



Asian Giving Circle Brings Hope to New York Children

Thanks to a group of Michelle Tong's friends and business colleagues who met one day in her father's apartment, the Queens Child Guidance Center now has one more social worker to help serve a growing Asian American community in the borough.

This ambitious group of five young Asian American professionals have pooled their funds to help address health, education and elderly needs in New York. The result: the AsiaNextGen Giving Circle.

The idea for AsiaNextGen grew out of a networking event of young professionals in New York City who gathered at a reception sponsored by the Asian American Federation of New York (AAFNY) to introduce them to the concept of philanthropy.

"Some 300 people showed up," says Tong, AAFNY donor relations director.

The energy and buzz of the group was a light bulb moment, Tong says. "We realized there were a lot of young people out there who had \$20 [admission] to give," she says. "Of that group, about 20 percent were seriously interested in philanthropy and really wanted to do something to help their own in the Asian community."

The Federation wanted to reach out more and engage the younger generation, particularly since they are more inclined to volunteer their time than earlier generations of Asians, who, in contrast, are not familiar with philanthropic concepts, Tong notes. Older Asians, she says, particularly immigrants who have lived through civil and international wars or government corruption, and may have lost their homes or savings, tend to be more cautious about their disposable income in this country.

The Federation decided that a giving circle—in which a select group of individuals pool funds and decide collectively where the money goes—would be the best way to help young professionals make and feel like they've had a real impact on their community.

The initial group members sought advice from other giving circles throughout the country.

Fifteen people attended the group's first meeting at Tong's father's home. The group appointed co-chairs and worked to define the giving circle's goals and objectives by inviting guest speakers from area nonprofit organizations to talk about the elderly, youth, health and education. The group then decided that their first focus would be the elderly and/or children.

"We have members who are taking care of parents and children," Tong says.

Circle members decided to set the minimum gift level at \$5,000, noting that it was a significant enough level to ensure that giving circle members were committed.

In the next year, five individuals made up the core group. Together AsiaNextGen members contributed \$20,000.

In January 2006 AsiaNextGen members did a site visit of the Queens Child Guidance Center, a clinic that provides mental health and other social services to 7,000 disadvantaged children and their families in nine clinics and 42 school sites. The group observed the work of the center's 10-year-old Asian Outreach program, which helps connect the Asian immigrant community with access to health care services. They met with social workers who work with outpatient mental health clients, and found the group to be short staffed and desperately in need of funds to hire social workers.

In June 2006 AsiaNextGen awarded the Queens Child Guidance Center \$20,000, which permits the center to hire a part-time social worker, allowing an additional 15 children to be served who are on a waiting list of over 150 children who need medical assistance.

The call to philanthropy was literally a health saver for Tong, who herself was drawn to philanthropy after four years in the legal profession. Previously a New York corporate attorney, Tong realized everything about her day was literally making her sick – the long hours and the cut throat environment.

“I was very unhappy and I saw that I was becoming a product of my environment. I asked myself, ‘is this the life I want?’”

Tong quit her job. Through mutual friends she eventually became connected with the AAFNY. She was hired in 2001 and now runs the entire development team.

“I love what I do,” Tong says. “In a way, someone’s life is indirectly in my hands. Because of the site visits, we see how the grassroots communities are trying to do so much with so little.”

“Young professionals may not know how to get started,” Tong adds, “and if we can help them, then that’s just the beginning, and they can then develop their own philanthropy style.”

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