

dentaltown

October 2021

real dentistry for real dentists

A portrait of Dr. Tu-Anh Vu, a woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a blue blazer over a white top and a gold necklace with white flowers. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. A colorful headscarf is tied around her head.

Dr. Tu-Anh Vu

Born in Vietnam and raised in the D.C. projects, this Townie has built a better life through intensive study and effort, financial discipline and some career coaching

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SENIOR PATIENTS

Dr. Joe Whitehouse says dentists often disregard what they actually want
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FACEBOOK LIVE VIDEOS

Dr. Cyndi Blalock explains why she gets 3–5 new calls after each online session
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BEHAVIORAL MASTERY

Dr. John A. Wilde discusses how to handle patient conflicts so both sides feel like winners
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Office Visit:

Dr. Tu-Anh Vu

This young Townie was born in Vietnam and emigrated to the United States with her parents in 1992. In 2017, Vu purchased a practice in Brooklyn, New York, and was very hands-on with the renovations. In our Q&A, we learn how she paid off nearly \$350,000 of student loans in just eight years while also growing her practice, and how she stays motivated day to day.

PHOTO THIS PAGE AND COVER: SEAN MICHAEL STUDIO





Office Highlights

Name:
Dr. Tu-Anh Vu, DMD

Education:
University of Pennsylvania
School of Dental Medicine

Practice:
Tu's Dental
Brooklyn, New York
tusdental.com

Practice size:
1,300 square feet, with an additional
800-square-foot basement for storage.
Three operatories.

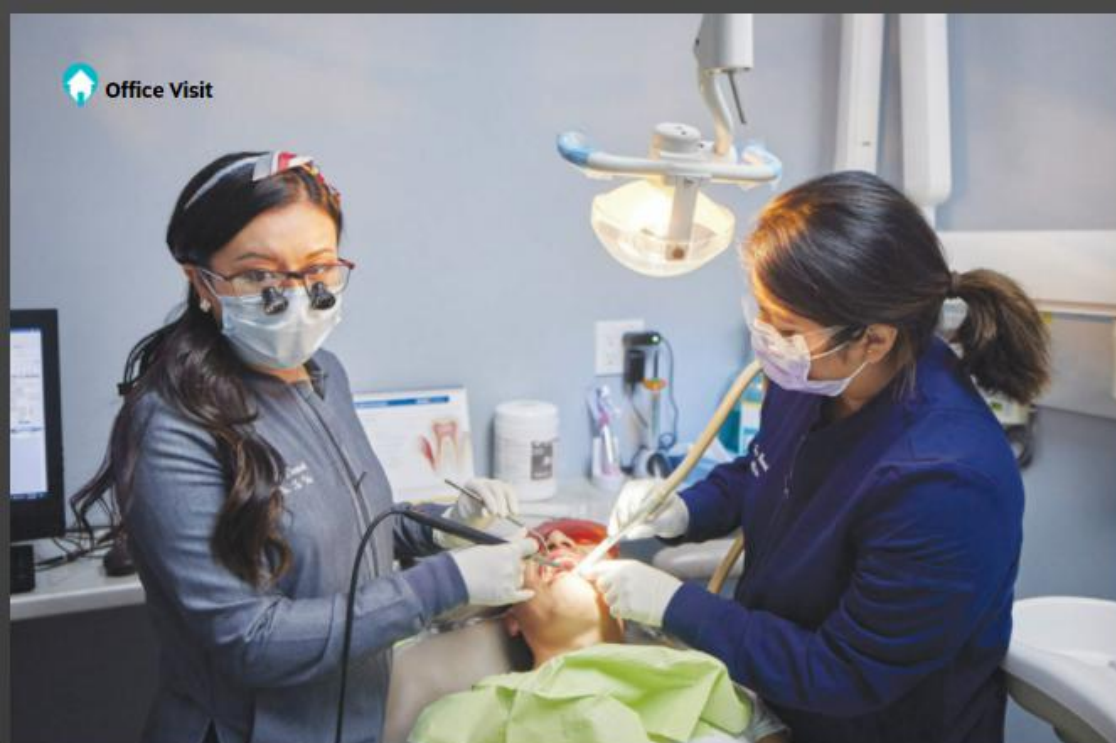
Staff size:
6

You have a unique background: You were born in Vietnam, and then you and your family fled to the United States in 1992 to escape the communist regime. Tell us about that experience.

