

SEPTEMBER 2020

# PASSAGE



AsiaFest

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# Welcome

*AsiaFest has become one of Asia Society's most treasured traditions.*

Created to celebrate the beautiful diversity of Houston's Asian community, our AsiaFest highlights the creative endeavors of local performers, artists, artisans, and chefs. Each year, we welcome thousands of visitors to eat, shop, and play through the festival, all while learning something new about Asian traditions along the way. With restrictions on large gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were challenged to find a new way to celebrate our community this year. And while we missed being able to gather with you in-person, we know you will enjoy exploring our brand-new endeavor, **Passage**.

We are most excited that *Passage* was created in collaboration with our Asia Society Teen Council, a cohort of teens engaged in programming designed to uplift and amplify student voices representing the diversity of Houston. This phenomenal group of young leaders has spent the last several months in conversation with the community members highlighted in *Passage*. They interviewed their subjects, wrote the articles, and assisted in the design. The intergenerational conversations produced by this process have been an especially heartwarming component of the project. As you turn the pages and discover the stories of the many creatives showcased here, we hope you feel a deeper sense of connection to your community and experience the great joy created through amazing food, beautiful art, and exceptional craftsmanship. Most of all, we send our best wishes for your continued safety and health.

## Contributors

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## Sponsors

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Photos by Asia Society Texas Center/Chris Dunn  
or courtesy of the artists and vendors.

# Asia Society Teen Council



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The Asia Society Teen Council is a cohort of teens engaging in year-round programming designed to uplift and amplify student voices representing the diversity of Houston. Throughout the program, teens learn about diverse cultures, develop cross-cultural communication skills, and build global competency.



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# Snapshot

*A sneak peek into the community you'll see featured in these pages.*

We're thrilled to feature vendors who have been with us at our Asia Society festivals for many years, and we couldn't resist diving into our image archive to show you what it looked like when they joined us onsite!

In the following pages, take a journey throughout different regions of Asia as expressed by some of Houston's best small businesses and artisans (in our humble opinion). We hope you'll enjoy the opportunity to learn more about the partners that help make our festivals happen, and what it takes to run this diverse collection of businesses.



Asal Shokati, featured on page 16



Tiny Sponge, featured on page 10



Mochillery, featured on page 6



VietWave Music, featured on page 30



Fung's Kitchen, featured on page 8



Art by Vivienne Dang, featured on page 32

EAST ASIA

# Cute Kawaii Creations

by Kailey Clifford

When most people think of crocheting, they think of sweaters, scarves, or blankets. But Karen Wong has a different vision.

Since she was little, Karen knew she wanted to do something artistic with her life. So, when she learned how to crochet, she had a vision of making items that you could collect or use to decorate with that looked aesthetically pleasing. Thus, she came up with the idea of making crochet plushies. This Japanese

craft is called amigurumi, a type of crocheting or knitting to make stuffed yarn creatures. It comes from the Japanese words “ami” — which means “crocheted” or “knitted” — and “nuigurumi,” which means “stuffed doll.” They usually take the form of animals or different creatures and have a kawaii, or cute, feel to them.





"In the beginning, I was just looking for another creative hobby," Wong says. After learning a few basic crochet techniques from her mother, she went to the internet for research and discovered she could make a variety of cute things from crochet. This piqued her interest, and after a while, she started creating crochet animals.

"Usually everything starts with a drawing, I'll get an idea for the color scheme and the way I want it to look when I sketch it. For ideas, I'm a person who's very interested in movies and animation. I always look to see if something has a cute aesthetic and put my own spin on it." Being an artistic person, she liked to draw and doodle—with this, she managed to create 3-D art from her 2-D renderings.

Over time, she developed the idea to sell them and started researching marketing, media management, photography, and everything else she would need to help her create a business around her creations. She started selling her work on Etsy in 2012. After several years of interacting with her community to sell products, she started to gain a wider audience in Houston and in 2018 began selling her creations at Asia Society.

"It's a side hobby. A bit of a crazy side hobby." Although it's a lot of work, Wong says a lot of times it doesn't seem like it. She takes joy from making her creations and feels

a sense of accomplishment after producing new designs or learning new skills that could be helpful for making them. She always likes to take ideas and inspiration from social media, pushing herself to improve. "There's always something new to learn." She adds, "I'm still learning from other people, too."

For those also looking to start up their own small businesses, some advice Karen gives would be "to pay attention to detail, because there's a lot that goes into a business, no matter how small. You should learn about things such as photography, marketing, and media that may play a big part in starting it. You also need to be humble and allow yourself to learn so that you can improve." She also strongly encourages you to do something you enjoy and says this is the most important part of creating a business.

"Just have fun. Hopefully, you can make money off of whatever you enjoy. But if you don't have fun, it's not going to end well," Karen says. And she stands by this as she continues to make more adorable crochet plushies, having fun doing so.

