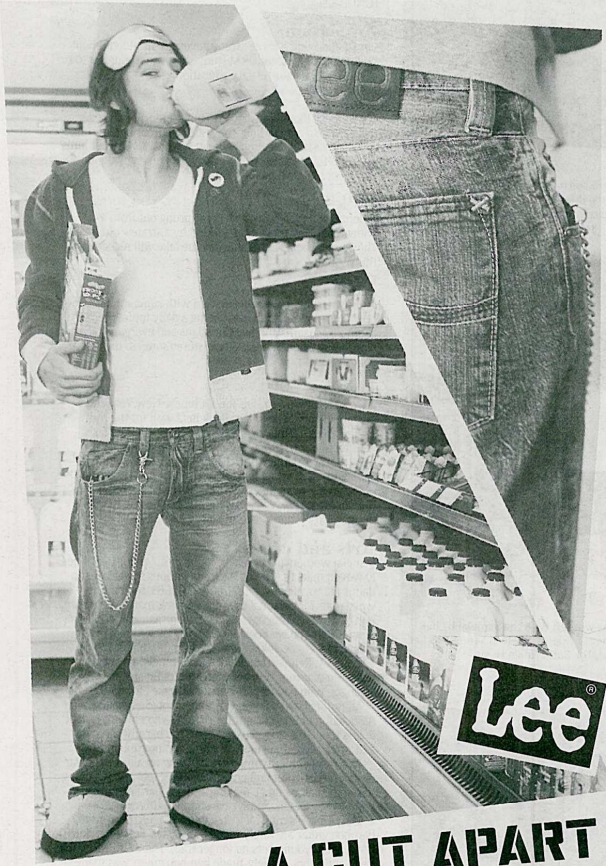


Fostering kindness

When they were orphaned 23 years ago, five children faced a bleak future. Then a neighbour stepped in and turned their lives around with the help of their school. Last week, it was their turn to repay the good deed. CHRISTINA KOH files this heart-warming story.



Fong Sui Ming (left) and Yip Li Ming at the fundraising concert at SJK (C) Wan Hwa II in Menglembu, Perak, where they handed over a RM100,000 cheque to the school to build a new block.



A CUT APART
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HOUSEWIFE Fong Sui Ming, a mother of three children, will never forget the day she suddenly became the foster mother to five orphans.

It was 1982, and the five children's father, Yip Them, had died of liver cancer at Ipoh Hospital. A year earlier, their mother, Fong's neighbour in Menglembu and childhood friend of 30 years, had passed away after giving birth to her last child.

It was then that Fong, who earns a living selling chicken at the Menglembu market while her husband worked in a mine, needed to make a choice.

"After their parents died, certain people wanted to separate the children, like take away a son here or a daughter there, but I didn't want that," said Fong, now 60.

Although not related, she decided to raise the four older children at her house while a relative temporarily cared for the youngest, who was a year old.

Their story recently came to light after the five children, now grown up aged 23 to 34, announced that they would donate RM100,000 to SJK (C) Wan Hwa II in Menglembu.

Twenty-three years ago, the school had helped to raise funds for the children to make ends meet, and so the Yip siblings - Kim Wah, Lai Ming, Lai San, Lai Kuan and Kim Heng - wanted to return the kindness.

Delighted school officials found the contribution especially timely as they needed funds to build a new school block about 2km from its existing overcrowded premises in Menglembu.

The school of 1,500 pupils has been sharing the same building and facilities with its sister school SJK (C) Wan Hwa I, which has an enrolment of 1,600 pupils, for several years.

When met at her house recently, Fong seemed glad for the chance to talk about her brood, including the ones who still respectfully refer to her as *Ah Sou* (Cantonese for "auntie").

Framed family portraits and wedding photographs hold pride of place on the walls of her home, including the wedding portrait of Lai Ming and her husband.

The family's comfortable terrace house in Menglembu is a far cry from the squatter neighbour-

hood where Fong had grown up with her friend Wong Mooi, the mother of the five children.

After Wong, a diluang washer, married Yip, a furniture carpenter who set up his workshop at their wooden house, Fong recalls watching the couple struggle to support their family.

Every once in a while, Fong remembers, she would invite Wong's children to eat with the family and that was how the two families became close.

It was early morning when a heavily pregnant Wong approached Fong at home, just before Wong left for the Perak Chinese Maternity Hospital (now Perak Community Specialist Hospital) to deliver Kim Heng.

"She said to me, 'Ah Ming, I'm going to the hospital. Please look after my children and cook rice for them. I'll be back'."