Coming from a Third World country to the United States was such a blessing for my family. It felt like winning the lottery! Most of us take our freedom and numerous job opportunities for granted. My mom would remind me how lucky I was to be in America and pursue any job I desired. It's not the same in Vietnam, where career advancement—or even job stability—doesn't exist. You cannot create a stable future in the communist era my parents grew up in.

The U.S. government placed my parents in the projects of Washington, D.C., where I was raised until I left home for college. My mom worked full time as a housekeeper and my dad was a cook at McDonald's for a decade before he became a houseman for a hotel. Their sacrifices meant the world to me, because I saw how hard they worked to make ends meet for me and my siblings to have food on the table and a roof over our heads.

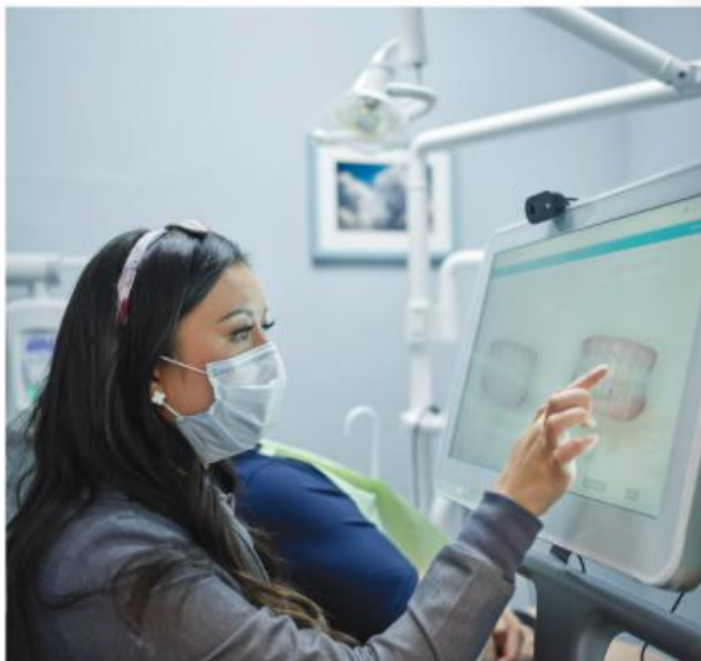
My childhood years were difficult because my family struggled financially and we had no help. I did not speak even a word of English, so it was a rough transition to build a life in a new country without a strong foundation.



How do you think that experience shaped who you are today?

My experience as an immigrant built a lot of grit inside of me. I was determined to leave the D.C. projects—that was the one goal I had growing up. I knew that if I kept pushing myself academically and did well in middle school and high school, it would allow me to get scholarships to attend a college away from home. I knew my parents didn't have money to send me to college, so I made sure to apply to as many scholarships as I could.

This determination to succeed and make my parents proud of their hard sacrifice was fueled by an inner drive developed from my past experiences. From high school to dental school, I was involved with different nonprofit organizations in Washington, D.C., and in Philadelphia. I felt a strong bond to immigrant children who had to struggle just as I had to make it in this world, so I got involved with organizations that had programs to help inner-city immigrant kids thrive.



I became a technology teacher with Sister to Sister and taught young girls how to use their creativity with Photoshop. I was a teacher's aide for the elementary school's afterschool program with Asian-American Leadership Empowerment and Development (LEAD) and later worked in its mentoring program to find mentors for young immigrants.

When I was in Philadelphia for dental school, I volunteered with Boat People SOS to bring more services and outreach programs to the Vietnamese immigrants in South Philadelphia. My strong nonprofit experiences shaped me into an empathic leader. I understand that without my mentors and the grace that was bestowed upon me when I was growing up, I would not be this gritty person I am now.