*Find Mochillery's details on page 39*



# Across the Continent

## A Taste of Hong Kong with Fung's Kitchen

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by Nina Varma

Driving along Houston's Southwest Freeway, you see billboards, small shops, and chain restaurants stacked next to each other for miles. But then something stands out. With a moss-green roof and vibrant red columns, the restaurant Fung's Kitchen, designed to resemble classic Chinese architecture, is hard to miss.

Behind this recognizable building are authentic Hong Kong cuisine and years of historic recipes—a story of community. Fung's Kitchen has been an essential part of the Houston culinary scene for over three decades, receiving accolades from the Houston press and Zagat.



My personal experience dates back to my grandparent's generation. Coming from different countries with different backgrounds, my grandparents sought to immerse themselves in the "melting pot" that defined the Houston landscape in the nineties. Fung's Kitchen became a Sunday family tradition filled with shumai, shrimp dumplings, sticky rice, and an abundance of other delicacies. This tradition passed on to my parents and our family as we all find comfort and share family memories at the restaurant each week.

I particularly remember my seventh birthday celebration, where we invited many of my classmates to Fung's, a new restaurant and cultural experience for many in the party. As six- and seven-year-olds flooded into the restaurant, they stood in awe around the live seafood swimming around in tanks, were dazzled by the potpourri of dumplings, and felt the warmth of being greeted by the familiar staff, who taught everyone how to use chopsticks.

When I speak with my grandparents, immigrants from India, they often reflect on the similarities they saw between Fung's Kitchen and an Indian restaurant back in their hometown of Lucknow. Despite the different cuisines, both restaurants embody an atmosphere of tight-knit culture, regionally sourced ingredients, and family-sized portions. Coming to this country, my grandparents had little to no exposure to dishes other than those local to their region in India; however, the familiar sense of generations of one family working in one restaurant spoke to them.

Fung's Kitchen operates as a family-run institution, passing down recipes by generation. Similarly, I learned how to cook vegetable pakora and roti from my own grandmother as she taught me recipes that she learned from her mother. For me, Fung's Kitchen is more than a restaurant and more than a place to gorge oneself on dumplings and beef tips; it's a part of my own family's history.

*Find Fung's Kitchen's details on page 35*



# Tiny Sponge

Adding New Flavors to  
Your Child's Next Tea Party

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by Van Nguyen

For many Asian Americans, the portrayal of Asian American identity in the media has been a common focus of conversation. However, cultural representation is not limited to the screen. We also see parts of our identity in everyday objects such as brooms, decor, and cookery. One place we haven't seen much diversity in is our children's toys. In the realm of kitchen playsets, in particular, there is no shortage of pizza slices, hamburgers, and roasted chicken.

Tiny Sponge has set out to add new flavors to your child's next tea party. Rebecca Chang is the creator of this passion project-turned-business, which features an array of different Chinese food sets as well as children's books.

Like every parent, Rebecca wanted the best for her son. Most importantly, she wanted him to be exposed to his cultural roots. She and her family visited Taiwan regularly, and while abroad, she would pick up unique toys at night markets and local stores. With every new toy or book, she knew that she wanted to see these products back at home.

Her entrepreneurial spirit growing, she began researching different products to feature on her new site. With her son and his cousins acting as toy testers, she came to find what products worked best. After a year of testing and drop shipping (ordering from the producer and shipping directly to the consumer), she finally decided to invest in inventory and made Tiny Sponge her new full-time business.

Rebecca first joined the Asia Society for AsiaFest 2019, displaying a feast of toy sets. She says that when most people see her products they're amazed not just by the quality and cuteness, but also by the fact that they see themselves in the little har gow dumplings or youtiao breadsticks. She hopes to expand her menu to incorporate more flavors from around the world so that everyone can play with their favorite foods.

