

Million-\$ gifts from the heart

Her \$1.6-million donation for a student centre is the latest big contribution from Mrs Wong Kwok Leong



When asked how much money she has given to charity, Mrs Wong Kwok Leong, 75, shrugs and disappears into her bedroom, emerging with two cheque books in hand.

She flips one open. In it is a tally of \$170,000. The other book reads \$118,000. These are the amounts she has given to charity in the last four months.

"I never think about how much, I just give," says the millionaire. Earlier this month, she also gave \$1.6 million to a new student wellness centre at the Singapore Management University, which has been named after her.

This is on top of the \$1 million she and her late husband had donated to the university to establish the Wong Kwok Leong Endowed Scholarship in 2006.

She donates to SMU because the university has a compulsory community service requirement for all its undergraduates and she thinks that instills the right character and values at a young age.

She says she has heard "too many cases" of parents gambling away, or losing all, their money and leaving their children helpless.

"These children may not have people to take care of them," says Mrs Wong, who was not allowed to study because she is a girl and her father wanted her to help out with the family business instead.

She is glad her contributions now can help students financially and emotionally.

She and her husband accumulated their wealth from various businesses in tin mining, shipping supplies and the hotel industry.

The late Mr Wong Kwok Leong, a Singaporean, was 41 when he married the 19-year-old Ipoh-born Mrs Wong.

He was a draughtsman in the shipping company Ben Line and her parents arranged their marriage.

Their rationale for marrying her off to the late Mr Wong was that she had been born in the Year of the Tiger – generally an undesirable year for baby girls.

Rather than have her end up as somebody's second wife, they picked an older man to be her husband.

Not only was he older, but he had also lost his left arm during the Japanese Occupation.

Mrs Wong says she cried after her wedding night when she found this out, but her mother convinced her that he would treat her well.

And he did. "He used to say I was his left hand," Mrs Wong says with a laugh.

Together, the couple built a hugely profitable business empire.

As Mrs Wong's family was in the foodstuff business and was reasonably well off, she was given half an acre of land –



Mrs Wong Kwok Leong has given to hospitals and temples, but her biggest donation to date is to Singapore Management University because she wants to help students in need.

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part of her dowry.

After two years of marriage, in 1958, the couple found that their land had tin deposits, so they started a tin-mining business in Ipoh.

At around the same time, they started a ship supplies business in Singapore.

"My husband would cycle to deliver goods such as towels and forks to the ships," she says in Mandarin and English, during this interview in her Ardmore Park apartment in the Orchard area, where she lives with a domestic helper.

Their business – Wong and Sons Company – grew. After a few years, it also provided ship repair services.

Mrs Wong remembers travelling back and forth between Ipoh and Singapore every week.

"We didn't sleep. We worked very hard," says the energetic Mrs Wong who, these days, gets up at 5am every day, does an hour of meditation, then goes to the Singapore Botanic Gardens for a walk.

"By the time I was 23, I had become a multi-millionaire," says Mrs Wong, with an incredulous expression on her face.

"We would roll up \$5 and \$10 bills and put them in tobacco tins," she adds conspiratorially.

In about 1969, they started a hotel business in Hong Kong. First, they ran the hotel out of a rented 28-storey building, then they built their own 32-storey hotel –



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MRS WONG KWOK LEONG, seen on the left with her late husband in a 2007 photograph, on their success

Fortuna Hotel. They built a second hotel, Fortuna Court, also in Hong Kong, but sold off the business in 1993.

In the 1970s, there was no more tin, so the tin business wound down. Around 1988, they closed the shipping business as Mr Wong was suffering from heart disease and needed rest.

He died in 2008, at age 93, of old age.

Mrs Wong says that, over the last 50 years, she has always donated money to temples, hospitals and schools in countries such as China, Nepal, India and Myanmar, and here as well. She says her biggest dona-

tion to date is to SMU, but she does not keep tabs on how much she has given in total.

She says her spirit of philanthropy comes from her mother who used to say: "If people say they want something, don't say no. If they ask, they must have a problem."

Even during the Japanese Occupation, Mrs Wong remembers how her mother would share rice with other families, even though their own family had just 2kg of it left.

But there are also those who have taken

advantage of Mrs Wong's generosity.

"I can tell if they are cheating me, and after one or two times, the next time, I will listen to them but just give them \$100," she says.

And what do her three children – a daughter who is a chartered accountant, 52; a pilot son, 49; and another son, 48, who is in the golf business – think of her giving?

"They say as long as my heart is satisfied, it's good," says Mrs Wong.

"If they want a car or house, I have helped," she adds, scanning through her mobile phone, searching for pictures of her grandchildren. She has nine – aged three to 21 – and gives each of them \$300 a month in spending money, till they start attending university.

Charitable giving not only benefits others, but also forces her to continue working her mind, she says.

"When I spend money, I have to think about how to get it back," says Mrs Wong, who shares that she recently flipped a property in Balestier and made a profit there.

But other than investments, and treating friends and family to meals, she does not spend much on herself.

She says: "I don't think about jewellery and clothes. I help people."

✉ simlinoi@sph.com.sg