Education was definitely very important in your household. You won the Gates Millennium Scholars Program scholarship to attend Bryn Mawr College, graduating magna cum laude in chemistry. You've also completed research work in the microbiology department of UPenn. When did you ultimately make the switch to dentistry?

During my senior year of college, I decided that medicine would be a good match for me because I love helping people get better. I volunteered at the George Washington University Hospital in Washington, D.C., for several years and after speaking with numerous medical doctors there, they all told me, "Don't go into medicine." I questioned this advice, but I knew they had nothing but wisdom for me. They told me that they had wanted to be doctors for that patient interaction, but with how health care has gone into managed care, they spent more time with administrative things than with patient care. This ultimately led me into dentistry, after shadowing my dentist and attending Howard University Dental

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School's summer program that was geared toward college students who were interested in dentistry.

I love working with my hands and making a difference in my patient's lives through dentistry. After I graduated from dental school, I questioned if dentistry was the right career path for me. It strengthens my resolve that I'm meant to do this profession on days when there is a nice flow to my work, I'm one with my team and my patients are leaving with big smiles on their faces.

Walk us through your decision to open your own practice.

I'd been at an amazing group practice in Philadelphia for four years, but after I met my future husband during a solo trip to Iceland, I decided that I was going to move to New York to be with him. On weekends when I visited him, I began checking out some offices that were for sale there on a whim. I knew that I'd always wanted to own my own office, but I really thought I would wait a couple more years.

This began in January 2017, and I must have looked at more than 20 offices in five months! In April, I was in contract to buy an office in the Bronx, but it didn't feel right; I felt like I was settling on an office just for the sake of having one, so I withdrew my contract. That same day, I went on Craigslist and saw an ad for a dental office in an area of town I wasn't even looking at. I called the landlord right away and saw the office that day. When I saw it, I immediately knew it was mine, and I signed the lease the next day.

It took me one month to renovate the space and make it my own. I saw the way associates had been treated in the offices I had worked at, and didn't feel like the office philosophies there aligned with my own self-being. Knowing this, I felt more compelled to start my own practice quickly.

Seeing all the offices gave me an idea of what I wanted my office to be like and what I didn't want. It happened in divine



timing. If I had seen what is now my office before I'd seen all the others, I wouldn't have seen its potential. It just felt right in my gut.

You graduated with approximately \$350,000 of debt from dental school. How were you able to pay down those loans, in addition to investing in your new practice?

When I graduated in 2013, \$350,000 of just dental school debt was so extreme to me. This was the only debt I had ever had; coming from an immigrant family, debt is something we shy away from! I made it my mission to pay my loans off in 10 years, so I signed myself up for the 10-year payment plan. My interest was high: 7% for my graduate loans. After two years of paying, I decided to refinance the loans that had higher interest rates. I finally finished paying them off this year, and it was a big milestone. For the first few years, I would get anxious just looking at the balance, because most of the money goes into the interest, not the principal. I'd look at the balance once a year to give myself a pat on the back and when I made more money, I would put that toward my loan.

When I graduated from dental school, I knew I had to pay off my loans quickly, so I couldn't afford to specialize or do a general practice residence like the majority of my classmates. I got my degree and license and went to work full time for a group practice the next week.

For the first four years, I'd sometimes work six days a week. I worked so hard for this degree so that when I got it, I just ran with it. I was frugal in my early career when I had a large debt load. The first car I purchased (as a graduation gift) was a used one. I lived with a roommate until I moved in with my husband at 30. I made most of my meals at home and brought them to work with me. I also didn't take vacations or travel anywhere. Because of my frugality, I could save a lot of my earnings for my dental practice, which I took no loans out for.

Not only did you design the theme of your office, but you were also hands-on and even did all the tiling, painting, etc., by hand.

I had been working part time in a couple of New York dental offices and decided I would quit all my jobs and solely focus on my startup. I was on a strict budget, because



I financed the renovations through my savings. I also wanted to budget some money for working capital as well. The landlord gave me a month of free rent because the dental office was already plumbed out. My goal was to stay within my budget and finish the renovations before I had to pay rent.