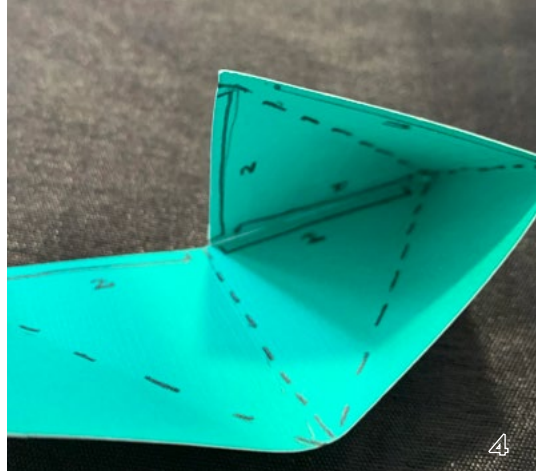
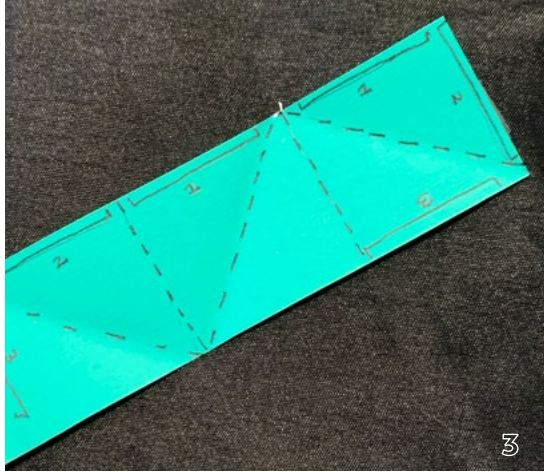
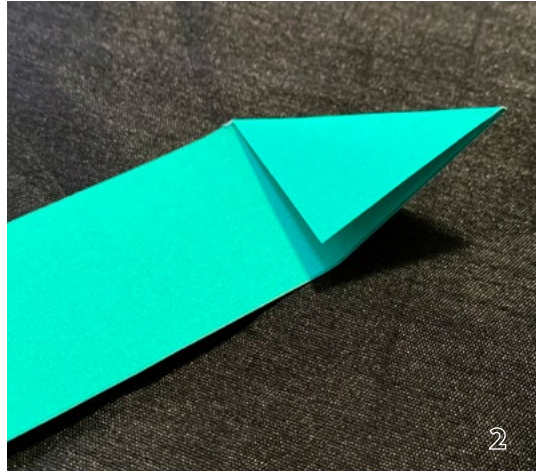
Rebecca wanted her son to grow up with the idea that there is more to life than just pizza and hamburgers. Exposing children to new cultures and perspectives at an early age helps build a mentality of acceptance and open-mindedness. With a more connected world, there is a need for global citizens—starting young with children's toys is a great way to foster that open mindset.

*Find Tiny Sponge's details on page 39*



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## Family Activity

# Paper Zongzi

Zongzi, or rice dumpling, is a traditional Chinese dish and popular street food during Dragon Boat Festivals. Made with rice and stuffed with fillings like salted egg yolks or pork belly, they are wrapped in bamboo or banana leaves and cooked by steaming or boiling. Zongzi are popular breakfast foods and can often be found in dim sum.

You can make your own craft Zongzi using just a few simple materials. When making them, we encourage you to learn more about [Dragon Boat Festivals](#) (including one celebrated here in [Houston](#)), [the cultural history of paper](#) in China, and the art of Japanese [origami](#).

### MATERIALS

Cardstock  
Twine  
Scissors

### CRAFT DIRECTIONS

*Adapted from fortunecookiemom*

1. Cut your green cardstock into long paper strips.
2. Fold the paper into a small triangle shape and repeat until the end of the paper strip.  
*Tip: Parents can draw lines for young kids to fold along; it makes the folding process much easier!*
3. Unfold the paper and there will be lines forming triangular shapes on the paper strips.
4. Fold the strip while following the line into a 3-D triangle; tuck the last end of the paper strip inside.
5. Use twine to wrap around the zongzi and tie a double knot to secure it.
6. Repeat with each paper strip.
7. Optional: Use a longer twine to connect your zongzi.

# Creative Illumination

with Katsola<sup>®</sup>

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by Ellie Clifford

Kawaii is an adorable art style known for its Japanese origin and cleverly cute forms. Houston artist Kat Kearns embraces the art, making unique pieces under her brand, Katsola<sup>®</sup>, and using her work to spread positivity and acceptance. Eager to learn more about her designs, I interviewed Kat to better know not only the art form, but what makes her pieces special.





**Q: What makes Katsola® unique?**

**A:** My ability to create a visual story with my characters and tiny details that can be found consistently throughout my work. As a storyteller, I value details and research and creating my worlds. What makes Katsola® unique is that I have a strong foundation in the creation of my style, but I am keenly aware of my artistic and cultural influences in the past and present.

**Q: Where does the name Katsola® come from?**

**A:** It is a name I gave myself—it is the combination of my nickname “Kat” and the Spanish word “sola” meaning alone. I wanted to create an identity for myself as an artist that was just me in my own world with my own creations.

**Q: Who or what introduced you to the kawaii art style?**

**A:** I was introduced to kawaii through multiple friends, and sources such as Hello Kitty, tokidoki, *Giant Robot*, *Fruits Magazine*, Domy Books, and the artists of Kaikai Kiki Co. I felt an immediate connection because I was drawn to the cuteness and the mischief combined together. Even as a child I enjoyed mischievous characters that were lovable and cute, rather than characters that were only cute. As a child, I grew up loving Sanrio’s *My Melody*, *Hello Kitty*, and *Badtz-Maru*. I also have discovered the culture of kawaii has evolved. As an artist, I have found the culture to be inclusive and fun, and that is something that inspires me today.

**Q: Did you have any doubts when you started Katsola®?**

**A:** I am learning that doubt is just part of the creative process, it’s something that never goes away. In the past, doubt has prevented me from sharing my work, but as I grow as an artist, I use it as a way to critique my work and make it stronger and more original.

**Q: Which project or art piece would you consider your most proud accomplishment?**

**A:** Three projects really enabled me to envision my goals. The first was a small gouache painting on craft paper of my coffee-inspired characters “Saska and Taska” for Blacksmith Coffee.

