

OASES – OUR NOBLE CAUSE IN OAKLAND CHINATOWN

By Raymond Douglas Chong



With All My Heart and Soul, I Have Kept the Promise.

- *Raymond Douglas Chong*

Our Noble Cause

Oakland Asian Students Educational Services (OASES) was our noble cause by a righteous few in the Chinatown community of Oakland, a gritty industrial port city in California, nestled between the east shore of San Francisco Bay and the East Bay hills. OASES briefly fulfilled an essential community need by providing educational and enrichment services to Asian youth of Oakland Chinatown for 29 years, from 1983 to 2012.

Oakland Chinatown is an impoverished ghetto of Asian immigrants from Guangdong Province of China and countries of Southeast Asia in the destitute flatlands of *Oaktown* (nickname for Oakland), on Broadway near Downtown. The immigrant residents are restaurant cooks, cafe waiters, store clerks, factory seamstresses, and field laborers who barely survived amid this urban blight. As they toiled for minimum wages in modest working conditions, their children, the next generation, were slowly assimilating into American society without proper guidance, especially in education.

In this harsh environment of pervasive poverty, Asian gangs roamed on the tough streets of Oakland, as others dealt crack cocaine and executed violent crimes. The Oakland public schools were performing poorly for decades. Oakland Unified School District faced financial troubles, administrative failures and sensational scandals.

In fall 1977, Family Services Division under Oakland Chinese Community Council (OCCC) (now known as Family Bridges), Lucia Cheung led Tutorial Program at Lincoln Elementary School auditorium and at OCCC Youth Services Center in Lincoln Square. The inaugural Tutorial Program had initially focused on middle and high school students.

Winnie Gin, an undergraduate at Cal (University of California at Berkeley (UCB)), foresaw a bleak future for the children of Oakland Chinatown. They were mired in dark poverty with a background of Limited English Proficiency. In fall 1983, Winnie and her classmates boldly formed OASES, a Cal student club, to tutor the children at Lincoln Elementary School. At its inception, 15 volunteers served 40 students. OASES collaborated with OCCC. The Asian Youth Program Advisory Council, with Winnie as Chair, oversaw the Tutorial Program. During our early years, funding was a constant challenge for the grassroots organization with minor administrative support by OCCC.

OCCC and OASES, which was under Associated Students of University of California, received precious funding from Cal Community Projects Office (now known as Cal Corps). Cal Corps gave annual grants to OASES to sustain its basic operations for tutoring. Roseanne Fong was always a resilient sponsor at Cal Corps.



A serious Tutorial Program at Lincoln Elementary School.

In the face of drastic funding cutbacks, OCCC decided to focus on senior programs, and they regretfully cancelled their youth programs. On October 2, 1989, OASES responded to the cancellation and announced a new Asian youth agency in Oakland Chinatown. The initial officers were: Raymond Douglas Chong, President; Winnie Gin, Vice President; Pamela Lee, Secretary; and Tommy Lim, Treasurer.

Our mission was simply and purely:

- To provide educational and social programs for youth in the Asian Pacific American and culturally diverse community;
- To build community values by encouraging dedicated volunteers to share their knowledge and experience; and
- To challenge students to excel in life.

Reminiscences

OASES always evokes my fondest reminiscences of the growth years from 1985 to 2000. My ethos thrived during my tenure as founder and President with my peerless associates, and I proudly watched OASES evolve into a state award-winning community service organization as we expanded into several programs by staff with a new facility in Oakland Chinatown.

As a fifth generation American Born Chinese and eldest son of Chinese immigrants of Kaiping from the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong Province in China, I recognized the urgent need to improve education for Asian youth in Oakland Chinatown.

OASES resonated within my heart and soul because I grew up during an era of poverty and racism, when I lived in a barrio (neighborhood) of Elysian Valley along the Los Angeles River near Chinatown of Downtown in Los Angeles. OASES was my true passion to serve in the Oakland Chinatown community, as my noble cause for the Asian youth. As a proud founder, OASES was my pride and joy with incredible associates. With them, for fifteen years, I passionately applied my heart and soul for OASES, as my honor and privilege for the Asian youth of Oakland Chinatown.

