Profile: Anh Do

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Published: February 2, 2011 - 2:50PM

After Anh Do and his family arrived as refugees in Sydney, he had one aim in life. Having survived two pirate attacks on their boat from Vietnam, then several months in a Malaysian refugee camp, he was determined to help lift his family from poverty.

"From an early age, all I wanted to do was earn money to buy my mum a house," recalls Do, now 33 and a well-known comedian.

His father had left the family when Do was 13 and his mother earned just $6.80 an hour in a clothing sweatshop.

At 14, he started a small business breeding tropical fish, after learning that $15 spent on adult fish could spawn 500 babies.

As a first-year university student at UTS, studying law and business, he ran a market stall selling American Indian artefacts to capitalise on the *Dances with Wolves* craze. The stall soon grew to four franchised stores.

Just six months from finishing his five-year degree, Do turned down law firm job offers to focus on stand-up comedy, figuring that was a faster way to earn money.

"By then I was doing stand-up about four hours a week and that paid a bit more than I'd get as a law graduate working 65 hours a week," he says. "I was following the laziness option."

He took every gig he was offered, including spruiking fruit and vegetables in shopping malls and hosting boxing tournaments, until he'd saved a $40,000 deposit.

"I gave the house to her for Christmas 2000," recalls Do, who was then 23. "We all cried."

Do realised he may have a future in comedy during his final year of university, when the law students practised their courtroom technique in "moot courts". "Rather than just going through the case, I'd just make the class laugh and I'd win because they would vote for me," he says.

At an "open mic" comedy night, a friend told Do he was funnier than the participants, so next time Do did a five-minute stint that went well and led to his first booking.

Despite more than a decade as a successful comedian, and writing a best-selling autobiography, Do confesses that he is "the least funny guy in my family". It was a coping mechanism for all of them to deal with the horrors of the boat trip with humour.

They left in 1980, after two of his uncles - who fought for the losing South Vietnamese/US side - escaped from a communist concentration camp. Forty people crammed on to a nine-metre fishing boat, which lost most of its food and water after a storm on the second day.

Pirates took what was left, including the engine, but one young pirate threw the group a gallon of water as his boat sailed away. It kept all but one of them alive for five days, until they were rescued by a German merchant ship.

Although Do was only a toddler at the time, he grew up hearing stories of the escape and says it has strongly influenced his approach to life.

"Rich wins over poor but family is more important than anything else."

*The Happiest Refugee: My Journey from Tragedy to Comedy* by Anh Do (Allen and Unwin, $32.99)
THE BIG QUESTIONS

Biggest achievement Buying my mum a house. After moving 17 times, I really just wanted her to know we've made it - this is our place and no landlord is going to kick us out.

Biggest regret I liked a girl in first year at university and I didn't tell her for five years. We were just friends. Finally I told her and she said "Me too" and we got engaged three weeks later. That was five years of watching her date other blokes.

Best investment My mum's house in the western suburbs [of Sydney]. I bought it for $350,000 [in 2000] and it's now valued at $700,000.

Worst investment Last year I bet $500 on [NSW rugby league team] the Rabbitohs to beat the Panthers. The week before, I had given the Rabbitohs an inspirational speech and they beat the Tigers. Then they lost to the Panthers by 30 points.

Attitude to money It's great to have but it's not everything.

Personal philosophy My father's favourite Vietnamese saying: There's only two times in life - now and too late.

This story was found at: http://www.smh.com.au/money/investing/profile-anh-do-20110201-1abk3.html
30 August, 2010 3:30PM AEST

From boat to bellylaughs: Anh Do and The Happiest Refugee

He is a well-known comedian and came very close to winning Dancing with the Stars but his story has many more twists and turns, as his book The Happiest Refugee reveals.

In fact, the complexity of Anh Do's family history is something he only recently discovered himself.

It's a story that includes his father's role in the Vietnam War, a role that included freeing Anh's two uncles from a concentration camp.

After that came living in hiding and a journey to Australia in "a nine-metre fishing boat [holding] 40 Vietnamese."

That boat was attacked by pirates twice, "and this is not Johnny Deep you know!" Do jokes.

No joking matter, though, was the incident where a pirate dangled a child over the boat's side but eventually spared the boy's life, "and that's a good thing," Do reflects, because, "that kid is my little brother Khoa Do who in 2005 was a Young Australian of the Year."

Arriving on safe ground in Australia, the Do family couldn't believe the generosity of those helping, although there was a mix up and they were provided with one boy's outfit and one girl's outfit for the two sons and so the future Young Australian of the Year got to wear a dress as his first Australian outfit.

Through school, times were financially hard but, despite not being able to afford textbooks and uniforms, "my number one goal was not to stand out and I got plenty of straps for forgetting my textbooks, I just didn't want to tell them my mum was too poor," Do remembers.

In fact, at school, "I was quiet," he reveals, adding that he didn't want to stand out and he "wanted to do really well to get a good job and buy my mum a house... [which] I did at 23 - one of the best days of my life."

From these serious days, Do took to mucking around with stand up comedy while working a 70-hour week in law.

A conversation with an old comic who told Do he worked four hours a week made the career decision for the younger man, "I pretty much chose it out of laziness and it's gone well ever since."

However, there doesn't seem to have been too much of a masterplan for Do's life so far and he explains his live for the moment ethos by relating, "My father had a saying, 'there's only two times in life, there's now and there's too late'."

Things seem to have gone well for him, though, and even when he came up
against racism at an RSL performance he won the crowd over.

He views himself as a refugee, an immigrant and an Australian, and looks forward to the day the film of his life story stars Russel Crowe as his father...

Khoa (left) and Ahn Do (right). (ABC Local)