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FEATURED

The American Dream: Hoang retires after 32 years with Clint Bowyer Autoplex

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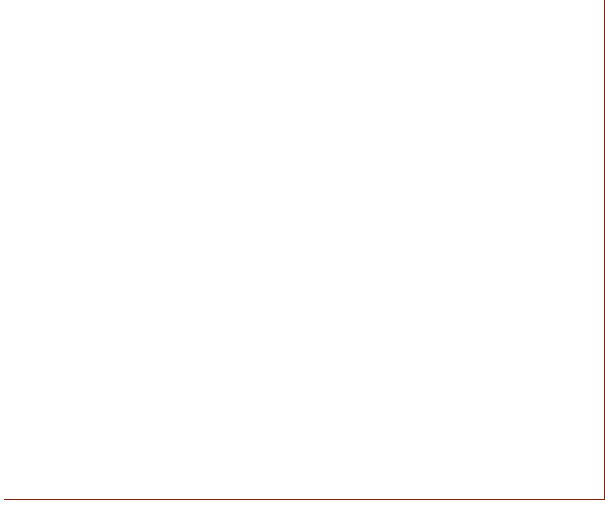
Dan Hoang is all smiles as he sits in Clint Bowyer's race car at the dealership Thursday morning.

Tim Mohn/Gazette

After 32 years, three weeks and four days, Dan Hoang stepped off the sales floor at Clint Bowyer Autoplex for the last time Friday evening. For Hoang, who estimates that he sold somewhere near 4,608 cars over the years, it represents the end of a successful and fulfilling career.

And more than three decades spent doing a job he genuinely loved to do.

“People always ask me, ‘Dan, do you like your job? Do you like what you do?’ And I tell them no,” Hoang said, smiling. “I tell them, ‘I love my job. I love this business.’ All the people that I’ve worked with have treated me right, treated me with respect.”



Hoang came to the United States from Vietnam 46 years ago with his pregnant wife Kim and 13-month-old daughter Cindy, seeking refuge from a war-torn country. He had been a lieutenant junior grade with the South Vietnam Navy, fighting against communist North Vietnamese forces.

They spent about three months as refugees before a Roman Catholic Church in Tuscaloosa, Ala., sponsored them to come to the U.S. That’s where they would welcome their son, Donny. Two years later, the couple moved to Emporia.

“My brother used to live in Lebo and we came to visit him,” Hoang said. “He convinced me to move to Kansas.”

Hoang took a job with Tyson — then IBP — where he would stay for about 12 years. Working long hours, he worked his way up into a supervisory position. But Hoang wasn’t fulfilled with his career, having missed many precious moments with his children in those early years.

“I had perfect attendance for 10 years in a row. And now I think that’s very stupid,” Hoang said. “I never took a vacation, never took a sick day in 10 years. I was talking with Kim and we talked about that and she asked me, ‘What is something you want to do?’ and I said, ‘Spend time with the kids.’”

One day, Kim Hoang circled a help wanted ad for a salesman at Emporia Motors. Dan Hoang thought he’d give it a try.

Dressing up in a suit and tie, he walked in to the dealership and sat down with the sales manager for an interview. It wasn't long before he had a job offer, but the manager wanted to talk to Hoang's wife, too.

"I said, 'Wait a minute, I'm applying for a job, what does my wife have to do with it?'" he said. "He said, 'This is a completely different business.' So I brought her here to talk to him."

The Hoangs listened as the sales manager discussed base pay rates, commission and expectations. Kim Hoang looked at her husband and said, "I believe my husband can do this."

"Two weeks later, I started," he said. "People told me, 'You'll last maybe three or six months.' I told myself that I would prove them wrong. And guess what? After all these years, out of all the people look who's still here."

Hoang quickly built up a reputation as someone people could trust at the dealership, earning customer loyalty and respect from his coworkers.

Curtis Nelson, who has worked with Hoang for nearly 30 years, said the retiring salesman is nothing short of a local legend.

"His work ethic is the same today as it was 30 years ago," Nelson said. "All I knew about him before I started here was from the paper. Every week he was the top salesman and I was like, 'Who is this guy?'"

It didn't take him long to realize Hoang was the real deal.

