

Shoppers welcomes young new owner



Helen Phan, right, with staff pharmacist Yasmin Abdalla in the Shoppers pharmacy.
TONY PEARSON Special to This Week

By Tony Pearson

Talk about getting on "the fast track." At this time last year, Helen Phan was attending university in Toronto. Now she's taking over Bancroft's Shoppers Drug Mart as the new associate-owner.

Phan, born and raised in Toronto, spent the last eight years studying at the University of Toronto, first acquiring her Bachelor of Science degree and then her Doctor of Pharmacy.

She had never even visited the Bancroft area. But during her apprenticeship stints, she experienced the Shoppers business model, and liked it.

And she met Andrew Yeh, who with Stacy Kwan had managed the Bancroft outlet before they moved the other way, to Toronto, where they both now have their own pharmacies.

They described the town to her in very favourable terms; they also stressed the opportunity she would enjoy to develop her career without the added hassles of big-city living.

Their description was convincing; Phan applied for an internship and started at the store in June, moving on to staff pharmacist the next month after she graduated.

Opportunity knocked when shortly thereafter, Shoppers HQ posted an opening for an associate-owner for the Hastings Street store, as Viney Bansal was heading to Peterborough.

Phan then applied for the position. The application process is very rigorous; most successful applicants make it only after several attempts.

But Phan impressed the selectors. She was chosen, and in October began the steps to set up her business incorporation.

The job is demanding, and requires two distinct skill sets — those of a pharmacist working with clients and their health care providers to ensure safe and effective medication, and those of an entrepreneur managing and growing a business. This includes the need to manage the workforce, to which she has likely researched extensively - many people are choosing to [check out this guide on workforce management](#) when looking to make their own business - to ensure that she has only the best people working under her. A technique used by many growing businesses to increase funds for expansion is to apply for some sort of commercial [finance](#) in the form of a business loan - perhaps this will be a route they will consider going down.

Phan notes that much of the store's business is in non-pharmaceutical products, from cosmetics and personal care items to magazines and food. On the pharmacy side, Phan and staff pharmacist Yasmin Abdalla trade 14 hour days in this extended-hours store.

Then on the days when she isn't running the pharmacy, Phan attends to the managerial side of store operations — the host of personnel, financial, and merchandising issues that a business owner must deal with.

"The advanced pharmacy program at the U of T not only makes you a highly competent pharmacist, but also teaches you a lot about

the business side," Tran stated. "I also learned enormously from the long stints we put in working hands-on in regular pharmacies while we studied.

"In fact, that was a strength during the application process for the associate position. I had to develop and present a full business plan, including financial goals and marketing strategies. The assessors found it a good fit for this area."

Phan now has more tutors than her staff. "They've been amazing supportive," she says. She also finds the Bancroft community extremely friendly. "In Toronto, lots of people don't even know the people on the same floor of their apartment building. Here everyone is neighbourly."

She points out another advantage to Bancroft: "In Toronto, my commute was an hour each way. Here, I can walk to work in five minutes. In fact, I'm within walking distance of most things in town. On the other hand, Bancroft is close enough to Toronto that my city friends can easily drive up for a visit."

As for her objectives in taking over operations, she says: "The Shoppers Drug Mart aim is to promote healthy individuals and communities. Accordingly, I plan to continue to provide a high standard of service to our patrons, and also to increase our involvement in the community."

When a Deep River delegation offered advice to Bancroft under the First Impressions program, they noted that the town as well-placed to draw young entrepreneurs from the GTA, including its sizable visible-minority populations. Helen Phan thus becomes the latest case-in-point.