The piece was up for several months behind their espresso bar. It was wonderful seeing my style in public. The second was a mural piece for Miraldela’s “Sweet Like Pan Dulce” market in October 2018. Seeing everyone take photos and post on social media was very exciting. The third project was the Lunar New Year illustrations I created for ASTC. I loved seeing the buttons worn by new members at the Lunar New Year Family Day. I have a great deal of pride with those projects because I was able to design piece(s) for each client that were unique for their needs while using my style.

**Q: Has COVID-19 affected your business in any way?**

**A:** Yes. In terms of earning a living, it has been a real challenge and I have struggled quite a lot. Creatively, I have had many moments where I have stalled, been blocked, and have not been inspired to create. Recently, as I have settled into quarantine, I am able to start creating again and set some intentions and business goals for the future. In many ways, I have learned to adapt and realize what I want to focus on in the future and what I want to let go of too.

**Q: What do you hope to accomplish in the future for Katsola®?**

**A:** I want to create larger-scale murals, fiberglass sculptures, books, and products of my work. I also want to spread a message of kawaii (cuteness with a wink), mischief, wonder, kindness, acceptance, inclusion, and appreciation for learning. I would really love for my designs to be a part of everyday life and to spread joy and happiness around the world.

*Find Katsola’s® details on page 38*





# A Hidden Gem

by Misbah Lakhani

It is easy to underestimate the transformative potential of travel. Most of us focus on itineraries, plans, reservations, and ceremonious visits to historical locations—and the more we plan, the more we lose a sense of the place we're trying to get and the people who call that place home. But not Asal Shokati.

Often traveling to her home country of Iran and throughout South Asia, Asal has found a way to create deeper connections between Houston and each place she visits.





Her pursuit is to seek unique pieces of art that she can bring back to Houston. Curations by Asal supports women who take their place as

breadwinners for their families by selling handmade artisan jewelry, and now works with over 20 different individuals and tribes.

Asal created this project based on her serendipitous experiences with travel—she describes running into insanely talented artisans and deeply admiring their work. Her own experience in Pateh, an Iranian needlework tradition originating in the Kerman region, made her appreciate how much love, passion, and hard work it takes to finish these small but intricate pieces. Bringing jewelry, or as Asal sees them, wearable miniature art, back as gifts for friends or family was one of the ways that she was able to support these artists who generously shared a piece of their culture with her.

This passion project also deeply connects her to her family. Asal describes jewelry as her first passion, and it's something she shares with her mother. She was further inspired to create cultural connections as her mother started to design artisan jewelry out of materials she collected from India. As Asal had moved to the United States during this milestone creative moment in her mother's life, she felt the need to connect with something familiar. Through travel and her business, she found a way to connect back to her family, and in her own way continue the work her mother began.

Asal sees travel as a means to meet and intersect multiple storylines between the buyer and the seller. She performs the role of a bridge between the two stories by traveling to meet talented individuals and by bringing their goods to caring owners.

With COVID-19, however, that bridge has been broken. One of the most important elements of her project is meeting people at events like AsiaFest, which unfortunately have been impacted due to safety precautions. In light of the pandemic, Asal has worked to make her project more accessible to the greater Houston community—building new bridges by moving some of her inventory online.

*Find Curation by Asal's details on page 36*

## Family Activity

# Middle Eastern Lantern

If you travel to the Middle East and roam the bazaars, shops, and vendor stalls, you'll find beautiful, colorful lanterns set aglow with candles, oils, or electricity. The detailed patterns of color are artfully designed to light up the night.

Known as Fanous, meaning lamp or light in Arabic, the origin of the lanterns dates back to back a thousand years ago to the holy month of Ramadan in 969 A.D. Today, lanterns are a part of Ramadan traditions for Muslims in many parts of the world. During the nights of Ramadan, lanterns illuminate streets, tents, and homes in a sea of color. The lanterns symbolize light guiding the way, keeping people safe throughout the night.

Follow along with our instructions to make your own lantern.



## MATERIALS

White sheet of paper

Pencil and eraser

Colored pencils, markers, or crayons  
(anything that is available)

Scissors

Glue stick or scotch tape

Optional:

Tissue paper or any colored paper

Small battery operated  
tea lights

Sequins, acrylic gems,  
or glitter

## CRAFT DIRECTIONS

1. Take a sheet of white paper. Keeping it horizontal, fold it in half and repeat by folding it in half again, to get four folded sections. Keeping the sheet folded into fourths, fold it once more.
2. On its folded side, draw just half a motif (for example, a semicircle, half-triangle, half a flower, or a heart). Keeping the sheet folded, cut out the motifs that you have just traced.
3. Open the sheet. Draw a design on the first section. Repeat the pattern on the rest of the three sections. Color the pattern.  
Optional: Place a tissue or a colored paper under your cutwork sheet and carefully paste it down.
4. Join the two ends of the sheet using the glue stick or scotch tape; it will resemble a cylinder. Carefully pinch each fold to create a four-sided shape.
5. Embellish your lantern with sequins, gems, or glitter if desired. Place a small battery-operated tea light for a "lit-up" effect. Or hold your paper lantern over a flashlight for similar effect.
6. Enjoy the noor and let your light shine!

