

## In My Grandfather's Footsteps

Chew Gek Khim, Deputy Chairman of the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation, on the challenges in keeping alive her late grandfather's philanthropic legacy through the Foundation that carries his name.



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Although my grandfather, Tan Sri Dr Tan Chin Tuan, came from a fairly well-to-do family, his father, Mr Tan Cheng Siong, died during the Great Depression leaving behind a sawmill business that was almost insolvent. Hence, from a relatively privileged background, my grandfather suddenly found himself having to deal with numerous creditors and being told to leave school to work and support the family.

My grandfather never forgot the Great Depression and it made him very sympathetic to the less fortunate or privileged. He would often remind us of the vagaries of life by telling tales of people who had done very well and lost everything when rubber prices collapsed. A very famous stockbroker ended up as a beggar. A gentleman who gave my grandfather his first job as a clerk in the Chinese Commercial Bank eventually lost his fortune during the Depression too.

Such uncertainty and frailty of the human state left an indelible impression on my grandfather, for many of these people had done no wrong, except to make poor commercial judgments. The Tan Chin Tuan Foundation, founded by my grandfather, has a very

simple vision. It is to enable a better outcome for the deserving, which is achieved when the same amount of money given can help more people. It is also achieved when the amount given has a cascading effect. For example, if you help a teacher, that teacher can then go on to teach another 30 children.

Similarly, when we support exchange fellowships in tertiary education, we often request that the fellowship result in collaborations, as we strongly believe that the sharing of ideas is critical to progress. Cross disciplinary research often yields a far more interesting and better outcome than uni-disciplinary research. We have seen this in the case of Tan Chin Tuan Centennial Professors at the National University of Singapore (NUS), such as Prof Subra Suresh and Prof Louis Chen. Prof Suresh is a physicist and his work in nanotechnology has now been applied to biomedical sciences. Prof Louis Chen's work on the mathematical theory of rare events is now the mathematical theory used in the area of biology and DNA Processing.

Another way in which we hope to achieve a "better outcome" is in the granting of scholarships, which my grandfather was always happy to

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support due to his personal experience in having to stop his schooling abruptly. However, I would also add that when we give to scholarships, we rarely cover the full costs of educating a child, which includes tuition fees, lodgings, food and so on. We have learnt from many years of experience that when something comes too easily, the individual takes it for granted. If, however, only half or 70% is provided for, and the recipient has to work for the remainder, he appreciates it more. Over the long term, the recipient's ability to appreciate the gift often results in a far better social outcome than if he takes it for granted.

As members of the third generation, our greatest challenge is to modify the way

we give, so as to suit the changing needs of the society. To illustrate, in 1976, when there were many poor people, just giving an outright donation was often sufficient to ensure that the gift would help a large segment of society.

Today, there are no beggars on the streets but society continues to have other needs and challenges. Therefore, we strongly believe that organisations can no longer just give out cash. In some instances, a better outcome is achieved by giving non-financial assistance as well, and by sharing our skills or bringing together different groups with synergies.

Foremost on our minds is keeping alive our Founder's values: Money is hard-earned and it should be respected. It is our servant and we should use it wisely to do good – and one way is to share that money with the less fortunate. Ideally, in doing so, we are helping them for the longer term, so that they can ultimately become self-sufficient.

We accept that things change with the times, but these values can and should remain constant. ■