

UNQUENCHABLE PASSION

A Moxie Woman
in Real Estate

By Russell Roberts

When the murderous agents of Cambodian dictator Pol Pot came for three-year-old Sökkie Choing and her family, they found out that they were too late.

Knowing that it was very likely that they would share the gruesome fate of millions of other educated Cambodians, the family escaped to the United States before Pol Pot's forces could either kill them outright or send them to another location where they would likely die of starvation or disease.

Today those hellish days in war-torn Cambodia seem very far away indeed. Choing is the proud broker/owner of her



RED DOOR

own real estate firm called Red Door Real Estate. Based in Philadelphia, the agency has only been in existence for five months but has already made a name for itself in the competitive tri-state real estate market by hitting \$10 million in monthly sales.

Not too bad for a girl whose entire family once picked blueberries in Hammonton for a living after being forced to flee their country with nothing but the clothes on their back.

Although her nationality is Chinese, Choing was born in Cambodia and was living there when Pol Pot came to power in 1975 and unleashed a reign of terror on the country's citizens. By the time his dictatorship mercifully came to an end in 1979, it is estimated that up to two million Cambodians (out of a total population of 8 million) had been killed under his regime.

"During that time in Cambodia, if they knew that you were educated or that you were Chinese, they would kill you right then and there," Choing said. "It was similar to that movie *The Killing Fields*."

Coming to America

Choing's family was one of the lucky ones who managed to escape Pol Pot's murderous ways. They were sponsored for emigration to America by a group called the Nationality Service Center. At first the entire family – including aunts, uncles and cousins – relocated in Boston, but eventually they made their way to Philadelphia.

To say that it was difficult for Choing and her family in the beginning would be an understatement. They came to the U.S. not knowing a word of English. They forged ahead, however, and before she knew it Choing had graduated high school and was going to Drexel for a degree in business, which she obtained in 1999. She had been interested in real estate ever since she was a child, but when she initially graduated she was thinking more along the lines of getting into computers.

Following in her Parents Footsteps

"When I was a kid I helped out my parents. They were real estate investors and we owned a few investment properties. When I was in high school I helped my parents paint and rehab the house that they were looking to rent out," she said. "That's where I got my start [in real estate]."

Although when she graduated Drexel Choing didn't yet know that she wanted to get involved in real estate as a career, she always had the entrepreneurial flame burning inside her. When the dot.com bust convinced her that perhaps computers were not the best career choice, she began considering other options.

"Drexel prepares you to go into the corporate world, so I worked [for awhile] at NBC in New York," Choing said. After that came a stint as a loan officer with another company.

All in the Family

However, that entrepreneurial spirit was still glowing brightly inside her and real estate was a siren's song echoing in her mind. Another thing that helped push her towards real estate was the fact that she had gotten married and her husband Sunny also had real estate in his blood. His father had been investing in real estate for over 30 years.

The Red Door

The young couple began in the field by doing some flips of single family homes about seven years ago and quickly learned about the business first-hand. One important lesson they learned would have a lasting impact on Choing's future. They realized that properties had a far better chance of selling if they had curb appeal. When it came time to paint the front door on one of their first rehabbed properties, her husband asked Sokkie what color they should paint it.

"Let's paint it red," she said. That helped to create the curb appeal needed, and the couple received multiple offers on the property before they had even put up the For Sale sign. From that point on they de-

cidated to paint all of the doors to their properties red. The idea worked repeatedly for them, consistently helping them sell properties quicker and at higher prices than competing properties.

Now fully invested in real estate as her future, in 2007 Choing obtained her real estate license. Over the next several years she worked for three of the top agencies in the field. She quickly realized that this was the field for her.

"I always loved real estate because it challenged me," she said. "Every day was different, and I loved the thrill of that, and the challenge of that."

Follow Your Passion

"I believe that in anything you do, in order to be successful, you have to have a passion for it," she said. "What I found seven years ago was that real estate is a passion of mine."

However, even as she was enjoying the challenges, her feet were always firmly pointed in the direction of owning her own business. Finally, five months ago she took the plunge into the small business pool, launching Red Door Real Estate.

When she needed a name for her new business venture, Choing didn't have far to look to seize upon the "red door" idea that had

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worked so well for her and her husband in the past.

"Also, the color red is a symbol of good luck and fortune in my Chinese culture," she added.

The company hit the ground running at its inception, and has not stopped. In just five months Red Door Real Estate has

grown to four agents, with plans to add a fifth. The company's primary focus is on commercial real estate, although they also handle residential properties. The agency serves the entire tri-state area, with an emphasis on Philadelphia.

Just since they've been up and running, Red Door has racked up \$10 million in monthly sales.

As any small business owner will tell you, the demands of running your own business are great. Choing, however, was ready for them.

"I didn't open up my own business to have more free time," she said. "Every day I appreciate owning my own business. It's not for everybody."

Finding the Balance

Despite the fact that she's busier than a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs, Choing also makes sure to reserve some time for herself. "I try to balance my time," she said. "You need to be able to delegate to your team members, otherwise you burn yourself out." Her leisure time pursuits include drawing and travel.

She said that she still experiences some prejudice against her because she's a woman, even though females in the real estate field are common. However, she doesn't focus on these episodes, taking any prejudice she receives as just another challenge to overcome.

It's been a long road for Sokkie Choing, from fleeing the death squads of Pol Pot to picking blueberries for a living to starting her own very successful real estate business. Through it all she's been guided by her personal philosophy – one that has brought her to the top of her field and has enabled her to contemplate a future full of possibilities.

"Always believe in your vision, always have passion for it, and always, always move forward. Don't let anything limit you – including yourself."

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