## FOLLOW ALONG WITH THESE DIRECTIONS IN OUR INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO:

<https://youtu.be/9Msjqx15zSQ>



# Roots in Harmony

by Lucia Varma

Behind-the-scenes with Roots in Harmony, a local Houston business centering around the spices of Ayurveda, an ancient holistic medical practice utilizing natural ingredients.

The business is run by sisters Rubina Ali and Neelam Damani, and their products include spices, teas, and lattes that stem from organic herbs and essential oils.



Roots in Harmony  
NATURAL LIVING  
**Golden M**  
**Turmeric Latte**  
Hand-blended in Houston  
No added sweeteners or  
NET WT: 2.8 oz (79g)

**Q: Could you go into a little more depth about Ayurveda?**

**A:** Ayurveda is the sister science of Yoga, a 5,000-year-old mind-body science about bringing balance to one's life. Ayurveda teaches that all imbalances start in the gut. With poor digestion, incoming food isn't processed fully and turns into an undigested substance called Ama. Healthy herbs and spices help eliminate Ama, leading to better health, better metabolism, and healthy weight. Though there are certified Ayurvedic practitioners, many remedies are passed down from generation to generation. Growing up, we took this ancient wisdom for granted, but feel fortunate to now be able to share Ayurvedic remedies with our fellow Houstonians.

**Q: What do you think is your impact on the community that you serve?**

**A:** Our proudest moments are when we hear that our teas and remedies are helping others. For instance, at Tomball Farmers Market, a customer said, "My daughter told me not to come home without Golden Milk." Her daughter is nine years old. Some weeks ago, a gentleman said the inflammation in his knee had improved from drinking Golden Milk. Another said she takes it for her elbow. When we learn that our products are promoting healing and bringing joy to people's lives—that is the positive impact we hope to have on our community.

**Q: Has there been a point in your journey where you became discouraged? What helped you overcome that?**

**A:** We grew up in a traditional South Asian family with great emphasis on owning a business, but we resisted the pressure. My sister Rubina pursued a degree in Biology, and I earned a degree in Education. But after years of resisting, something shifted in our forties. Instead of letting others dictate our lives, we wanted to be in charge of our days. We both loved drinking tea and the idea of sharing our favorite blends with others filled us with so much excitement, so we launched Roots in Harmony with lots of support from our family.

Launching a business without a business background was a steep learning curve and

at times very discouraging. Our small budget and desire to DIY everything meant late nights watching "how-to" videos, tons of research, and long hold times with government agencies. But the reward and savings were worth it. Doing everything ourselves—from packaging, label design, website launch, printing, marketing, taxes—we have learned so much on this journey, and continue to grow every single day! Our advice to anyone wanting to start a business would be to start small, but start. You will learn more by doing than through research. Just begin and the rest will fall in place.

**Q: What is the process of creating your spices and teas?**

**A:** At Roots in Harmony, we hand-craft Ayurveda-inspired herbal teas and remedies using certified organic herbs and hand-roasted spices. Our family strongly believes in natural ingredients, so we never add sweeteners, flavors, or anything artificial to our blends. Our teas are unique because each blend incorporates Ayurvedic spices with health benefits such as improving digestion, promoting female health, and increasing energy.

Each blend undergoes several iterations and countless tea tastings by our family and friends. Over the years, however, we have learned to trust our instincts and listen to our intuition. Hearing the advice of others is important, but in the end, we make decisions that seem right for us. That is a big part of entrepreneurship—learning to trust your inner voice and judgment.

**Q: What does your ideal future look like?**

**A:** We want to continue to make a positive impact on people's lives and help them lead a healthy, balanced lifestyle. For our business, we would love to focus on wholesale accounts and partner with like-minded business owners to get through the pandemic together. We have met such strong and powerful entrepreneurs on our journey and would feel honored to grow together as a team.

*Find Roots in Harmony's details on page 35*





## Family Activity

# Mango Lassi

Mango Lassi is a traditional South Asian beverage and one of the most popular beverages in Northern India. The mango is native to South Asia, from where it has been distributed worldwide and is one of the most cultivated fruits in the tropics.

Mangoes are used in many ways across cultures. For example, in tropical countries, sour, unripe mangoes are used in sauces, or eaten raw with salt, chili or pumpkin seeds. In India, ripe mangoes are also used to make curries or lentil dishes. The pulp from ripe mangoes makes jam, juices, or ice cream. Mangoes can also be dried or cooked with rice.

The mango lassi drink is a cross between a smoothie and a milkshake, and is smooth and creamy. This recipe is fun for the whole family to make together and is a popular treat at our ExploreAsia Amazing Asian Eats summer camp.

