

S & P/TSX 15,386.77 64.10	TSX Venture 705.59 0.37	Dow Jones 18,105.77 6.84	S & P 500 2,104.99 1.64	Dollar 82.10¢ US 0.80	Gold 1,198.00 3.50	Oil 56.71 0.32	Natural Gas 2.68 0.07
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BRIEFINGS

► Energy board
OKs gas pipeline

The National Energy Board has given approval for the construction of a natural gas pipeline and new facilities proposed by Trans-Canada Corp. in northern B.C. The \$1.7-billion North Montney Mainland Project would include a 300-kilometre pipeline connecting from northeast B.C. to the proposed Prince Rupert Gas Transmission Pipeline for export of liquefied natural gas. The board found that the projects did not pose significant adverse environmental effects, although the construction is still subject to government approval. There are 45 conditions attached to the approval for such issues as pipeline integrity, environmental protection and aboriginal consultation. The project is one of several pending in what Premier Christy Clark has boasted will be a multibillion-dollar industry for the province.

► Workers press for
union role at Site C

Workers who built some of B.C.'s best-known mega-projects are at the legislature pushing for a union-backed labour force on the \$9-billion Site C hydroelectric dam near Fort St. John. Jack Whittaker says he worked on the W.A.C. Bennett Dam near Hudson's Hope more than 50 years ago and that having union workers on Site C will get the project done on time and on budget. Crown-owned BC Hydro says it plans to have union and non-union workers at Site C. Energy Minister Bill Bennett says he will meet Whittaker and others, but will tell them that Site C will be built with a combined labour force. Tom Sigurdson of the B.C. and Yukon Territory Building and Construction Trades Council says an open-shop site on Site C will create chaos and increase costs as companies compete for workers.

► AmEx net income
beats the Street

American Express on Thursday reported first-quarter net income of \$1.51 billion US. The results topped Wall Street expectations. The credit card issuer and global payments company posted revenue of \$7.95 billion in the period, which did not meet Street forecasts. American Express shares have declined 13 per cent since the beginning of the year.

SMALL BUSINESS

Love led way for Siamurai

Chance meeting spurred move from rock climber to clothing designer

JENNY LEE
VANCOUVER SUN

She was a native Thai and a scuba-diving instructor. He was a laid-back Canadian rock climber vacationing in Thailand's famous Krabi area with three friends.

But once Thomas Tong met Bung Duangnet three years ago, everything changed. The then-28-year-old part-time climbing instructor searched inside himself and found an entrepreneur.

"I needed to figure out how I can make it work so she can be with me," he said.

At first, Tong thought he could open a retail climbing shop in Krabi, as the guiding business was already well served.

But he soon learned he'd have to pay \$70 or \$80 wholesale for climbing shoes that retail for \$150 in Vancouver, and that was before shipping and duty. Minimum order amounts ran to \$25,000 a year and he'd still need to find \$20,000 for a year's lease on a store.

"That was too big of an investment, and I had no business background," he said.

So much for opening a romantic little store in a tropical paradise.

So Tong rented a little \$100-a-month stall in a local Thai market and tried selling shoes, jewelry and other bits and pieces. For the next two years, Tong went back and forth between Vancouver and Krabi. Duangnet managed the stall whenever he was out of town.

Tong came face to face with the stresses of entrepreneurship. Why weren't people buying his stuff? He began learning how to read and connect with customers. The little business earned just enough to cover Duangnet's basic living costs in Thailand.

Back in Vancouver, Tong taught climbing and started doing rope access work — painting, window-washing and repairs while hanging off highrise buildings.

In 2011, he was perched high above BC Place Stadium helping to install the new retractable fabric roof. In January 2014, he was on top of the Port Mann Bridge installing equipment to prevent ice and slush from falling on commuters. It's dangerous work — it keeps him awake nights — but he does it.

Somehow Tong and Duangnet found time to get married. While waiting for Duangnet's immigration paperwork to clear, Tong began importing Thai fisherman pants to sell at weekend markets and shows such as the Vancouver Folk Festival. The high traffic at



Bung Duangnet poses in clothing made by Siamurai.

these shows along with low-risk, one- to two-day commitments worked well, and Tong gained valuable face-to-face interaction with customers.

Couriering product from Thailand 50 pieces at a time cost almost as much as the product itself, but at Tong's small volumes, having a courier take care of customs paperwork made sense.

At first, Tong said he tried selling "funky hippie stuff" at music festivals, but last year, he found a new market among the anime

crowd. Last fall, he refocused on a Japanese-Thai theme. He began buying Thai fabric, customizing patterns and employing Duangnet's aunt and a sewer in Thailand to create his own product. He called his label Siamurai.

Designing has become his passion. "It gives me the option to be creative," said Tong, who was born in Hong Kong and drew Japanese animation as a child, but was sidetracked by hockey and rock climbing as a young Canadian.

"I met (Bung) and I realized I can push myself more ... I can take risks."

THOMAS TONG
OWNER OF SIAMURAI

Today, he's working harder than ever before in his life.

Siamurai has ramped up enough that Tong does rope access work just three days a week, and works full tilt on the business the rest of the week. He's just come out of two very successful weekends in a row at VanDusen Botanical Garden's Sakura Days Japan Fair and at the Fan Expo comic, sci-fi and anime convention. He's booked for 24 other festivals this summer, ranging from the Shipyard Night Market to the Vancouver Jazz Festival.

"I didn't expect it to be this good at all," Tong said cautiously, attributing recent success to his new Siamurai-branded custom product and his growing expertise at meeting customer needs.

Stall space costs him between \$100 and \$500 a day. Siamurai pants sell for \$45 to \$50, and beanies for \$25.

One challenge is extending Siamurai into a year-round business. Tong hasn't had much success at Christmas markets. "People like to buy small items. How much would you pay for a gift?" he said.

Many have suggested he try selling at yoga studios, a move he is still considering. Participating in a co-op store, where small entrepreneurs share space and take turns working in the store, didn't pan out as there wasn't enough traffic. But Tong is seriously considering online sales.

Looking back over the past three years, Tong said he's a markedly changed man.

"I was scared of heights before," he said, "and now I hang off buildings. I used to have vertigo from just looking over a building from a highrise, and now here I am. I know now what to say to myself. It's funny how much one person can overcome ...

"Back then, I was working in a climbing gym and didn't really have much money saved up. I was more scared to try things or to take a risk. Then I met (Bung) and I realized I can push myself more," he explained. "I can take risks."

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