Passion

The brilliant undergraduates and graduates from Cal were our greatest asset as passionate volunteers for OASES. They faithfully served the Asian youth in Oakland Chinatown community with humility and zeal. As role models, they offered a way for a better future in higher education by keenly sharing their knowledge and experience with their students. They gave a bright promise of hopes and dreams for the Asian youth by their positive influences. OASES also empowered them to coordinate our programs, and they developed curriculum for the students. They were purely devoted to OASES as their noble cause.

Wilson Diep, an immigrant from Vietnam, was an outstanding Cal volunteer, who served with zesty zeal, as our Head Coordinator, when he led our flagship Tutorial Program. He also was an active director as student representative. Wilson had the kind heart of the servant.



Meghana Acharya, our passionate volunteer.



Selina Poon, our devoted volunteer, with Nancy Quach and Nancy Wong.

Our directors were firmly committed to the noble cause of OASES, recent Cal graduates and young professionals who believed in our vision and mission. They ardently served during the formative years of OASES, as they humbly sacrificed their time and money to maneuver and direct OASES during the constant difficult times. They had a clear dream of an optimistic future for OASES as community activists in our programs and the associated activities. Mike Lang and Tiffany Cheung notably served as our directors. Robert Lau, Mark Francis, and Charles Quach ably served as my Vice Presidents.



A Saturday field trip for students with volunteers and staff, led by Wai Kui Lee.

Robert Lau, a Cal graduate and Hong Kong immigrant, was a fervent advocate of OASES, as my fellow founder and my Vice President. As a youth, he had a dear friend who committed a serious felony and was imprisoned. So he vowed to help Asian youth in Oakland Chinatown toward a better path. He organized our nonprofit organization startup. Robert developed our finances that were crucial in funding our administration and operation.

Our directors believed in innovations for academic and enrichment services thru various initiatives. We expanded our Tutorial Program beyond Lincoln Elementary School to Westlake

Middle School and Brewer Middle School and to Oakland High School and Oakland Technical High School in the adjacent neighborhoods. As a key innovation, we devised a system that enabled a case manager to track the student progress to improve his or her academic performance.



David Siopack, our dedicated director.

We gradually developed a myriad after-school programs: *English as a Second Language* (Fall 1994); *Inspire Mentoring* (Fall 1995); *Kids Into Computers* (Spring 1995); *Asian Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership* (Fall 1998); and *Summer Enrichment*. Our exuberant field

trips including picnics at Lafayette Reservoir in Lafayette and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco and other wonderful venues in the Bay Area.



*An Oakland Police Department presentation during Tutorial Program at
Lincoln Elementary School.*



Michelle enjoys a lively Friday Activity at Tutorial Program.

Miss Carrie Jun Cai, a resident of Oakland Chinatown, was our precocious tutee with OASES, only daughter of a single mother, who was a Chinese immigrant from Zhongshan City in Guangdong Province. While attending St. Paul's Episcopal School, Carrie thrived under the various programs of OASES, especially with experiments in the Kids into Computers Program, Asian Pacific Fund – A Community Foundation recognized Carrie, who was a gifted writer Carrie for *My Extended Roots* in 1998 and *The Best Place for Me to Be* in 2000 in their *Growing Up Asian In America* student essay contest.

With a solid academic foundation, Carrie is pursuing her dreams and hopes. She excelled in French during high school, she earned a bachelor's degree in Human Biology and a master's

degree in Education and at Stanford University. As an undergraduate research assistant at the Stanford Center for Infant Studies, she investigated how children acquire language at a young age. Now, she is a doctoral candidate at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in Computer Science, focusing on user interface design and spoken language systems.

Carrie pensively muses about her time with OASES in an essay for this article:

Having grown up in Oakland and lived in the bustling center of Chinatown for most of my life, I have always felt that OASES was a central part of my academic upbringing and cultural community. In my earliest memories of OASES, I recall brainstorming creative ways to construct a prop for our Greek play, along with my tutor and teammates. On other occasions, I dissected animals to understand their underlying anatomy, and did a science experiment on electrical conductivity as part of the Kids into Computers program.

Looking back on my time at OASES, what I value most were not the nuggets of knowledge I gained, but rather the many avenues through which I could invent and make new discoveries. During my electricity science experiment, I remember pondering how to define an interesting scientific question, debating among a vast array of battery size options to buy at the store, designing the layout of my demo, and sharing my newfound discoveries with a room full of science fair attendees. What I remember most was that moment when I grabbed the two wires tapped both ends and witnessed my system finally light up.

