

A sage once said that it is far easier to make money than to sensibly spend it. More and more in Asia, high net worth individuals are beginning to feel that simply writing out cheques to charity is not enough. They want to do more to channel their funds to needy causes. Setting up a charity foundation ensures a lasting impact on society, an entrepreneurial approach and business style governance towards the management of funds. *MillionaireAsia's* **Brian Yim** spoke with Chew Hua Seng, the Founder, Chairman and CEO of Asia's largest education group, Raffles Education Corporation, who is ranked the 12th richest person in Singapore with assets worth US\$460 million, about what made him donate S\$100M to charity.

Chew Shows the Art of Giving Away S\$100 million to Charity

A misfortune in 1993 turned Chew Hua Seng's life literally upside down and pushed him to the brink of bankruptcy. The date was August 23. A large shipment of medium density fibre and chipboards, belonging to Mr Chew, was hit by a typhoon near Hong Kong, entirely ruining the goods. He found himself swimming in a sea of debt to the tune of US\$3.6 million. The six years that followed

was a dark period still painfully etched in his memory. Mr Chew, who was 39 years old then and with a wife and two young children to feed, faced ugly lawsuits from creditors while seeking compensation from insurers to clear his debt. "I was a broken man. It was a humbling and humiliating experience but being broken meant that I could be patched together again."



Photo Credit: Joann Chia

Chew Hua Seng – Founder, Chairman and CEO, Raffles Education Corporation

"But even at the worst of times, I still had the love of my family. I prayed very hard for guidance and I am glad to have stayed on the right bearing to sail through the rough waters," he recalled in an exclusive interview with *MillionaireAsia*. The difficult episode made Mr Chew more "spiritual and philosophical". "He eventually received payment from his insurers to pay off his creditors.

After graduating from the then University of Singapore in 1979, his brother encouraged Chew to go into business on his own as a timber broker. Business prospered and Chew would have continued happily building up his timber trading business except for a fateful meeting set up by his lawyer friend. It was that "chance encounter" in 1997 that opened the door for Chew to get into a completely different field. The president of the La Salle College in Montreal was in search of partners to invest in what was then called La Salle International Fashion School. It took just 15 minutes for Chew to decide that he wanted to invest as a stakeholder in creative education, an area he felt Singapore was lacking at that time since the focus was on Mathematics and Science.

The business did not take off immediately and just managed to at most, breakeven in the first few years. After learning the business fundamentals Chew decided he wanted to take charge and bought out the shares of the other partners in Shanghai, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore in 2001.

From a single college, Chew master-minded the phenomenal growth of Raffles Education into the largest creative design and management education business in the Asia Pacific with 25 colleges and a student population of over 33,000. Through foresight, organic growth and shrewd acquisitions, Raffles Education reported record profits of S\$99.8 million, a surge of 102% from

the previous year on a turnover of S\$190 million for 2008.

In August 2008, Forbes named Chew Hua Seng, the Founder, Chairman and CEO of Asia's largest education group, Raffles Education

Corporation, the 12th richest person in Singapore with assets worth US\$460 million.

Soon after, Chew announced that he would pledge S\$100 million over 10 years to the Chew Hua Seng Foundation in support of economically disadvantaged youths in the Asia Pacific, by enhancing their

educational opportunities, making this arguably one of the largest private donations to charity. Chew, 53 years, is married to Doris, 39, who is a director of the Chew Hua Seng Foundation and also Director of Operations at Raffles Education. They have 3 sons, aged 8, 15 and 18 and a 16-year-old daughter.

The Chew Hua Seng Foundation was incorporated in November 2007 and officially launched in conjunction with UBS Global Philanthropy Forum in Singapore in September 2008. To date the Foundation has already disbursed more than S\$5 million to a total of 18 worthy causes including giving out bursaries to students facing financial hardship.

What is your key motivation for pledging S\$100 million to charity?

I have been richly blessed and I realise that you cannot live in this world just for yourself and for your family. If you live just for yourself, then you become a hoarder, a miser and an unwilling giver. Life would be miserable and stressful.

