An early start in the business of giving

Couple donate big part of their wealth and wish more would do the same

BY LYNN LEE

THE first time Madam Mah Jia Lan gave to a good cause, she was just 10 years old.

The year was 1947. She asked her businessman father to lend her $10 to give to a monk who was going to San Francisco to spread Buddha's teachings.

Now 70, she recalls, “My father said to me, ‘$10? Do you know our grain is paid only by 50¢ a pound?’

I had to carry sacks of rice to his shop as a form of payback. It was tough. Luckily, after 10 days, my father said we were even,” she says with a chuckle, adding that the episode in her growing-up years in Malaysia taught her the value of money.

She has not looked back since, using her family’s hard-earned wealth to better the lives of others.

Madam Mah, who has been living in Singapore for the past 40 years, reckons she gave “several hundred thousand dollars” a year to the poor.

More money goes to religious causes and education.

Her single biggest donation was made last August when she and her husband, retired businessman Wong Kwok Leong, celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary.

They gave $1 million to the Singapore Management University to set up a scholarship that will annually fund the studies of at least three needy undergraduates for a year. Each will receive $10,000.

Another $400,000 also went to the Luding Free Monastery near Mokkan Road, says Madam Mah, a Buddhist.

Growing up in Ipoh, she was the eldest of 15 children in an upper-middle-class family. “We had three meals,” she says.

Her father treated her as a boy, she adds, with eyes twinkling, and put her in charge of his wholesale shop, which sold foodstuff.

The experience gave her an appetite for business. So, soon after her marriage at the age of 18 to Mr Wong, the couple became entrepreneurs. Mr Wong, a Singaporean, was then a draughtsman in British shipping company Ian Line.

They started a ship that was made and supplies business in Singapore before expanding into tin mining in Malaysia and the hotel business in Hong Kong.

“We worked hard. I remember being pregnant and driving from Kampar (near Penang) to Singapore, and then back, at least once a week,” Madam Mah’s belief that what goes around comes around rather than the wish to get something in return, she says.

But, in the 80s, this belief was put to a severe test when her daughter, Mika Lim, then 23, was diagnosed with the potentially deadly lupus disease.

“Suddenly my whole life was turned upside down,” she says, adding that she has tried her best to do all these good deeds.

But her daughter recovered after two years. She has two girls and a boy. Madam Mah’s two other children, both sons in their 40s, are married with children.

After that crisis, her giving habits took on a new vigour, says the grandmother of nine, aged between three months and 15 years.

Madam Mah and her husband have given money to feed and clothe young monks in monasteries in Tibet and Nepal, and built schools in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Indonesia and India. In Singapore, they have helped, among others, Hai Sing Catholic School and Chong Hwa Free Clinic in Toa Payoh.

But there is one group Madam Mah wishes she can change. The rich who don’t see the need to give back.

“They have big mounds but small hearts,” she says.

Small is better than none, she says.

It was tough.

“I would like it if people could give 10 to 20 per cent of their wealth away. For me, I don’t mind giving 90 cents for every $1 I have. Compared to others, we have no burden.

So before I pass away, I want to help as many as I can.”

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GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY: Madam Mah Jia Lan and her husband, Mr Wong Kwok Leong, give generously to the poor, and to religious and educational causes.