Most importantly, though, what I learned at OASES -- the process of discovery, creation, and problem solving -- has been foundational throughout my academic career, whether in the humanities or engineering. Currently, as a PhD student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, I design new technology to enhance online education. Depending on where I am in the research cycle, I may be brainstorming ways to help people learn more effectively, programming interactive systems and prototypes, designing experiments, or gathering and analyzing data. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to learn, discover, and grow at OASES, which has been invaluable in cultivating my curiosity and shaping how I think every day.



Carrie Jun Cai intently dissects a frog.

As result of our excellent innovative programs, President Bill Clinton named OASES for his *Daily Point of Light Award*. In recognizing OASES as a *Daily Point of Light* for November 22, 1999, Former President George Hubert Bush wrote:

Your dedication to improving the education of Oakland's immigrant students is a remarkable example of the generosity and compassion that helps to better our communities. I commend your work and thank you for being a shining point in the lives of the people of America.

California Partners in Education recognized OASES for *Outstanding Volunteer Programs Award as Outstanding Community Based Educational Partnership Serving an Elementary School*. The League of Women Voters of Oakland honored OASES with its *Civic Contribution Award*. OASES also received the *Outstanding Community Service Award* from University of California at Berkeley, a *Certificate of Excellence* from Cal Corps and the *Golden Rule Award* from J.C. Penney Company. Our reputation was truly outstanding in the Oakland Chinatown community and beyond for its educational impacts with a corps of exceptional volunteers.

Our dedicated staff of OASES devotedly worked for our noble cause. They had the required knowledge, skills, and abilities to deliver academic and enrichment services. We fully trusted their professional acumen in administration and operation of our programs. They knew our volunteers and students well while fulfilling our core mission, six days per week.

On July 1, 2006, Wai Kiu Lee, a Cal graduate, became our first Executive Director. He previously had associated with OASES as a tutor, coordinator, head coordinator, and program administrator. He always wanted to give back to the community. When his family arrived to America from Hong Kong, his parents in Sacramento received social services from various agencies. He always believed in delivering results despite challenging obstacles. At a personal sacrifice, Wai Kiu delayed his medical school education until OASES was solidly established in Oakland Chinatown. Along with Wai Kiu, Betty Lin, Associate Director, and Elaine Cham, Outreach Coordinator was our first staff.



Elaine Cham, avid staff, with Sophia Yu and Joyce Lee.



Hanh Lo, ardent staff.

On August 12, 1998, Wai Kiu was recognized as “Dream Maker” as an American outstanding community leader with the prestigious *Do Something BRICK Award for Community Leadership*. The Brick Award recognizes and supports the accomplishments of ten outstanding leaders under the age of 30. Wai Kiu transformed OASES from a college student club into a full service community center.

Wai Kiu Lee acted as the Executive Director of Oakland Asian Students Educational Services (OASES) in Oakland, CA. An after-school educational program, OASES provides mentoring, arts & crafts, computer classes and college preparation courses for children in Oakland's Chinatown community. Under Wai Kiu's leadership, OASES has transformed from a college-based student service club into a full-service community center that currently attracts over 400 college students and committed citizens who mentor hundreds of students.



Wai Kiu Lee with youth and parent at OASES Center.

OASES always had an intimate unique partnership with Lincoln Elementary School in Oakland Chinatown as the site of our core Tutorial Program. We always had strong relationships with their Principals. They recognized that our after-school programs enhanced the academic performance of their students.

As Principal, Wendy Lee was our tireless advocate in the Oakland Chinatown community. She advised us on the academic needs of her students. She eventually served as our director. At a critical time, OASES was facing a funding shortfall. Wendy loaned her personal money to cover construction of OASES Center.

Home

For the first fifteen years, from 1983 to 1998, OASES was like the proverbial *Lost Tribes of Israel* as they wandered through the deserts of Egypt. We had no permanent office in Oakland Chinatown and we floated in temporary spaces of OCCC and Career Resources Development Center.

We daringly implemented *Project Lookout* to remodel the second floor of an old glass-cutting factory in Oakland Chinatown at 196 10th Street, a corner across Lincoln Elementary School, below Choice Korner, a liquor store. For seven months, from August 1997 to February 1998, staff and volunteers diligently toiled hundreds of hours to complete construction. Wai Kiu Lee, our Executive Director, spent days and evenings in overseeing the remodeling through the arduous permit and construction process.

