

THE FOUNDATION OF GIVING

It has been more than five years since the late Tan Sri Tan Chin Tuan passed away but his legacy lives on through the work of his eponymous foundation. **Sonia Gomez** speaks to Tan Sri Tan's grandson, Chew Kwee San, about his late grandfather and his hopes for the foundation.

Photos Sharon Lam & Tan Chin Tuan Foundation



Albert Einstein once said: "The value of a man resides in what he gives and not what he is capable of receiving." If this is true, the value of the late Tan Sri Tan Chin Tuan is simply immeasurable. After losing his father at the age of 17, Tan Sri Tan's principals and teachers at Singapore's famed Anglo-Chinese School went out on a limb to ensure that the young boy passed the final year of his Senior Commercial class. Few would have realised that the young man they helped out would one day become the backbone of the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation

(OCBC), but Tan Sri Tan never forgot the kindness and generosity bestowed upon him and spent the rest of his life paying it forward by affording the same opportunities to young people who, just like him, have the odds stacked against them.

Tan Sri Tan was a life-long philanthropist, but he set up the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation (or the Tan Sri Tan Foundation, as it is known in Malaysia) in 1976. His grandson, Chew Kwee San (also an Anglo-Chinese Old Boy), says that it was important for the family to set up a foundation in order to bring some discipline to their philanthropic activities.

"Before the foundation, the family gave donations out of our pockets and we only knew of the recipients by word of mouth," he explains. "For example, my grandfather may hear of an employee who needs to buy school supplies for her children and he'd give her some money. But there are, of course, many other Singaporeans and Malaysians out there who may also need a little boost. So my grandfather realised that by setting up a foundation, we'd be able to put more thought into our activities and identify gaps in other areas that need to be filled."

Today, the foundation, which is run from the award-winning heritage Tan Chin Tuan Mansion in the heart of Singapore, has an independent board of governors which is very clear

in its mission. While the key focus areas continue to be education and community service, the foundations' philosophy of giving dictates that all contributions must generate a social return in order to be effective; there should be a clear and measurable outcome that would benefit many and, finally, accountability and efficiency must be respected in order to ensure that the 'yield in good' is high.

Chew, who has a personal interest in youth development through his involvement in the ACS Boys Brigade and the YMCA, says that he has seen first-hand how the foundation's contributions have generated social returns.

"Through my involvement in youth activities, I was roped in to teach a young boy for a year. This boy's situation bore an uncanny resemblance to that of my grandfather; in that his father had passed away suddenly on the operating table and he was left to support his family. I knew him only as a person in class, but later found out that he became a recipient of one of our scholarships. Today, this boy is a youth leader who is active in volunteer projects around the country. Our foundation gave him that reassurance and guidance to succeed, and in return, he has been able to influence his peers to also be agents of change in the lives of those less fortunate. This example is really what our philosophy of giving is all about."

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Tan Sri Tan Chin Tuan's legacy of giving lives on through his grandson, Chew Kwee San.



1 Chew is seen with Tan Sri Dr Tan Chin Tuan scholars from Hwa Chong Institution. 2 Chew presents Suria Basri with the Foundation's inaugural TCT-SSTI Award.

In addition to the Foundation's focus on education and community service, the Foundation was named Patron of Heritage by Singapore's National Heritage Board for its commitment to conservation. The Peranakan-style Tan Chin Tuan Mansion, which was once the 80-year-old Tan family home, has been redeveloped into a cultural hub. A work of architectural genius, the complex now comprises a 20-storey apartment tower at its rear, fronted by the aforementioned stately house. Here, the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation is headquartered with a mission to instill a sense of history to all those who walk through its hallways.

It is in this mansion that the philanthropic decisions are made. More than 150 organisations have benefited from the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation, including the

Malaysian Red Crescent Society in Johor as well as The Little Sisters of the Poor in Kuala Lumpur and Penang, impacting the lives of thousands of individuals. Chew attributes the Foundation's success to his grandfather's vision.

"My grandfather wasn't the typical Chinese patriarch who would usually keep his distance from the family," says Chew. "Instead, he was very engaged with us, his grandchildren. He had a deep and consistent influence on us all, and through that relationship, we formed shared philosophies on giving. By recounting his own childhood experiences, we realised the full extent about giving a chance to the underdog and decided that this would be the best way to honour his legacy." ■