"Those were her last words. I cooked for them and left for work around 10am. By noon, however, a neighbour told me she was dead," says Fong.

While the children were too young to understand their mother's death, Fong remembers Yip took the news badly.

The family could not even afford a grave for Wong until neighbours went around collecting donations from residents at the Menglembu market.

Seeking out the undertaker, Fong also convinced him to give the family a discount and helped arrange for her friend's funeral. It was the least she could do.

"I'd known her (Wong) a long time and she was always a good and gentle person to me. Since young, we would confide in each other if we had problems."

After Wong's death, life became even tougher for the Yip children as their father was often away from home.

She related one harrowing incident when then 10-year-old Kim Wah tried to cook something with a charcoal pot because his siblings were hungry.

"But he put in so much wood that the fire nearly got out of control. I couldn't sleep thinking about how he could have burnt the house down."

"I waited until their father came home at night and then scolded him for leaving the children alone."

Then Yip's health started to fail

and he was diagnosed with cancer. He died 10 days after he was admitted to the hospital.

Despite their financial burden, Fong had few qualms about taking in the children and she was determined that the Yip siblings continued schooling.

She sought the help of their school's headmaster who suggested holding a fund-raising campaign for the family.

To her surprise, public donations poured in for the orphans over the years and a RM100,000 fund was set up to take care of their schooling and living expenses.

She withdrew only the interest of the amount, which came up to about RM700 per month for their expenses, leaving alone the principal amount for important purposes.

Did anyone doubt her motives, especially when donations poured in?

"Yes, some people have, and I've even told them off. I only withdrew the interest and not the principal sum, even for any emergency."

Besides, she adds, the fund is under the name of two relatives and two school officials.

Her husband Cheng Chew Choon, 68, chips in, saying that yes, times had been hard but he did not mind the extra mouths to feed as the children were like family.

"We had a lot of help in the form of food and money from relatives."

He explains that after their parents' deaths, he and his wife raised the children for about four or five years.

However, when public donations started coming in, relatives turned up to claim Lai Kuan and Lai San, the two younger daughters, and then later for the other children.

"However, Lai Ming, the eldest daughter, didn't want to go and so she stayed with us," says Cheng.

Lai Ming, 32, now the mother of three in Kuala Lumpur says she decided to remain because "I just didn't feel like leaving them."

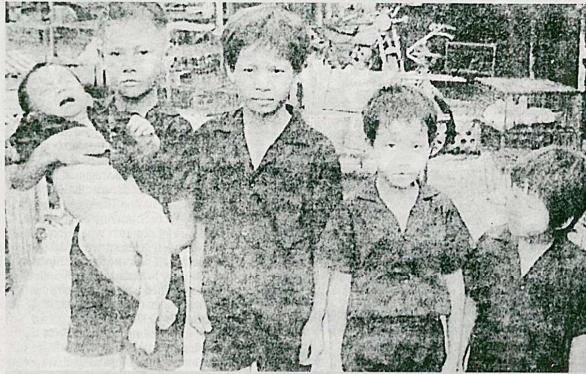
She recalls being very well treated by her foster family.

"They loved me like I was for my own and I got along very well too with my foster siblings. We are still close," she adds.

Over 20 years later, Fong hit upon the idea of donating the



The school that cared. Now that Wan Hwa II in Menglembu needs funds for a new block, the children it helped responded generously.



This photo of the Yip children (from left: Kim Wah carrying Kim Heng, Lai Ming, Lai San and Lai Kuan) is taken from a newspaper clipping published 23 years ago when a public appeal for funds was made for the orphans.

money to the school after she learned they needed the funds. She admits it took some convincing before the siblings agreed.

"I told them the money wasn't actually theirs and that they should give back to the community. They realised there were other people who needed it more, and I didn't want them thinking I was keeping the money for myself," she says.

Having worked in a market for most of her life, Fong believes education is the key to changing lives for the better.

Today Kim Wah, the same boy who once tried his hand at cooking for his siblings with a charcoal pot, is a 34-year-old cook in Switzerland. Sister Lai San, 31, is

married and settled in Penang.

Another sister, Lai Kuan, 29, works in an electronics factory in Singapore while the youngest, Kim Heng, is now a wireman in Johor.

"I'm happy for the chance to give back to the same community who helped us when we needed the money," says Lai Ming who recently handed over the mock cheque to school officials during a fund-raising concert.

Although Fong comes across as a strong, down-to-earth woman who brooks no nonsense, there is a sense of quiet pride when she talks about the children of her late friend.

"I'm happy. They all have their own families, their own jobs. I don't need to take care of them

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