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He gave the gift of higher learning

LEAVING school at 17 to work in a bank meant Mr Tan Chin Tuan could never fulfil his dream of higher education. But his lifelong generosity meant many other young people could.

Mr Tan, a strong believer in education, channelled that passion into practice, making donations to many institutions, such as his alma mater, Anglo-Chinese School (ACS), the Chinese High School, Ngee Ann Polytechnic and the National University of Singapore (NUS).

'I'm sure he would have loved to get a higher degree, but he made the most of the opportunities to keep learning wherever he went,' said Mr Tan's granddaughter, Ms Chew Gek Khim.

Fate and circumstance worked against Mr Tan. His father died when he was 14, and as the eldest son, he had to work to support the family once he finished the equivalent of the O-level examinations.

His abilities were not to be denied, however, and he soon started to climb the corporate ladder in banking. His success allowed him to start promoting education.

He set up the Tan Foundation in Singapore in 1976 to support educational, medical and other voluntary organisations committed to community service. It is now run by a council that includes Mr Tan's daughter, Madam Tan Kheng Lian.

The foundation has made generous donations over the years but nothing like the astonishing gesture earlier this year when it showered \$29 million on NUS to fund four Tan Chin Tuan Centennial Professorships and NUS collaboration with the University of Malaya.

The foundation also contributed more than \$2 million to ACS (Barker Road) redevelopment programmes about three years ago.

It has also helped individual go-getters.

Mr Alex Lee, 32, took up a scholarship from the foundation at the end of his second year in Nanyang Technological University to finance the third year of his accountancy degree.

'It was a great encouragement to me,' said Mr Lee, now assistant vice-president of Citigroup Asset Management's emerging markets equities research team.

'I never met Mr Tan but I have read much about his life. He has been a great source of inspiration to young Singaporeans.'