Pascal Sze acted as our volunteer general contractor. A quiet man of myriad skills, Pascal worked long nights and weekends on the building's structural, electrical, and plumbing. The impressive result was a professional office of 2,700 square feet, including administration, computer lab, and multipurpose room, built by novices. Our volunteers labored for 2,700 hours to build OASES Center.



Mike Lang and Tiffany Cheung, staunch directors, building OASES Center.

OASES Center was a major milestone in our history. During a sunny winter Friday afternoon, on February 27, 1998, we celebrated the Grand Opening of OASES Center, at 196 Ninth Street in Oakland Chinatown.

Our program began with a joyous vibrant traditional Lion Dance in grand style with popping red firecrackers. Shannon Reeves, Chief Executive Officer of the Freedom Fund, gave a dynamic keynote speech and Wai Kiu Lee and I gave our inspirational speeches. Carol Quan, Superintendent of Oakland Unified School District, and Cheryl Hightower, Superintendent of the Alameda County Office of Education, attended our event, as well as Carl Chan, President, and Jennie Ong, Executive Director, with Oakland Chinatown Chamber of Commerce.

We had arrived *Home*, our sacred oasis in the heart of Oakland Chinatown. OASES Center was our significant team achievement. Henry Chang, Oakland Councilmember, presented an *OASES Day* Proclamation from the Oakland's Office of the Mayor. *OASES Day* was our defining moment.



Councilmember Henry Chang presents OASES Day proclamation

to Wai Kiu Lee as Raymond Douglas Chong looks on.

Office of the Mayor Proclamation read:

***WHEREAS**, As Mayor of the City of Oakland, I am pleased to extend special recognition to the Oakland Students Educational Services (OASES) upon the occasion of its Grand Opening, and ...*

***WHEREAS**, OASES provides volunteers the opportunity to make a difference in the community, and provides valuable experience for OASES leaders and participants to reach beyond their limits and achieve their dreams, now.*

THEREFORE, I, ELIHU M. HARRIS, Mayor of the City of Oakland, do hereby proclaim, February 27, 1998, as

“OAKLAND ASIAN STUDENTS EDUCATIONAL SERVICES DAY”

In the City of Oakland and I commend OASES, for its outstanding efforts and contributions to our youth in the City of Oakland.

ELIHU M. HARRIS

MAYOR



Intense activity in multipurpose room of OASES Center.

From 1983 to 2000, we seized the golden opportunity to help the Asian youth of Oakland Chinatown community with OASES. We faced hardships and crises during our long journey of seventeen years. Nevertheless, we persevered despite tough odds against us. We were always optimistic with our ceaseless energy and enthusiasm, and we patiently nurtured OASES as it grew with our volunteers, staff, and directors.

During a summer evening on June 11, 2003, OASES held its 20th Anniversary Dinner at the Oakland Marriott City Center in Downtown. The Oakland Chinatown community honored me as founder of OASES. Milton Chen, Ph.D., Executive Director, of The George Lucas Educational Foundation, was the evening's keynote speaker. At the podium, I pensively mused about my

proud years with OASES as I received the crystal plaque: *RAYMOND CHONG – In Recognition of Your Outstanding Services and Contribution to OASES*. Under the glare of the spotlights, my ethos was simply overwhelmed by tender reminiscences of the people, moments, and milestones of this remarkable journey of fifteen years. In particular, I duly recognized Robert Lau, Wai Kiu Lee, and Wendy Lee for their diligent dedication to OASES.

IN RECOGNITION

It is my pleasure and honor to extend special recognition to Raymond Chong for his dedicated services to Oakland Asian Students Educational Services (OASES) as the organization celebrates its 20th anniversary.

Since 1983, OASES has provided thousands of Oakland youth with important social and educational services, fulfilling its mission to create a strong Asian immigrant community that is self-sufficient and actively involved in Oakland's cultural and political life. Mr. Chong began working with OASES in the mid-1980s, led the organization's successful effort to achieve non-profit accreditation and served as the Board's first chair until 2000.

I am privileged to join OASES in thanking Mr. Chong for his extraordinary commitment to the young people of Oakland.