"I think his family values are what impress me the most about him," Nelson said. "His kids were still in school when I was working here and just looking at how successful they were, you can see how important education was and how much he cared. He's a worker, you know. He's really living the American dream, coming over here, being successful. ... God knows how many cars he sold over the years. It's in the thousands for sure."

Nelson said it was going to be "weird" walking onto the sales floor Saturday and not seeing Hoang sitting at his desk.

"We're going to miss him," he said.

Nelson and the rest of the Clint Bowyer Autoplex family are not alone.

Ken Dreyer is one of the many customers who is also going to miss the longtime salesman. Dreyer said he first met Hoang sometime in the 1990s and was struck immediately by how genuinely kind the salesman was. Both members of Sacred Heart Church in Emporia, Dreyer also saw another side to Hoang and was impressed with his volunteer work.

A few years later, Dreyer referred a family friend to Hoang: a young woman who was down on her luck and needed to buy her first car. She had no credit, but Dreyer knew she was a hard worker, dependable and he trusted her with his kids.

“Dan was caring and respectful about the way he treated her financial situation and he made the situation so easy and enjoyable, and a positive experience for her,” he said. “That’s when he really passed the litmus test.”

Dreyer was also impressed with Hoang’s attention to detail. Every birthday and wedding anniversary, he gets a phone call and a card in the mail.

“He’s really become one of my best friends over the years,” Dreyer said. “He knows my children and now that they’re grown up, he knows their children. He always asks about them and what they’ve been doing.”

Bill Brooks is another longtime customer who echoed Dreyer’s statements.

“His details to service are second to none,” he said. “Every birthday, every anniversary, he’s always called and tried to talk to you. We’ve gotten a lot of messages over the years.”

Brooks said anytime he goes into the dealership to get his vehicles serviced, Hoang comes over to talk with him. And it’s always more than just a quick, “Hello.”

“He’s never just walked by,” Brooks said. “He sits down and asks about the grandkids. He’s just a genuine, good guy.”

And, Brooks said, Hoang is just a naturally good salesman.

"I don't know that I ever went in there thinking about getting a new car," he said with a laugh. "I'd go in for service and he'd come over to talk and I'd tell him that the miles were getting kind of high. He'd say, 'Come out on the lot, I've got just the car for you.' Before I know it, I'm buying a car. He's one of a kind."

That type of story is unsurprising to Nelson, who said Hoang sold 14 cars in a single day once upon a time. Hoang confirmed that was true, during one of the dealership's special events held at the Lyon County Fairgrounds, but said it's simply because he treats all of his customers the same: with respect.

"It's very important to make everyone feel comfortable," he said. "You've got to treat everyone equal, no matter who they are or what they are wearing. You don't know their story."

Hoang said it's also important to treat customers like more than just customers. That's why he sends the cards for birthdays and anniversaries, makes phone calls, makes an effort to learn about their families. That's why he cares.

"We were really impressed with him," said Jim Pickert, who just came in to buy a new Toyota Camry after he found out about Hoang's retirement. "We've bought two cars from him and from the first one to the second one, he hasn't changed a bit. He's the same honest person. He called yesterday to see how we were doing. I just appreciated it."

Hoang said he's going to miss the customers he's gotten to know over the years, but realized about a year ago that it was getting to be time to retire. He wants to spend more time with his grandchildren, he said. His grandson lives in Alabama with his daughter's family. A granddaughter is in Singapore with his son.

"It's time; I worked so hard in the last 44 years and spent so much time [at work] when my kids were young," he said. "I was busy. The family was one-income. We weren't rich, but we were comfortable, because we were always happy with what we have."

Hoang said he's still going to try and keep in touch with a lot of his longtime customers. They were more than just people who bought cars from him, after all. They're friends.

On Thursday, the staff at Clint Bowyer Autoplex held a retirement luncheon to celebrate Hoang's long and successful career. Owner Clint Bowyer had intended to come out for the lunch but was unable to make it to Emporia. Instead, Bowyer called Hoang, which meant a lot to the retiring

salesman.

“We had a nice, long talk. We go way back,” Hoang said. “His plan was to fly down. It was very, very nice of him.”

Standing in the middle of the showroom that’s been his second home for more than three decades, he took a breath and smiled.

“I love this town,” Hoang said. “The people in Emporia have always treated me right.”

Ryann Brooks

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