*Recipe courtesy of Neelam Chowdhary, Center for Global Education, Asia Society*

### INGREDIENTS

2 cups Greek or plain yogurt  
1 cup milk or coconut milk  
2 cups mango chunks, fresh or frozen  
1/4 cup honey  
1/4 teaspoon ground cardamom  
1 handful ice if using fresh mango

### DIRECTIONS

1. Wash your hands.
2. Measure 2 cups of yogurt and 1 cup of milk or coconut milk, and pour them into the blender.
3. Measure 2 cups of mango pieces and add them to the blender.
4. Measure the honey into a microwave-safe bowl, warm the honey in the microwave, and add it to the blender.
5. If you are using fresh mango, add a handful of ice to the blender.
6. Put the lid on securely and blend until smooth.
7. Pour into glasses and serve.



# Impacting Lives with She Has Hope

by Cora Wen

Gabby: a handcrafted necklace with an amber pendant strung below a variety of beads made from bone and wood from the local markets of Nepal. Becki: glittery black and yellow acrylic crystals on top of gold bangles. Abigail: a vivid green coiled bracelet crafted with paper beads by artisans in Uganda.

These carefully assembled pieces of jewelry, called 'Impact Products,' are created by artisans from India, Nepal, Uganda, Myanmar, and the Philippines. They're all a part of the community created by the organization She Has Hope, which focuses on preventing, rescuing and rehabilitating victims of sex trafficking. Uplifting survivors through their community, She Has Hope teaches skills such as craft-making and tailoring to help these artisans gain financial stability. We interviewed one of the founding members, Kelly McGee, for a more in-depth look into the organization.

**Q: How did the project in India, rescuing orphaned survivors, evolve into what She Has Hope is today?**

**A:** After we had been working in India for 15 years, we started to become more widely known, gathering a good base of support from around the U.S. During that time, we started to meet more and more people with a like-minded passion to respond to the human trafficking crisis. We would meet people who would say, "Hey, I was traveling in Uganda and I struck up a friendship with a local charity leader who is doing something similar to your project in India; could you email him and lend some advice?"

And it was around 2008–2009 that we started to find ourselves with a few of these kinds of connections. The exchange of advice led to friendships, which led to site visits, which led to our funding new projects and founding new partnerships. So, in addition to India, we've now been working in Nepal, Myanmar, Uganda, and the Philippines for about the past 11–12 years. We were able to take lessons learned over those first 15 years in India and apply them to our newer projects, and now some of the experiences we're learning in these newer projects we're taking and applying to improvements in India. Full circle!

**Q: What are the stories behind some of the Impact Products? Are they named after particular women?**

**A:** Right now, we are featuring products from our Nepal, Philippines, and Uganda programs. In Nepal, the pieces are made by young trafficking survivor artisans at our Kathmandu rehabilitation home and trade school program as they are becoming certified in tailoring and jewelry-making skills. The same is true with our Uganda pieces for our Kampala, Uganda, program. For our Philippines program, our artisans are not trafficking survivors, but they are widows, single mothers, or otherwise extremely impoverished mothers. The proceeds from the sale of their very popular wine tote design go to helping their financial stability and supporting their daughters' education.

The pieces are named after founding members of our advisory board to recognize them for their invaluable effort to help us launch She Has Hope into what it has become today.

**Q: How has the spread of COVID-19 impacted the way She Has Hope functions?**

**A:** In most of our programs, we've been able to continue basic services for our trafficking survivors, resident orphans, and students. Our nine schools and education centers are operating on a limited basis, but are at least providing meal service or food delivery for program beneficiaries. All five of the countries where we work are experiencing prolonged lockdown situations but we are slowly starting to see some of the restrictions eased. Nepal is probably seeing the best improvement on easing of lockdowns, but it's still quite restricted. In India, our boarding school has closed and residents have gone back to live with family while awaiting the school to reopen.

**Q: What is a goal you hope to accomplish in the future with She Has Hope?**

**A:** We hope to expand our high schools and trade schools to equip more survivors with the skills and knowledge they need to live sustainable and financially independent lives. Right now, we have two trade schools and two boarding schools and we've just broken ground on a new 344-seat technical college in India. The technical college will incorporate a venture philanthropy model whereby 15 percent of the seats will be on scholarship for trafficking survivors and orphans who have graduated from our high school program, covered by profits from the other paid seats at the college. We hope to see this kind of sustainable venture as the future of our charitable model.

*Find She Has Hope's details on page 36*

OCEANIA

# Spread the Aloha Spirit

by Lucia Varma





Originally founded in 1987, Ka Pā Hula Nā Pua o Kamali'i, also known as Houston Hālau, took a little while to find its legs. This traditional hula hālau, or hula school, was founded and run by Kumu Keli'i Chang for over 20 years, gradually building a community of students and participating in competitions across Texas and the U.S. In 2014, Kumu's sisters Nani Kamalii-Chang and Alapa'i Chang combined their Hawaiian and Polynesian talents to take over management of the school and to share their cultural heritage, performances, and love for kupuna (ancestors).