Best wishes for continued success.

Respectfully,

JERRY BROWN

(Mayor)

COMMENDATION***RAYMOND CHONG******OASES Founding Board Chair***

In grateful appreciation to your exceptional contributions to the Oakland Asian Students Educational Services (OASES) to provide outstanding programs and services to Oakland's youth.

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS***COUNTY OF ALAMEDA******STATE OF CALIFORNIA***



Raymond Douglas Chong, Founder, with Wendy Lee, Principal, at OASES 20th Anniversary Dinner.

At our inauspicious startup in 1989, I had clearly envisioned sustainable stability and fiscal solvency for OASES as our primary goal. With my fellow directors, we recognized that an OASES Center, an Executive Director with staff and program funds were critical goals to OASES's sustainability in Oakland Chinatown. During our adolescent years, we faced tremendous challenges and had scarce resources. With passionate zeal, we assertively and vigorously pursued our dream for OASES, and we thrived in a team environment of creativity and innovation. We kept our eyes on the *Prize*.

The awesome significance of OASES was that we gave hopes and dreams to the poverty stricken children in their meager lives at Oakland Chinatown. At Lincoln Elementary School on 225 11th Street, 90% Asian, 47% in poverty, and 89% of parents had high school or less education. With OASES support, Lincoln Elementary School ranked highest in academic achievement in Oakland that was duly recognized in California.

A Brief Legacy

After a vibrant odyssey of 15 years, I had kept my promise and finally retired on July 1, 2000. I had accomplished my vision and mission for OASES for this noble cause with the righteous few. Committed volunteers, competent staff, and compassionate directors were firmly in place with an operating budget of \$500,000 and eight staff. At the beginning of the new millennium, the 21st Century, in 2000, a new era for OASES dawned in Oakland Chinatown.

In 2000, as our second Executive Director, Perry Chen carried the momentum for OASES under leadership of Charles Quach as President. In 2005, as the third and last Executive Director, H. Nhi Chau continued to sustain OASES. She quoted: *Our reward? Our reward is in these students!* At its peak, OASES served 400 students by 400 volunteers with operating budget of \$1 million.

During the economic turmoil of the Great Recession in 2008, OASES faced an immense fiscal crisis as grants steadily disappeared. OASES eventually merged with East Bay Asian Youth Center in September 2012, which now continues as OASES Mentors Program. OASES sadly ceased to operate as a nonprofit organization.

For 29 years, OASES had faithfully perpetuated eternal optimism among our Asian youth in the rough neighborhood of Oakland Chinatown in the East Bay. From my intimate vantage, I am

very proud of our brief legacy in the Oakland Chinatown, for we deeply transformed their lives. OASES was our ultimate success story in exceptional community service by righteous few during an extraordinary time, and for the recent past, OASES was a true Shining Star in educational horizon of Oakland. *OASES - Our Noble Cause in Oakland Chinatown.*



OASES Center in Oakland Chinatown.

OASES - I Have Kept the Promise

In "Oaktown," USA

Amid flatlands of the East Bay

A dour ghetto of Chinatown stands

A grim and indigent world of

Drug deals, violent crimes, abysmal schools.

Strangers from a different shore

Vainly struggle for bare survival

They humbly serve meals in restaurants

Meekly sew dresses at factories

And modestly sell goods for stores.

*In a murky dim world,
Youth mire in dark angst
Live in harsh despair
Without hopes nor dreams
They bleakly cry out in terrible hurt!*

*In a gloomy turbulent time,
OASES, a noble cause, boldly appears
As a shining star, an awesome miracle
To save the youth
And to inspire their ambitions.*

*Volunteers, workers, and directors
With gold heart of a servant
Fervently answer their plea
To tutor, mentor, teach
To manage, direct, and lead.*

OASES Center grows in Chinatown,
A marvelous place of sacrificial labor by few
That fulfills a valiant vision
A serene pacific sanctuary
Of kindness, joy, love and happiness.

Now, youth rejoice with bright smile,
As OASES nurtures their hearts and minds
And nourishes their souls and spirits
With hopes and dreams
They cheerfully shout out in pure joy!

Afar in recent past
I fondly remember OASES
The best years of my life
The glory times of my hopes and dreams
I have kept the promise.

- *Raymond Douglas Chong*