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Paying tribute to man who became an institution

People from various walks of life recall his kind heart, sharp mind

By Lorna Tan and Grace Ng

IT WAS a wake befitting a man whose passions ranged far and wide and whose achievements and generosity of spirit made him that rarest of creatures - a businessman as much loved as he was respected.

Fitting then that the turnout yesterday for Mr Tan Chin Tuan, family man, banker, philanthropist, politician, foodie and race-goer, reflected all those worlds.

Business figures were there, of course, but so were OCBC employees keen to acknowledge the man who built their bank, senior trade unionists, academics and politicians.

And in the evening, more than 150 attended the hour-long Christian service at the function hall in Grange Court. By then, more than 100 wreaths had arrived.

But as one of the most astute bankers ever produced here, Mr Tan, who died aged 98 on Sunday, knew that it was not just about numbers. Emotions played a part as well as there were plenty on show yesterday.

Senior business figures paid fulsome homage to a man they remembered as being razor sharp and who, in the words of OCBC chairman Cheong Choong Kong, became something of an institution himself.

Dr Cheong's predecessor and now OCBC non-executive director, Mr Lee Seng Wee, was there as was the bank's chief executive David Conner.

They are more aware than most of the legacy of Mr Tan, who served as OCBC's chairman and managing director - and guiding light.

Dr Cheong said: 'It was difficult very often to separate the man from the bank. He was not just an outstanding leader of the business community, he was an institution himself. He will always have a special place in the annals of OCBC.'

Pretty astute as well. Former OCBC director Tan Tock San said: 'When we were building OCBC Centre, he told the architect that we must use all our own land for the office building and the government leasehold land for the carpark. He was sharp in all respects.'

Old business sparring partners who came yesterday knew that. The chairman and chief executive of United Overseas Bank Group, Mr Wee Cho Yaw, recalled: 'Besides being an astute banker, he was one of our pioneer entrepreneurs.'

Mr Wee added he was impressed by his clarity and recollections when they got together for tea in January this year. He was seeking support for the Chinese Language and Culture Fund and Mr Tan responded in typically generous fashion - a donation of \$500,000.

OCBC's Mr Lee remembers Mr Tan as 'a man of tremendous drive, strength and foresight'.

'I shall always remember his great dedication and strict adherence to principle which has set the tone for all of us who have followed him.'

Former deputy prime minister Tony Tan - who is also Mr Tan's nephew - was in Switzerland but his wife was at the wake as was former banker Elizabeth Sam. Also present were the chairman of Great Eastern Holdings, Mr Michael Wong Pakshong, NUS president Shih Choon Fong and the deputy secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress, Mr Lim Swee Say.

While words like inspirational and visionary abounded yesterday, they could not adequately describe a career as spectacular as the late Mr Tan's.

This was a man who began as a humble bank clerk at 17 and retired in 1992 as chairman of Great Eastern Life and Straits Trading with 66 years under his belt as one of Singapore's most important corporate figures.

But his passion for business had a parallel in his zest for good food and fast horses.

Ms Veronica Tan, co-owner of the Peach Garden restaurant in Novena Ville, told The Straits Times yesterday how Mr Tan always came up with innovative ideas to spice up his favourite dishes.

'He suggested that I fill longevity buns with char siew instead of the traditional lotus paste, and to make suckling piglet trotters in vinegar, instead of normal pig trotters,' said Ms Tan.

Racing was a lure as well. Mr Tan, whose funeral will be held on Thursday, was chairman of the Singapore Turf Club from 1983 to 1986 and an avid horse owner with champions like Happy Melody, which won the King's Gold Cup in 1959.

But all the talk of achievement and success could not overshadow Mr Tan's deft personal touch.

According to Channel NewsAsia's website, Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean said: 'I remember Dr Tan because he was very kind to my father. After the war, he gave my father a job at OCBC and my father worked with him for many years. He was always very kind to our family.'

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