Houston Hālau has a lot going on. Over the years, in addition to attending the AsiaFest, they have joined in community events and performances across Houston to support Asian Pacific Cultural Heritage initiatives. They have played a role in the APAHA (Asian Pacific American Heritage Association) festivals throughout Houston and surrounding areas, and have performed at private events and festivals, often within the Chinese community.

Director and dance instructor Nani Kamali'i-Chang spoke with us to share more about the school. "We share together, care together, and work together to help one another." She explained that the Houston Hālau dance school is made up of multicultural students who learn hula and Polynesian songs, dances, culture, and language.

Learning dance to participate in performances is a structured and sometimes grueling process, but it is taught with love. Students learn basic steps, foundation, and protocols through dedication and hard work, which intensifies as they grow closer to the day of competition.

Houston Hālau participates in dance competitions and performances across the country, and preparation for these events takes a lot of work. When entering a competition, practices are conducted throughout the week and weekends—depending on

the complexity of the arrangement. But all of this dedication helps students to build character, confidence, humility, and respect for one another.

As director and dance instructor, Nani hopes that all who join the hula school and become students "embrace [their] cultural roots, protocols, and rich heritage, sharing Aloha from Hawai'i and from Polynesia." Through attending classes, they not only learn the culture but become part of the hula family.

According to Nani, "My Houston Hula students have taught me to be a better instructor in all aspects and what to do when situations should arise. They are all tremendous dancers and students who are dedicated and loving, strong and committed, supportive, and helpful from our Keiki class (children's class) to our adults classes."

During this unusual period of lockdown, Houston Hālau has been continuing their classes via Zoom online. While it's not as convenient as being hands-on with their haumāna (students), the school's leadership has found it to be a healthy and safe alternative. Nani also holds classes and meetings with her assistant instructors, or Alaka'i ladies, via text, Zoom, and Facebook Messenger to go over curriculum, new hula, and any future events and hula school concerns.

Despite the challenges, Nani says, "I look forward to hula flourishing and thriving in the Houston area and beyond. We hope to share our culture and motto 'to Spread the Aloha Spirit,' bringing cultures together through our songs and dances that will continue for generations to come."



*Find Houston Hālau's details on page 37*





# A Meditation Journey

by Pravdeep Banwait

“You can’t live your entire life just going along with what’s ‘best’ for you.”

— Van Trinh, co-founder of NÔBL Cushions

While on a yearlong trip to explore the world, Van Trinh and her husband, Joe, stumbled upon an idea that would be lifechanging for them both. In 2017, they went to seek adventure and a change in their day-to-day lives, leaving their jobs behind and venturing out to explore the world and themselves along the way.

When Van was young, her mother Vi bought her a basic meditation cushion. It was something Van didn’t think much about at the time but now has become a major part of her life. When she and Joe were on their trip, they stopped in Vietnam, where her mom was visiting

a relative. As the three explored temples during their visit, Van and Joe found their love for meditation growing. The peaceful setting of the temples inspired them to include more meditation in their daily lives.

During a shopping trip, they noticed some meditation cushions but were unimpressed by their basic look and structure. Van wanted something different, sustainable and better functioning. This sparked the idea of making their own meditation cushions, and while Vi proposed the idea of selling them on Etsy, Van and Joe were considering something a bit bigger.

Here began a new journey in their lives. Starting from origami newspaper models, they spent months developing the perfect cushion. They started designing, searching for the best quality fabrics and filling. Developing their perfect product was difficult as they faced countless dead ends, failures, and hurdles as they kept working toward reaching their goal. But with Vi's expertise and advice as a seamstress and the support of Joe's parents, the couple felt inspired to continue chasing after their dream of starting up this business. Today, they are known by the name NÔBL Cushions. They provide aesthetic, sustainable, washable, hypoallergenic, and ethically-sourced meditation cushions.



### IMPACT

Along with assisting people in their meditation journeys, Van wanted to make sure the business wouldn't do more harm than good for the Earth. She and Joe were looking for something organic, long-lasting, and biodegradable, as Van notes "whatever we make will have a driving force of sustainability." After a long

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*"Together, we just kept chasing the dream until we were happy with the end result."*

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search, they sourced raw organic cottons for the outer shell and a combination of upcycled buckwheat hulls and natural cotton for the fillings. When positive reviews started coming in for their items, they felt the satisfaction of providing people with a helpful product that is good for the environment.

### FUTURE

NÔBL Cushions' impact on the community and environment has become as inspirational as their origin story. In the current times of distress, inequality, and pandemic, Van and Joe found that their customers have relied upon the support of their cushions in the meditation practices they support.

In the future, the two would like to expand the inventory with new shapes, ideas, and fabrics. One day, Van hopes to open up a meditation studio—a dream far off for her but something she'd love to do. She and Joe also dream of including cushions in Montessori schools, as they are passionate about teaching kids the right coping skills, and through these actions, they hope to spread mindfulness.

