

How a dedicated teacher of young children became a dedicated civic volunteer.

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Sharon Yowâ??s father drove a truck and tried his hand at farming. Her mother worked a switchboard and became an accountant. But while they labored at low-paying jobs, Yowâ??s parents drilled one lesson into her: â??Education is your key. Do well in school!â?•

It was a lesson she took to heart.

The first in her family to graduate college, she earned a bachelorâ??s degree and teaching credential from San Francisco State University in 1968 and launched a lifelong career in early childhood education. For more than four decades, she taught children from kindergarten through fifth grade, retiring in 2009 to care for her aging mother.

Now 79, she still works as a substitute teacher at the Chinese Immersion Elementary at De Avila in the Haight Ashbury district, keeping alive her passion for education.



Sharon Yow practices Tai Chi at the On Lok center in Noe Valley. (All photos by Colin Campbell)

â??Both of my parents stressed the importance of an education. They felt that our learning and growing was the key to success, and if anything should happen personally in life with my sister and I, we could always fall back on our education to support us.â?•

Along with her commitment to education, Yow is a dedicated volunteer, working with several civic organizations, including On Lok health services, where she plays a leadership role. She also served a term on the San Francisco Civil Grand Jury.

No strangers to hard work

Born in San Francisco, Yow is the daughter of native Californians. Her father grew up in Chinatown and worked odd jobs, including driving trucks. He never got to college and eventually leased some land and tried his hand at farming. He tried growing tomatoes and sugar beets in Bryte â?? a town outside of Sacramento â?? but wasnâ??t successful. He moved around quite a bit and tried to come home to San Francisco but frequently couldnâ??t afford to travel the distance.

Yowâ??s mother grew up in Walnut Grove. She, too, worked odd jobs and never attended college. She was a switchboard operator at the Chinatown Telephone Exchange and later worked for Southern Pacific; she retired as an accountant. She was the primary caregiver for Yow and her younger sister.

Reflecting on her working years, Yow said: â??I loved teaching. Possibly, I have fully absorbed the Latin proverb: `By learning you will teach; by teaching you will learn.â??â?•

She did have one big obstacle: Teaching math was a huge challenge.



Sharon Yow (standing) and On Lok volunteers. Left to right: Maria R, Carmen M, Jimmie C, Adam Z.

Rather than avoid the subject, Yow took a course in how to teach math at San Francisco State University and came to love it. â??I learned how to deliver the curriculum in a new way and brought understanding to my students who were struggling like me in school.â?•

Now 79, she said she is happy that the emphasis in her career was on children just entering school. â??The first years are so important because a child will learn to love (or hate) school during those years.â?•

Her first teaching job was at Jedediah Smith Elementary in Hunters Point, teaching kindergarten through third grade. She said the school was diverse;, mostly African American children. After that two-year stint, she went on to Alamo Elementary in the Richmond district, where she lives and continued to teach there until her retirement.

Leading from behind

Yow said she prefers â??to lead from behindâ?• and has little interest in awards. Nevertheless, in 2002 she was awarded â??Educator of the Year; Women Warrior in Educationâ?• by the Pacific Asian American Women Bay Area Coalition. Founded in 1980, it promotes personal, professional, and political development of Asian Pacific American Women.

Education is now the family business. Steven, her son from her first marriage, now 55, is a para-professional teacher for special education children.

Divorced, Yow remarried in 1985 to Wilson Tang, a retired chemical engineer, and together they enjoy traveling all over the globe.

â??Iâ??ve been to all the continents except Australiaâ??just not on my bucket list right now. My husband and I just returned from a month-long trip where we visited the Gobi desert and traveled throughout Mongolia and later visited with family in Hong Kong.â?•

Yow is an active member of the Square and Circle Club, the first and oldest Chinese American womenâ??s service group, founded in 1924.

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Sharon Yow (right) with On Lok volunteer Olinda Marti-Volkoff.

She is a board member of On Lok and has participated in much of the organizationâ??s growth since 1980. She joined as a volunteer and now plays a leadership role. She leads the Plan Participant Advisory Committee, which evaluates issues and implements resolutions in all locations of the organization. This seven-member team investigates all incoming complaints, which could involve any activity, program, food service, translation services, transportation, etc.

â??No matter how small the complaint may be, there is close scrutiny in place to find a resolution.â?•

In 2010, Yow and her husband were honored as On Lokâ??s Outstanding Philanthropists at its annual spring banquet.

Serving on the Grand Jury

But by 2011, she was looking for something else to fill what spare time she had, something out of the ordinary. Noticing a help-wanted ad in a local newspaper, she applied and landed a volunteer grand juror position on the San Francisco Civil Grand Jury. It investigates the operations of the various offices, departments, and agencies of San Francisco government. The group met every Monday for four hours, and Yow served for a year.

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She joined a committee of the Grand Jury that examined surcharges added to bills by businesses, particularly restaurants. At the end of the year, the report, â??Surcharges and Healthy San Francisco: Healthy for Whom?â?• was submitted.

Yow strategically calendars her activities one by one every day, gets them done as if she were working a 9-to-5 job, and says â??she loves it all.â?• She does Iyengar Yoga, gets together with friends, and attends the symphony at Davies Hall while managing to handle her duties at On Lok. And she walks a daily minimum of 10,000 steps â?? an exercise that fits in well with her busy schedule.

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