Initially, I had general contractors come and bid on the renovations, but they were over my budget and didn't know where to start with a project that was complicated. I then had designers come in and bid on my project. Their fees were also high, and I decided to take the project on myself. I spent the majority of that month at Home Depot and watching YouTube videos on home improvement. I spent a lot of time researching color palettes, decor ideas and dental office designs. To save money, I decided to keep all the existing cabinets and countertops. I learned to remove each cabinet facing and I painted them all. I also learned to use epoxy resin to mimic the look of marble on the existing countertops.

Some days I was at the office at midnight painting the walls and cabinets by myself. I knew I wanted a bright and welcoming front desk. I kept the reception desk and tiled over it, giving it a fresh look. I used epoxy resin on the tops to get rid of the wood. I decided that I wanted white tiles for my floors—for this, I did have a contractor, because they had to demolish the existing tiles.

From the design of the sign above my door, to the I.T. setup, to the installation of the chairs and X-ray machines, I had a hand in setting up every part of my office. I was the project manager. I was there every day to oversee the work. By being frugal and creative, it allowed my money to go further. The renovation was quick, because I was running the show. Everything was completed within one month and my dental office was up and running by June 2017.

Top Products

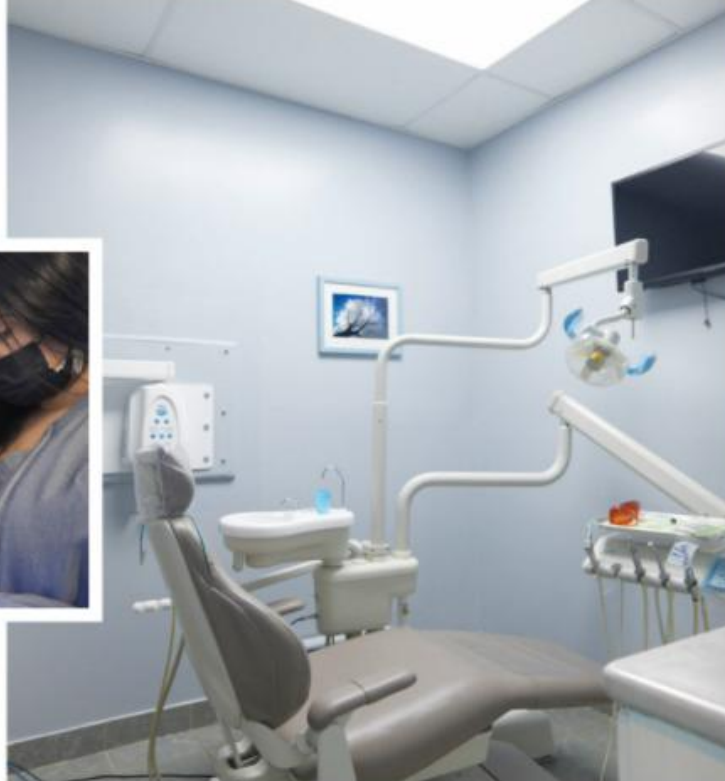
iTero Element 5D Plus. I love the ease of integration with Invisalign and the Invisalign simulation. I can e-mail the patient so they can see how their teeth will improve. The caries detection is also great because I can better show my patient the interproximal caries.

Dandy Lab. They provided me with a free Trios and training, which allowed my office to go with a digital scanner without the big upfront cost of maintenance and the scanner. They also have great customer service and the quality of the crowns has been excellent.

WaveOne. I've used this rotary system since I practiced with Dr. Silvana Cumani and I love it for its ease of use and simplicity. I love the reciprocating files and its ability to curve through the canals.

Open Dental. The capabilities on Open Dental are endless. I use it for everything from sending e-prescriptions to confirming appointments. Patients can schedule online appointments through our website and access their bills. I can remotely access my Open Dental if I'm at home and want to work.

Howard Farran's Dentistry Uncensored Podcast. Dr. Farran's sense of humor and all the knowledgeable guests have been a great entertainment for me during my commute. I've picked up many pearls of wisdom from listening to his podcast.



How were you able to bring your vision to life?

