



Left: Bee Nguyen, Athena's Warehouse founder.
Far left: Bee enlisted her sisters Kim Nguyen, left, to develop the logo and website and Phi Nguyen, right, to recruit speakers.

Atlanta's Own Athena

Bee Nguyen knows how tough it is to juggle the expectations of two different cultures. Her nonprofit—named for a wise female warrior—helps other second-generation girls find their way. It all started because of a rack of bridesmaid frocks she hoped to repurpose into prom dresses.

BY ANN HINGA KLEIN

Bee Nguyen doesn't recall how the argument started, but she remembers how it ended: Her parents were disappointed. Again.

The year was 2002, and she was home on break from Georgia State University. The family—mom, dad, and five girls—had gathered at the breakfast table in Augusta, Georgia.

Bee, the second oldest, was still hurting from a wisdom-tooth extraction the day before. Asked about college, she answered honestly: She'd dropped a class and switched her major from business to English.

Her father's outburst hurt far more than her aching jaw.

The Nguyen daughters knew their parents had risked everything, venturing out in a boat built in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. A pharmacist, their father had been detained in a reeducation camp long enough to picture his future in Communist Vietnam. He and his wife

had nearly lost their lives for the family they would later begin.

But for Bee, who had grown up reading novels late into the night, the legacy seemed impossible to shoulder. She hated the science, math, and law courses her parents wanted her to take.

Her younger sister Phi recently recalled that day at the breakfast table. "I thought, *No, thanks; I will try to do what they want me to do.*"

Bee, at 21, had tried. She knew she couldn't meet her parents' expectations. As the family fell silent, she struggled to cope with her own avalanche of questions, including the one she feared most: If she followed her own path, would she find a career that she *and* her parents could respect?

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, decisions about children's futures have torn at the heart of family relationships. The questions prod at sensitive areas,

including a parent's hopes and a child's ability to make it on her own.

For immigrant and refugee families, the issues can be even more raw. Parents are forced to base decisions on an incomplete understanding of an unfamiliar place. Children struggle to honor a distant culture as they navigate the one in front of them.

California-based sociologist Jennifer Lee explores these issues in *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* (Russell Sage Foundation; 2015). Interviewing adult children of Chinese immigrants and Vietnamese refugees in Los Angeles, Lee and co-author Min Zhou noted a theme. "From the parents' perspective," Lee says, "there was one singular definition of success and a singular pathway to get there. You had to get all A's in high school, go to a top university and graduate school, and work in one of the coveted professions: medicine, law, science, or engineering. We called it the success frame."





Lee and Zhou surmised a rationale. “Those fields require a high level of education,” Lee says. “You can show a diploma. These are markers of status that might be a shield against the subjective bias or discrimination you might experience in another field.”

But for many children, Lee notes, there was a deep cost. “Anything outside the success frame was considered failure,” she says.

ATHENA’S WAREHOUSE WAS BORN in 2009 when Bee, then 27, considered a simpler problem: a closet full of bridesmaid dresses.

By then, she had completed a master’s degree in English and was selling residential real estate in Atlanta, a job that exercised her entrepreneurial side, and had rebuilt the confidence she lost in a relationship with an older man.

Now, Bee thought about the dresses. Dropping them off at a charity seemed too easy. She’d heard of programs to donate prom dresses. “But I didn’t want it to be me essentially saying, ‘Here,

I’m giving you this because I have more than you.’” From Bee’s perspective, the exchange required empowerment.

Through a mutual friend, she connected with Diane Gluck, a teacher at Cross Keys High School. Located in northeast Atlanta, Cross Keys drew students from a string of affordable apartments along the Buford Highway Corridor. Nightclubs and payday loan offices lined the route to school.

Of the school’s 1,300 students, 97 percent were minorities, mostly Hispanic. Many had jobs to help their parents pay bills, reducing the school’s graduation rate to around 50 percent.

Diane had taught at other schools and been touched by a difference: Whenever she announced a volunteer project, Cross Keys students lined up. “They don’t have much,” Gluck says, “but they will give what they have.”

Bee had found her perfect match. The program she designed allowed girls to give three hours of community service in exchange for a prom dress. Some tutored elementary school kids;

“I wanted this to be about empowerment for the girls versus waiting for someone to come along and save them.”

—BEE NGUYEN



*Clockwise from top: Athena’s Warehouse girls and volunteers hosted a screening of the documentary **Miss Representation**. Katy Avila, with volunteer Dionne Driscoll Delli-Gatti, chooses a prom dress at the Athena’s Warehouse shopping day. From left, Kedan Endrias, Ahide Rostro, and Guadalupe Paque volunteer cleaning up the Atlanta BeltLine trail.*

other packaged meals for the elderly. Meanwhile, Bee rounded up dresses, racks, and mirrors and recruited friends to serve as personal shoppers.