Ultimately, they believe that meditation helps everyone, and we can all use it to look within.

*Find Nôbl Cushions' details on page 39*



# Movement

## On Julie Dang and VietWave

by Taia Bush

Welcome to the show! You take your seat and wait as introductions are made; you hear which organizations have had a hand in helping the performance come together, and who is behind the scenes making this show what it is. Then you wait again as the final setup is cued. You hold your breath and then: music.

VietWave Music is a performance group composed of traditional instruments, including the dan tranh (a 17-string zither), dan kim (a two-string moon lute), the sao (flute), among others. The song they play is lively and fills the entire room. Each instrument blends with one another and it somehow feels as if there is color bouncing wall-to-wall. This is performance. This is art.







Founded by Julie Trinh Dang in 2007, VietWave Music was created to bring light to Vietnamese music and spread the love of the culture imbued in said music across Houston. Musicians in the group perform from Discovery Green and the Houston Grand Opera, to regular appearances for Lunar New Year celebrations all over the city. Beyond that, VietWave Music spreads cultural appreciation and understanding. In addition to performing, Julie teaches classes in the art of traditional Vietnamese musicianship. Her students perform and participate in the expansion of cultural art.

During our interview, I wanted to find out: Who is Julie Dang? Outside of VietWave, Julie works as a pharmacist for H-E-B. She moved to America to pursue her career, and music has simply been a longtime hobby. But while she was finishing pharmacy school, she opened Saturday classes on the side to teach Vietnamese traditional instruments. She found she loved working with children, helping them better understand Vietnamese culture. That was 30 years ago. Since then, Julie has continued working as a pharmacist, but her hobby has long since grown to a mission.

It's a passion that has been in her from youth. When Julie was 10, she began taking music lessons under Master Nguyen Vinh Bao using her sister's old dan tranh. This master's presence in her life led to endless support and creating the drive necessary to run an organization dedicated to spreading cultural appreciation. Julie views her time with her master as inspiration for her own teaching methods.

Her experience with the youth of the city, though long and arduous, has never welcomed doubt. She is adamant that while obstacles will appear in every medium she works, there is not a single thing that she can't overcome.

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*"To learn the traditional instrument is hard by itself... our traditional instrument is very fragile; it's not like piano or violin. All they do is press the key to get the note. It's fragile, it's flexible. It's moving."*

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I asked her, considering current events, how do you manage classes with the lockdown? She answered that online classes are not completely new or too difficult for VietWave's work. Digital teaching has allowed for far more flexibility for her students' schedules.

This adaptability does not make the situation easy. COVID-19 brought the cancelation of performances scheduled for spring, then summer, and it will continue for no one knows how long. Even with this uncertainty, Julie continues to plan for what VietWave could be doing at the earliest possibility: bigger performances, expanding even further across the Houston arts scene. Her biggest desire is to continue stronger than where she left off at the beginning of this year.

*Find VietWave's details on page 37*



# Chasing Dreams

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by Boris Mejia

Art plays an important role in being a medium of expression for many.

Conveying meaning through visuals can be straightforward and to the point, or artists can layer in a myriad of interpretations depending on how they want the viewer to experience their work. Artist Vivienne Dang explores both ends of this spectrum of expression to illustrate the different experiences of human emotion—some feelings are straightforward and easily interpreted, while others are not as easy to depict.

Vivienne dates her initial interest in art back to childhood, finding a connection to it through her older brother who used to draw often. She found she enjoyed not just drawing on coloring books but also on items like her shoes and backpack—it helped her show off more of her personality. She carried this interest to college and earned a Bachelor's Degree in Graphic Design at the Art Institute of Houston. Upon graduation, she landed a position in a company and managed to use her skills in a field she was proficient in and enjoyed.

While in that work she found her team was amazing and she was able to choose the projects she was interested in working on, she missed being able to do the drawings that were more personal to her. She started sketching again for her own amusement. As she explored, she started to expand her work into ink drawings and murals. Her art now generally revolves around visualizing complex human emotions that are difficult to describe with a single word.

“I got into creating art because I love it; I live for it. Because nothing else has ever made me happier.”

After a while, she decided she wanted to share her work with others. She established a side business selling merchandise that included her art. It served as a way for her to be able earn a little more financially through exploring her passion. Community involvement is also an essential part of Vivienne's art practice. She has donated her work to The Via Colori Street Painting festival to raise money for The Center of Hearing and Speech, The Artist Boat's Beautify the Bucket Initiative in Galveston, and The Traffic Box Public Art Project in Sugar Land—to name a few.

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“Being an artist means being vulnerable and exposed. My motto is to go for it, and do it scared.”

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Vivienne is still growing as an artist and hopes to continue sharing her work with the community. She has a “passion project” in the works, which she won't tell us the details of yet but is excited to present in the near future. There isn't a better time to keep track of her ongoing progress than now.

*Find Vivienne Dang's details on page 38*



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