After seeing numerous offices, I decided that I wanted a first-floor, street-accessible office, which would double as an advertisement when people walked by. I also wanted my practice to be wheelchair-accessible; most dental offices I'd seen during my search were located in a building or a second-floor walkup, and I didn't want that. I also wanted a practice that was bright and with operatories that weren't crammed. I wanted separate rooms for the operatories, not dividers, which allows for more privacy.

New York is one of the more expensive cities in the country, so getting the office of my dreams within my budget was going to be tricky. Because this was my first office, I wanted just three operatories to keep my overhead and rent on the lower side of things to have more cash flow.

When I was looking at practices to buy, my boyfriend (now my husband) came

with me. I once joked with him, saying, "Wouldn't it be nice if the universe just gave me a free office so I wouldn't have to take out a big loan (on top of my student loan) to buy a practice?" Never would I have dreamed the universe would actually listen to me: It delivered an already plumbed, three-operators, storefront dental office in a nice neighborhood. All I did was give the space a facelift.

My vision allowed me to see the beauty behind this office. Ironically, this office had been for sale for a whole year. I vaguely remember seeing an ad in December 2016 when I still just toying with the idea of buying an office, but decided to pass because it was far from Manhattan, where I had been thinking of living. The dentist who owned this office couldn't sell the practice and left it vacant for a year before I came along and took over the lease. It was all in divine timing that I came to acquire my office.

You describe your practice as a Brooklyn "hole in the wall." What do you like the most about your location, and how did you grow your patient base when you started out?

I love my office and everything we stand for because it was intentionally designed! My practice is in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, a blue-collar, working-class melting pot in New York. I love my location because it's not pretentious, like some of the higher-end neighborhoods can be. It took me some time to align with my true nature, to realize that I need to show up in the world as true and authentic to my being. I love serving my community. My patient base is mainly young working families and millennials. We see lots of NYPD officers and teachers.

When I first started out, we used Yelp and ZocDoc to market to new patients. I'm not into social media like most people my age, so I just try to be the best dentist I can

and do quality work. The excellent patient experience led to the expanded patient base we have now. Most of my patients come from internal referrals: One day, I might see a patient because his wife made an appointment for him as the "guinea pig." Then, I'll see his wife and their children the next week. Once one family member has a good experience, they refer the whole family. My patient base has grown organically through time, which has allowed me to get to know my patients individually.

If you had to do it all over again, would you do anything differently?

I would probably have gotten a life coach sooner. I had a midlife crisis when I was in my late 20s: I woke up one day and questioned my existence and what my purpose was in this world. My life was in shambles. I'd left a 10-year relationship that was a defining moment in my life. I didn't

know who I was as a person. My outer world had crumbled, and I didn't have a strong inner world to support myself. I had to go soul-searching. I took the nest egg that I had saved and took myself on a solo adventure around the world. Each month, I went to a new country for one week. I traveled to Peru, Mexico, Iceland, France, Senegal, Vietnam, China and Japan.

Traveling alone was hard for me; I'm a shy person with a lot of social anxiety. (I wouldn't even go to the mall by myself when I was 27!) I'm not naturally an independent person, so my solo adventures proved that what I was scared of was just a limiting belief. My solo adventures made me confident in who I am as a person and I learned what I was capable of. That saying, "Wherever you go, there you are," finally made sense to me.

I got a life coach when I turned 30 and was building my practice up. She really helped me with my mindset. Your inner

world will always reflect your outer world, so I wish I would have gotten a life coach earlier in my career. It would have helped my mindset earlier in my 20s to build a stronger inner peace.

As a young mom with two small children, do you think dentistry allows for a great work-life balance?

I absolutely think dentistry is a great profession for working mothers! As a small-business owner, you can set your own hours and days to meet your life needs. I'm in the office by 10 a.m. and out the door by 4 p.m. on most days. This allows me to spend quality time with my kids in the mornings and in the evenings, when I have time to make dinner for my family.

I know some working mothers who are working part time as associates and they also have a great work-life balance because they choose the days and hours they want to work. I understand now that dentistry doesn't define me as a person; it's just one facet of my life. My life is more enriched when I spend quality time outside of dentistry doing things I like with my family.

