



Why Get Involved?

By Carol Lee



When I was asked to explore what it looks like to have a fully engaged Chinese Canadian community, I looked no further than the inspiration provided by my father and his father before him. I grew up in a family where being a good citizen and getting involved in the community was encouraged if not expected. Through my work in Chinatown, I recognize this spirit of being a fully engaged citizen is shared by many, as the Chinese Canadian community collectively works to revitalize this important historic neighbourhood.

My paternal grandfather was very involved in Vancouver's Chinatown community, and he remained active well into his 90's. He was an executive member of the Lee Association in Vancouver and the Lee Association of North America. A generous philanthropist, he donated land for the Chinese Public School and the Chinatown YWCA.

My father followed in his father's footsteps. He observed and appreciated the importance of actively participating in the community and generously shared his talents to advance those causes he believed in. He sat on numerous boards locally and nationally including those of the Rick Hanson, Man in Motion tour, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), CN, and Crown Life to name just a few. But his real passion was UBC, his alma mater, and where he devoted much of his energy. He served on the UBC Board of Governors, was Chancellor of UBC, and was the founder of UBC Properties Trust, where he served as Chair, missing only one board meeting in 26 years. A list of his board affiliations doesn't really tell the whole story of his incredible devotion to community and the greater good. He was always available to help when



asked to talk to a group of students, to fundraise for a cause, or to buy tickets for a charity event. He could always be counted on to provide help where it was needed.

Ever since I was a young girl, my father has been my role model so it was natural that I would follow his path. When I reflect on my life, no matter what I was doing or where I was living, I always tried to be an engaged citizen and—like my father and grandfather—am always willing to lend a helping hand and contribute to the greater good.

After a period in Hong Kong, I moved back to Vancouver in 2004 and I set up my own business in Chinatown. I shared an office with my Uncle Jack and Auntie Vera in a building that my father's family has owned since 1921. This is when it became clear that getting involved and being engaged with my heritage is what I wanted to do. Little did I know then, that trying to help revitalize Vancouver's Chinatown would become my passion.

Even then it was obvious that Chinatown was on a downhill trajectory. The complexity of the problem would take the collective effort of the community to revitalize this historic neighbourhood. There were obvious signs of decline—dwindling foot traffic, businesses moving to other neighbourhoods, vacant storefronts, dirty streets and sidewalks, buildings not being maintained. The neighbourhood no longer felt vibrant.



For me and for the people and organizations that we've partnered with, Chinatown is an important cultural hub; a symbol of the legacy left to us by earlier generations who built the railway and fought for our right to vote. It tells the stories of the struggle and the successes of our community for over 130 years. The feeling of community and the sense of sacrifice for the betterment of those who follow remains. As my father often warned me, revitalizing Chinatown would not be easy.

We have many of the same complex issues that other urban cities are facing related to poverty, homelessness, drug addiction, and mental health issues. Particularly evident is the lack of housing for new residents.

Many fully engaged citizens have been working on these problems striving to honour those who came before us and to revitalize our beloved Chinatown. I am humbled by their grit, fortitude, and resilience, and am deeply grateful for their efforts to join me in addressing these problems. This movement of fully engaged citizens was the beginning of the *Vancouver Chinatown Foundation for Community Revitalization*.

The Chinatown Foundation is dedicated to building a more resilient and inclusive community by promoting the well-being of those in need while preserving Chinatown's irreplaceable cultural heritage. Our ongoing projects focus on creating a lasting positive impact in the areas of affordable housing, seniors housing, and cultural and economic development. We understand our efforts must find a balance between preserving tradition and enabling a sustainable future for our neighbourhood.



The Foundation’s strategy to revitalize this important neighbourhood is grounded on three interconnected pillars: Physical Revitalization and Housing, Economic Revitalization, and Cultural Revitalization.

Physical Revitalization and Housing

After 10 years, we are about to begin construction on a 231-unit social housing project at 58 West Hastings, which includes a 50,000-square-foot integrated healthcare facility for the Downtown Eastside community. The total project cost is \$110 million and has required significant fundraising on the part of the Foundation.

The Chinatown Foundation’s philosophy is that what is good for our neighbours is good for Chinatown. We also purchased the *May Wah Hotel*, a 100-room Single Room Occupancy hotel for low-income residents which was built in 1913 and served as a rooming house for Chinese workers and is now home to many Chinese seniors. We knew that these efforts are small drops in the bucket, but we believed that others would follow suit, and they have.

Economic Revitalization

However, physical revitalization is not enough—a community also needs economic revitalization. People need to be able to make a living and shops need to have enough business to sustain themselves.

We have been involved in a grassroots effort of interviewing local merchants door-to-door to understand what assistance they require to keep their businesses afloat. We connect businesses to government support programs, provide direct assistance when necessary, and launched a “Gifts from Chinatown” program which helped merchants



continue selling their products during COVID-19. Our *Meals For The May Wah* program provided \$100,000 in direct assistance to Chinese restaurants and complemented the *Taste of Chinatown Festival* over Lunar New Year. Yet these physical and economic revitalization programs were still not enough. The “body” was getting stronger, but we also need to feed the “soul.”

Cultural Revitalization

The Chinatown Foundation felt that a “cultural reawakening” was the next pillar for revitalization. Our community needs to connect with its past and regain a sense of pride. We are dedicated to building that pride through education and understanding and are creating the *Chinatown Storytelling Centre*. This immersive cultural space will open in Fall 2021 and is dedicated to the stories of early Chinese immigrants whose spirited resilience reshaped not only their own lives but played a critical role in the building of Canada. The sacrifices and hardships endured by previous generations were made in hopes that their descendants would have a better life. The *Chinatown Storytelling Centre* is our way to honour and respect their collective contribution.

Over the last 9 years, we have made steady progress in helping revitalize Vancouver’s Chinatown. But as my father warned me, this is a daunting task. I am dedicated to my journey, and I am grateful that the Chinatown Foundation is not the only group dedicated to trying to help our neighbourhood. There are many other groups doing meaningful and impactful work; together we can—and do—make a difference.



Complex problems usually involve multiple stakeholders with very different agendas. Like so much in life you never know where help will come from. No one can revitalize Chinatown alone; this truly is a movement of engaged citizens making a positive difference.

I will not deny it; the journey has been a difficult one. But like those that came before us on the long journey across the Pacific Ocean, with resilience, grit, and hope, we will not only survive but thrive once again.