

Our Town

Milpitas' most unique and inspirational personalities

The Shark Guy

Aquarium inside Christ Community Church's new building will be home to wild sharks and rays

BY KEN YODER REED

Tuan Trinh is building a live shark tank for the church lobby on South Park Victoria Drive and he's coming down to the wire. He's got mere days to install the tank and populate it with fish before the grand opening of the new building May 31.

He points to the big steel-and-wood framework in one corner of the Christ Community Church parking lot. At 16 feet by 8, it's the size of a U-Haul truck. He's fiberglassed the entire frame, painted it Caribbean blue and next he'll install the 400-pound, 1 3/4-inch Plexiglas viewscreen.

The tank needs to comfortably house 20,000 pounds of water and 100 fish, several of them 4-foot sharks — leopard, black-tip, white-tip and hammerhead, and 96 of them "shark-mates" — sting rays, bat rays and schooling fish like damsels and tangs.

"Once it's guaranteed leak-proof, the fork-lift hauls it right through the front lobby doors of the new Family Life Building and installs it next to the coffee-bar. Then I run to the bay four times to get 500-gallon truckloads of bay water. And then I get into it," he says. "In my neoprene diving suit. With an air compressor hose. Full face-mask. And a Wi-Fi. I can talk in there and you'll hear me outside. Just like they do at the Monterey and Steinhart aquariums."

"Why a shark tank in a church?" I ask.

We're anchored over the "Shark Hole" south of Dumbarton Bridge, fishing for sharks. Trinh is a no-nonsense businessman. He owns this boat, the commercial licenses for fishing, the boat, and live fish collecting and he's running five lines off the back, baited with sardines. Whatever he can pull up in the next 90 minutes, he'll divide, one perhaps for the shark tank, the rest for the customers of Aquatop, his aquarium servicing business.

"Why an aquarium in a house?" Trinh says. His grin is contagious, the right tool for all the networking it takes to succeed with outrageous projects, like this one. "Because fish are aesthetically beautiful. A world very foreign to us. Very soothing to watch."

Sharks? Soothing? "Jaws!" He spits the title of that notorious movie at the teal-

blue bay waters. "Sharks are different from their image. OK, they're the top of the food chain. The hunter of hunters. But out of 400 species, only a dozen may attack people. And almost always by mistake. I scuba and I'll tell you — from below, the shadow of a swimmer resembles a seal's. Or a sea lion's. Overall, however, sharks play such an important role in cleaning the bay. They're scavengers."

Trinh tells me God had a plan for his life and fish were a key part of the plan.

The war in Vietnam was a major hiccup in the life of the Trinh extended family. Trinh's dad, a doctor for the U.S. Navy in Saigon, was thrown into a re-education camp by the victorious Viet Cong. He bought escape from Vietnam for himself and 40 members of the family aboard a fishing trawler.

Trinh was 8 when they arrived in California. "My family also had a plan for my life. Like most Asian families," Trinh says. "Dad was a doctor, I would be a doctor." The fall of his 18th year, he entered the pre-med track at U.C. Davis. He also made a fateful decision — he joined the Christian church. The Trinh family reacted to this cultural affront by disowning him, cutting off all his funds.

In a desperate struggle to survive financially, Trinh sold his most valuable possession: his 4-foot aquarium and tropical fish. The Chinese restaurant that bought it then contracted with him to build, stock and service three 8-foot aquariums. The contract funded his entire college career. When he and Daniela, his German bride, entered medical school in Germany, he again turned to fish to support the family. He launched the first of a series of import/export ventures, ordering exotic fish from Bangkok brokers and retailing them to German fish-lovers at big profits.

High-octane business deals made his medical degree seem stodgy. Back in the United States, Trinh launched several successful high-tech ventures, including Gesundheit Inc. Gesundheit's medical smart card could dramatically change the American medical system, Trinh claims. Kaiser Permanente, however, turned down the opportunity to work with Gesundheit



Seconds after posing, this powerful leopard shark thrashed out of Tuan Trinh's grip and onto the grass. Leopards are only found along the North American Pacific Coast, from Baja to Oregon. Although prized for their sweet meat, live ones go for about \$300. This one will live in the Christ Community Church shark tank.

Photo by Ken Reed

in 2007 — "We're developing our own smart-card." (Trinh claims that card, the new Kaiser Flash Card, can be hacked and compromised easily.)

Rebuffed and then clobbered by the recession, Trinh came back to fish. He'd had 20 years of building and stocking aquariums when he took the shark-tank project for Christ Community Church 18 months ago. He purchased a closet full of filtration equipment and a trolling motor that will rise and fall in the tank, creating a current for the sharks, who prefer continuous movement. Copying the Steinhart and Monterey aquariums, he'll feed the sharks vitamin-laced food pellets that reduce food consumption and growth rates by 50 percent.

"I want to educate people on sharks. We'll set up a looping video in front of the

tank to tell their story. And I need a team of volunteer helpers." He anticipates public feedings several times a week, starting with Sunday mornings.

"And for the kids. I've got something for them. See the back wall of the tank, how it's empty now? We'll decorate it with coral. I make coral. Plaster of Paris and paint. I'm gonna show the kids how. Then every time they pass the tank they'll tell their friends: 'Look! There's my coral.'"

The shark tank is his gift. His and Daniela's gift to Milpitas and to this church and to God, who he says gifted him with his fish-brokering business.

Freelancer Ken Yoder Reed loves writing. Read about his forthcoming novel, "He Flew Too High," at www.kyreed.com, or write him at kreed@tkophoenix.com.