Your daily commute to the practice is unique—you take an Uber! What's that like?

I used to take the subway to work, but it would take over an hour and was unpredictable. It made my mornings more hectic knowing I had to rely on the trains that sometimes would not arrive on time. So, I decided to splurge on myself and take an Uber every day. (I'm a terrible driver, so it's better for the community that I hail a ride rather than drive myself!) The backseat of an Uber is my happy space: It allows me to have 30–45 minutes (depending on traffic) all to myself. Sometimes I'll listen to Dr. Howard Farran's podcast or I'll meditate.



This time allows me to get into the correct headspace before I arrive to work and hustle. When I start my day on a high note and in a happy and positive place, everything just flows more effortlessly.

What advice do you have for young dentists who are just starting out?

Learn all that you can from anyone and everyone. Life is all about learning and growing into a better version of you. Your thoughts create your reality, so always try to have positive thoughts. The sky is the limit in dentistry, so if you're clear about what you want and desire, you can get there. You can have all that you desire, but it's going to take a lot of work, dedication, passion and time. It's up to you to decide if you're going to go after it and put in the hard work.

What do you like the most about dentistry?

Dentistry is so broad that you will always find something that you like. I love getting people out of pain—mostly with root canals. When you help someone out of pain, it always brightens their day and they will be your best spokesperson for referrals.

I also love doing cosmetic cases. If a patient's mouth is in really bad repair and they've never had a smile they're proud of, it brings me great joy to show them the artistry of dentistry and what a brand-new smile can do for them. They'll be patients for life.

Good dentistry is life-changing for a person and I love the service that I provide for my patients, whether it's getting them out of pain or giving them their smiles back. That's why I practice and it's what brings joy to my life.

Tell us about some of your mentors. Who inspires you?

I'm eternally grateful that Dr. Joel Eichen gave me a job straight out of dental school and mentored me in the early years of my career. He allowed me to make my own mistakes, and helped me fix them, when I was a new dentist. Young dentists should know that it's called the *practice* of dentistry for a reason: Even when we try our best, our work will inevitably fail. It's just a matter of when. You shouldn't beat yourself up when your work ultimately fails. Learn from your mistakes and move on.

I'm blessed to have worked under Drs. Silvana Cumani (drcumani.com) and Dan David (padentalwellness.com). They saw something in me that I didn't see. Dr. Cumani gave me the opportunity to work side by side with her for four years. She would always help me with extractions or root canals if I got stuck. She gave me the best advice when I was having my midlife crisis: "You can only be yourself, so know yourself and be you." I didn't understand that at first, and it took me a year of soul-searching

and traveling to realize what she meant. She is the most successful dentist I know, with two well-managed group practices, and a loving wife and mother.

I call Dr. David sometimes just to discuss dentistry. Being in solo practice can be lonely, so you always need someone to talk to who can relate to you. He's like my Dentaltown message board, but in real life!

I'm currently being coached by Dr. Edwin McDonald (lineofsightcoaching.com). He's brought more clarity into my life by asking the right questions. The answers are within each of us; no coach can give us the right answers to our problems. However, the right coach can ask the right questions for us to find the solution. I believe all dentists could benefit from a coach.

What's life like outside of your practice? What do you do for fun?

I have a 2-year-old son and a 6-month-old daughter who I love spending time with. I love taking my son out to soccer camp and enjoy playing with him on the playground. I love seeing my kids grow up and pick up new skills every day. I dropped my son off at camp the other day, and I asked for a hug and a kiss before he left. It warmed my heart when he hugged and kissed me.

I love cooking for my family and will cook for us three times out of the week. My husband and son really enjoy my meals. With COVID-19, I've learned to appreciate the simple things in life more. It brings me happiness to see my husband enjoy my meals and to see my kids grow up.

I'm currently studying at New York University to complete my certificate in executive coaching. I'm really excited to start this new journey. I've had great success with my life coach and Dr. McDonald has inspired me to try it. I'm constantly trying to be the best version of myself and a multifaceted person: a mom, a wife and a dentist. ■

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