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*Savannah Ziegelbauer/MEDILL  
Tu Bloom, owner of Tu Bloom Designs Inc., stands next to one of his showcases at the Chicago Flower and Garden Show at Navy Pier.*

## **From rags to roses: a street boy's hobby flowers into his dream job**

**by SAVANNAH ZIEGELBAUER**  
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While cultivating a dirt patch in Chicago's dreary Cabrini Green housing project, Tu Bloom's five-year-old self never would've imagined that 25 years into the future he'd be designing floral arrangements for the Grammys.

But folks attending the Chicago Flower and Garden Show at Navy Pier this weekend can get a view of Bloom's Hollywood style. He was chosen to develop the center boulevard, which consists of four large installations showcasing container gardening. Each one has a different theme: spring, summer, fall and winter.

"From the response from his boulevard planters, he definitely was an excellent selection for us and we are quite happy to have him as part of the show," said Daniel Stober, the show's creative director.

Bloom can still remember the first book he read cover-to-cover. It was a 3,000-page garden encyclopedia. He read it while in high school and called it an enlightening experience because he finally figured out what he was doing wrong in his own gardening. To this day he's self-taught.

Bloom, 30, is now the owner of Tu Blooms Designs Inc., a Chicago-based garden and landscaping design company.

But before Bloom could design dressing room centerpieces for A-list celebrities like Lady Ga Ga, Beyonce, Mary J. Blige and Elton John, he had to overcome a few obstacles.

Bloom developed his green thumb early when his family was living in the high-rise Cabrini Green housing project. A few years later, they moved to Section 8 subsidized housing in Uptown. It was there that he had for the first time a garden of his own, where he grew basil, parsley, radishes and cilantro.

He said the biggest two influences on his green thumb are his mother, who's half French and half Vietnamese, and his American grandmother. "My mom has a 'brown thumb,'" he said with a smile, meaning that she doesn't possess a natural talent for gardening, but her effort is what counts.

"Mom is and always has been the driving force that's gotten me into gardening," Bloom said.

After graduating from Loyola University with a B.S. in psychology, he pursued an M.A. in sociology at DePaul University. However, corporate America was calling his name, and he left the university three classes short of his degree.

For four years, Bloom worked for an online higher education institution in the Chicago region. He said he was surrounded with bright minds, helping him expand his leadership skills.

Then one February his father went to the doctor with a cough, and three weeks later he died from stage four lung cancer. A month later, Bloom's grandmother passed away.

As he was distracted by personal distress, Bloom said, he was let go by his company.

Without a job and coping with his father's death, Bloom turned to what he knew best—plants.

He started selling bamboo plants in decorative pots on eBay, and was able to make money. He bought the bamboo plants and pots in bulk from vendors. During this time, he said, he was selling \$1,000 worth of plants a month—with an 800 percent margin.

He eventually segued into doing small landscaping projects on a referral basis. When he was clearing away old shrubbery, he would ask his clients if it was OK if he took the old flowers from their garden, and would grow the plants back to life.

But he needed a place to grow them year-round in Chicago.

He turned to Craigslist and asked people for old windows and doors, from which he constructed a 14 by 12 feet working greenhouse in the middle of Chicago. It was even controlled thermostatically with natural gas.

"I still can't believe it," Bloom said. "I built a greenhouse out of all used windows and doors, literally piecing each section of the green house, structurally sound, that's a lean-to against my mom's garage in two months."

Having his own greenhouse enabled Bloom to cut out the floral middleman and thus increase the profit margin of his landscaping business.

In 2006 he started Tu Blooms Designs Inc.

One of his first clients was a Hollywood movie producer who lives in Chicago. The job led to such a volume of referrals that he opened up an office in California. He now spends half the year there.

In 2008 he took first place in Mayor Daley's Landscape Awards, an annual program that recognizes Chicagoans who help make the city green through their environmental beautification efforts.

Bloom says that the majority of his client base is affluent, each spending an average of \$12,000 per project on landscaping and plantscaping services. He has a total of 11 employees in Chicago and California. He said he'd like to expand his business and design offices worldwide.

This is Bloom's first official appearance at the Chicago Flower and Garden Show. And he said he's thoroughly enjoying it because he's "the center of attention."