Diane liked Bee's style. "We had done free prom dresses through another organization, but it had been a challenge," she says. "Bee did more legwork. She was driven, organized, and had the connections with people to come in and work with the girls." That year, 50 girls earned dresses.

In the exchange, Bee's group also overheard conversations about older boyfriends. A few girls had shyly asked about careers. In it all, Bee recognized something: second-generation girls trying to find their way through a maze. She could not walk away.

Bee asked Diane to help with an after-school enrichment program she called Be Awesome, Be Aware, offering sessions that cover healthy relationships, positive body image, exercise and diet, and career and life planning for senior girls. "I'd read the fairy tales and watched all the Disney movies," Bee says, "but I wanted this to be about empowerment for the girls versus waiting for someone to come along and save them."

Her sister Kim, a Web designer, developed a logo and website. Phi, an attorney, stepped up to recruit the speakers.

ONE OF THE GIRLS who earned a dress that year was Cathy Cornejo. The second of nine children supported by a busy working mother, Cathy was falling through the cracks.

Her family had moved from place to place, staying with relatives, for years. At 12, Cathy had started smoking and skipping school with friends.

"Most of us had come from immigrant parents," she recalled recently. "We didn't know if we were going to be like them, working 12-hour days for minimum wage, or if we would have office jobs like the Americans."

By her junior year, tattoos spelled out a message across her knuckles: F*** LOVE. "A boyfriend had broken my heart," she says simply, "and I hated the place where my family was living. It was all really hard to handle."

At Athena's Warehouse programs, Cathy was stunned to hear talk of

college, even for her. Her sisters had gotten pregnant and dropped out of high school.

In one session, Bee asked the girls to close their eyes and imagine where they wanted to be in five years. Cathy took a deep breath and pictured herself working in a hospital, "making good money and being happy."

IN LATE 2014, just before New Year's Eve, Athena's Warehouse graduates prepared for dinner out with Bee and alumni. On break from the College of Wooster in Ohio, Brenda Khor looked forward to catching up with the women who had helped her land a Gates Millennium Scholarship. Noemi Raygoza wanted to update Bee on her psychology classes at Georgia State.

Cathy Cornejo Piedra, Athena's first scholarship winner, had completed a degree at Everest Institute and had her tattoos removed. Newly married, she paused between work and church to talk about her life. "I don't work in a hospital yet," she said, "but I do work at an urgent care clinic taking vitals, drawing blood, and assisting with pain management. I'm very stable now, and I'm just happy. It's amazing."

Bee had hit her own goals: a master's degree in public administration, a job with a Georgia nonprofit, and for the first time, a part-time salary through Athena's Warehouse.

She had cleared her closet of formal dresses—the goal that had launched Athena's five years earlier. But now, her attic held nearly 1,000 of them—a sacrifice she'd been happy to make for an organization that had grown to encompass so much more.

Bee's family had evolved, too. Her father had asked about her writing, calling it a gift, and her mother—once a social worker herself—had encouraged Bee's new goal: making Athena's a full-time job, expanding programs for freshman, sophomore, and junior girls.

A few nights earlier, on Christmas, Bee had stopped by to see her mother and Phi as they prepared for a morning flight to visit relatives in Iowa. Bee had brought an armload of Athena's Warehouse shirts for her nieces there.

Placing the shirts in a suitcase, her mother had paused, holding up a sweatshirt bearing the warrior logo. "I would like one of these," she said.

Surprised, Phi and Bee exchanged glances—and Bee smiled. "Of course." **J**

NONPROFIT 101

Founded in 2009, Athena's Warehouse has served 350 Atlanta girls, recruited 300 speakers and volunteers, hosted more than 100 events, and awarded \$9,000 in scholarships. We asked founder Bee Nguyen what she has learned.

WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT STARTING A NONPROFIT?

"It's taking what you're passionate about and turning it into something sustainable. For me, it was combining a love of entrepreneurship with my passion for women's issues and my belief in education."

WHAT ARE SOME RESOURCES FOR GETTING STARTED?

"Talk to other nonprofit leaders. Ask to meet for coffee or lunch with people serving similar communities. Most people are very willing to help."

HOW DID YOU SECURE FUNDING?

"There's a misconception that you can just go out and get big government grants. We've had better results cultivating relationships with people in our community. We've also had to be willing to invest our own time and money until the program becomes sustainable. And we've stayed open to other resources. We're starting a yoga fitness program, for example, and the studio where I do yoga donated mats people had left behind."

HOW CAN READERS SUPPORT CAUSES THAT HELP YOUNG WOMEN?

"When I volunteer, I look for groups that align with my passions. If it's something you're emotionally invested in, you're going to keep giving."

LEARN MORE: ATHENASWAREHOUSE.ORG