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## »BEYOND THE CURTAIN

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## Making a brighter future for both her and her family

Ratanachat Saelee won't stop until the customers are served and the homework is completed

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HAWKEYE staff

For most, the last bell of the day means it's time for fun, to go home and to do homework. However, for sophomore Ratanachat Saelee the end of school means going to work to keep her family business alive.

Saelee and her family own and operate one of Mountlake Terrace's hidden gems, Amorn Thai Cuisine. Named for her father, Amorn, the store is run by Ratanachat Saelee, her mother, father, grandmother, and brother. Together, the five work day and night to support themselves in a country they are still fairly new to.

Like most of us, Saelee starts her day at around 5:30 a.m. She studies in her classes every day, just like the rest of us. When she arrives at her house, she has about an hour until her responsibilities begin. She and her middle school aged brother, Nikan, work together doing all the non-cooking work for the restaurant. "I work the outside...the cash register, taking people to seats, taking orders, serving food and cleaning tables," Saelee said. Usually her duties last until eight or nine p.m.

Between taking orders from customers wanting an authentic Thai meal, or simply clearing tables of the customers who enjoyed the mouth-watering food, Saelee attempts to complete as much homework as possible. If you walk in to Amorn Thai, it's hard to initially see, but a space in the front has been converted to a space for her and her brother to accomplish their school work. "Sometimes, it's kind of stressing... it's a lot of work," Saelee said.

Although very difficult, Saelee said she loves working with her family every day. Saelee loves interacting with the customers and the excitement of doing what she loves. "It's pretty fun," she said. "Every day is different, each customer is different...each experience is unique." She likes developing relationships with the customers who become the regulars. "Sometimes our customers come so often, they become friends instead of just customers," she said.

For many people, especially teens, one couldn't imagine spending so much time with your family without someone killing someone else. Saelee said, "We do some-



The Saelee family, originally from Thailand, own and operate Amorn Thai in Mountlake Terrace. (From left to right) Amorn, Ratanachat's father, Ning, her mother, Ratanachat's grandmother, Nikan, her brother, and Ratanachat.

times get mad at each other," but still enjoy working side by side each other, making some of the finest Thai cuisine in the area.

### Excelling Academically

On top of all her responsibilities at work, Saelee is in several advanced classes.

Saelee takes AP European History, Honors Pre-Calculus and enrolled in STEM engineering program. Finding time to do school work on top of running her family's business is very stressful for Saelee. She said it's hard, but it was even harder in Thailand.

### Coming to America

The Saelee family, including Ratanachat, are originally from Thailand. Ratanachat Saelee arrived in America in time to enroll for fourth grade. She was just eight years old when her family left their lives behind in Thailand for a new beginning in America.

One of the biggest struggles with leaving her home and coming to a foreign country was not being able to communicate with others. Her English skills were next to

none. "When I came here, I pretty much knew nothing [about English]," Saelee said. Her father, Amorn, had lived in America several years previous to moving back to Thailand and starting a family.

Saelee didn't know a lick of English and had no experience in a land so different than her home. She said that communication is still sometimes an issue in school. "It is hard for [teachers] to understand me when I talk sometimes," Saelee said.

Saelee first lived in Seattle and attended school in the Seattle School District. In sixth grade, she transferred to Evergreen Elementary, now closed, in the Edmonds School District. Her family purchased the building that would soon become one of Mountlake Terrace's best local eateries. They live just two houses down from their restaurant, making it easy for mom to call her up to work.

She was old enough before she came to America to still hold on to memories of her birthplace. Saelee said one of the biggest differences between the U.S. and Thailand is the climate. "In Thailand, it's super-hot all the time. There's no cold at all," Saelee said. "Maybe once or twice a year [it gets

cold], but those two days it would be hot for here," she said.

### Travels to Thailand

For the past several years, the Saelee family has long parts of their summers in their birthplace of Thailand. When they came to the U.S., they left behind many family members. "My mom has 10 siblings including her," Saelee said. Saelee's other grandmother, who is 90 years old, also still lives in Thailand and is one of the reasons that they like to go back regularly.

She likes different things about both her homes (the U.S. and Thailand). "Sometimes, when I am in Thailand, I miss [the United States] and sometimes when I am here [in the United States], I miss Thailand."

One of the things she misses about Thailand is all her family that still remains there. "I miss all my cousins," she said. When in Thailand, she misses the milder weather of the Pacific-Northwest and its serenity compared to Thailand. "Thailand is so noisy. You sit in your house and you can hear all the cars running," Saelee said. "It's more peaceful here."

### A Bright Future Ahead

With high academics, Saelee said she probably will not continue the family business after she graduates from MTHS. She wants to go to college and her family wants her to do more.

"The first choice would be UW," Saelee said. Right now, Saelee said she wants to either to go into engineering or become a doctor.

The Saelee family is the American Dream personified. They came to America with a dream and a staff of five. Now, their business is up, running, and just one meal eaten here can make a returning customer for life.

Saelee is one of the hardest working students at MTHS. What makes it even more impressive is you will never hear her complaining. She leads with a smile and has a work ethic admired by all who know her.

While her job and school can pile up, Ratanachat Saelee is willing to do the work to help her family's dream succeed.