We must be happy to give from the heart to the poor and the less well off to help them make ends meet, to grow and to be happy. With the Foundation I have institutionalised the giving process so that my children see it as a good example and continue to touch people's lives through the mandate I have set.

How much should one give to charity?

People say we should give until it hurts. For me, I feel we must give something meaningful. There is always this tug of war from within about providing enough for one's immediate and extended family and one's duty to society. If I pledge just S\$1M to the Foundation, considering

what I have, I will be setting a very bad example. I do hope that what I have done will encourage others to dig deep and to do similar acts of charity. People say wealth cannot endure beyond three generations. But with the Foundation, with your funds professionally managed, it can go on for a very long time. Hence the Foundation's motto is "Compassion Through the Generations." Life will become more fulfilling for us and for our children.

You came from a humble background, the son of a fisherman and homemaker with eight children (six sons and two daughters). How did your own upbringing and early childhood influence your acts of philanthropy?

When you come from a humble background, there's really nothing to lose so you dare to take more risks and if you fail, you just start again. The more you have, the less risks you want to take and you may only take risks when there is a high probability of success. I learnt to strive from my mom. Seeing the hard work, the tenacity to overcome challenges, provided the grounding from young.

My father was the disciplinarian. Even though we were poor, we didn't realise we were poor then. In fact most of the people then were poor. You only feel poor when you start comparing yourself with others. We ate watery porridge with salted eggs, salted vegetables and fish we caught from the sea. We lived in an attap house, ran around in boxer shorts and wore worn out shoes to school. I had my first toy, a small matchbox metal car during Christmas from "Santa Claus", only when I was in Primary 6. But I still considered my childhood a happy one with my family.

I feel richly blessed with what I have today and I remember those with a big heart who helped me along the way. I now need to ask

what are the things I can do to give back to society. The Foundation provides educational opportunities to the under-served communities to enable them to unlock their potential in life.

Has the act of giving rubbed off on your children yet?

My three older children are beginning to better discern people around them to be kind and to help other people. By exposing them to learn and feel for other people, it trains them to be more compassionate. My daughter is chairwoman of Raffles Girls' School fundraising committee and she went through my personal contact list (without my permission which I was not too happy with but I understood her intentions) and contacted them to raise the S\$100,000 targeted for her school. My eldest son is also regularly donating from his own pocket money and is also involved with Sanctuary @ Montfort project at Montfort Secondary School.

Montfort Secondary School is your alma mater and you have made significant contributions to the school including the funding of the Sanctuary @ Montfort and the school's Indoor Sports Hall Building. What values did you learn at Montfort? What advice would you give to youths and Montfortians in particular, to overcome their difficulties and to succeed in life?

I learnt humility and compassion from Montfort Secondary School and also from my parents. Although my parents and siblings were all Taoists, the school ingrained in us the presence of God that I felt at a young age. I want to do things that I like and kids to me are the future. My involvement reminds me of the

times when I was a kid and you never know the people who touched your life until much later when you realise how much they really cared.

Like me, from a young age, when you realise that you are not so fortunate, you start to think that the only way out is to really strive and work hard to succeed. Set out a long-term goal. Look 20, 30, 40 years ahead and focus on what you want to be in life. If you want to be a lawyer, be a very good lawyer or if you want to be a businessman then work hard to provide services that people are willing to pay for. If you aim at 100, you may get 90, 80 or even 70 but you still get something. However, people give up easily and that is where mediocrity comes in. Success does not come easily.

In business, it is also a very long journey and the chances of success may be small. For 25 years, I toiled in vain and it was only in the last five years that I enjoyed the fruits of my labour. If I had been impatient, success would have eluded me. At the Olympic Games, many athletes train for years but few will ever win a gold medal. Patience is an important virtue to have.

Are you satisfied with what you have achieved in life?

One should not measure success with material possessions or to compare oneself with the Joneses. If you compare, then you miss the point. You will never achieve peace in life. Personal peace is very important. Most cannot achieve it because we are always in a hurry. Above all, pray hard. Wealth is only part of the equation. The spiritual well-being is often overlooked especially by the young who may still think they are far from being expired. But the truth is, in order to feel satisfied and have peace of mind; you need to be spiritually well. I am a happy person. I am at peace with myself. ■



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