
- Get Financing
 - Your savings.
 - Your family savings.
 - Get a loan.
- Set up an entity
 - Corporation (S or C),
 - Limited Liability Corp.
 - Sole Proprietorship
 - Partnership
- Set up a place (Physical location or online location)
 - Obtain Licenses and Permits.
 - Open a business bank account.

Mistakes I Made

- I had no business background
- I had no idea where to start
- I went to a bank for financing – was not able to get financing; I did not have a BUSINESS PLAN!!!
- I was unprepared to be a business owners.



New Business Statistics

Failure rates of new business over time

- 1 year: 20%
- 5 years: 45%
- 10 years: 65%

Professional Service oriented business tend to survive better – Health profession, Lawyer, and Engineering firm...

Common reason for failure

- Poor cash flow: 82% fail due to cash flow problems
- Lack of market needs;
- Inability to adapt: to the changing market conditions

How To Correct My Mistakes



A Tax Attorney to help set up the business entity that would protect me personally from lawsuits and shield me from taxes.



A Real Estate Agent to find a physical location

Marketing Research

Asian People – especially Vietnamese speaking

- People with dental needs.
- Residential Area
- Business
- Schools



Financing

Real Estate

Real Estate Financing for the purchase of the building.
Easier to achieve due to there is a physical building the bank can take back;
20 years or 30 years to pay back;
Interest rates are more reasonable.



Financing

Equipment & Buildout

The financing for the equipment and buildout was much more difficult to achieve. Why? More risk for the bank because they can not recoup this cost if I go bankrupt. The terms were shorter at 10 years and interest rates were higher.



How to Attract Business?

Advertising – with ads or word of mouth

Ads

Print Ads– in school flyers; in the Yellow Pages of the phone book (No longer available)

Google Ads– digital ads

Promote yourself

Go to nearby business and give talks;

Go to nearby schools and give talks;

Word of Mouth – Patient will recommend you to friends

How to maintain your business?

- Provide consistent great service and make sure all your staff are well trained. They represent you. They may be the first person the client deals with.
- Be honest and ethical.
- Admit fault when you have made a mistake.
- Treat your customers / patients how you want to be treated.
- Never over promised and under delivered.
- Be on time.
- Know your limits.

Words of experience: (I never thought of)

Health Affects

Hearing will go;

Easily contagious field;

Body aches – neck & lower back;

Hand and Eye coordination;

Hands start to shakes;

Poor eye sights;

Cost of materials goes up exponentially;

Reimbursement stays the same; so you have to work harder to pay bills;

So do your research early / volunteer / ask around for different advices / be prepare for a long expensive journey.

Go into the health field if you truly have a passion for it. Otherwise, the healthcare field will quickly tire you out.



Successes or Failures

In the beginning

Will I make it to my 1st anniversary, 5th, 20th etc...

Will I make lots of money?

10–20 years later

Will I still enjoy the business?

Will the business still grow and sustain itself?

Will my health and skill still be at a level to treat my patients?

Will I have enough in reserves for breakdowns in equipments?

The parameters where I judge success or failures changes with each decade.

Reflections on my Journey

I am now in my 22nd year of business. – YAY a success.
My body and health is holding up. Thank the Lord!!
I have a loving family with a husband and 3 children.

The profession and business are very rewarding for me. I felt like I contribute to the education and dental health of my patients.



The Profession and business
allowed me to be with my family
when they needed me and watch
my kids grow.

Pick a field that you really like to study and research it thoroughly. Go into it with your eyes wide open.

Know what you want in life and go after it.
With my experiences: all profession/ job / work will get you financial stability if you are dedicated to it.

If you truly enjoy what you do, it will not feel like work.



Would I do it all over again?

Late 80's- early 90's

Yes – if I were to return to my 18 years old self, I would repeat this journey again. I really enjoyed the journey and happy where I am in life.



Today 2025

No – if I were 18 yo and about to start college I would not go to dental school again?

Why? – cost cost cost!!!

It is too expensive to go to school today. My nephew graduate from UMSOD 5yrs ago. He borrowed \$480,000. He have 30 yrs to pay back. That is just for dental school. His parents took care of his undergraduate school.

Then think of how can he now buy a home and a practice and still live.