

STOCKTONSpeaks!

VIOLET WONG CHAN

There was hardly a time growing up when Violet Chan did not have responsibilities. As a child in China, she had a major role in ensuring food for her family and caring for her sickly mother. Later, in the United States, barely a teenager, she had primary responsibility for her baby brothers. Despite the roles thrust on her, Violet had an underlying passion for an education, and she fixed her sights on that goal.

Arranged marriages have been a part of Chinese tradition for generations. As soon as the young Violet Wong was out of high school, her parents tried to match her up with several young men. Even though she met two of them, including one who was seriously interested in pursuing marriage, she resisted. Violet had been told from her youth that there are changes and differences from one generation to the next, and it was this idea of change that helped Violet in shunning a matrimonial match and continuing her education instead. Though getting married and starting a family was a goal Violet felt was important, she was determined to get all the education she could, no matter the obstacles.

Born in Un Hong Village in the Toy San District of China, Violet lived with her mother and paternal grandmother during the years that the Sino-Japanese war was raging in China. In a pattern typical of many Chinese men in the early part of the 20th century, her father, Mr. Wong, had emigrated years earlier to the United States, where he was raised by an aunt and uncle. Then, as a young man, he went back to China to marry. He returned to the United States, leaving his pregnant wife behind, to continue working to raise funds for his new family's passage to the United States. But World War II hostilities in China prevented his wife and daughter, born soon after his departure, from leaving the country to reunite with him in America. It would be more than a decade before Mr. Wong would see his wife again and meet his daughter.

Life was not easy for Violet and her fractured family in China. They could hardly buy food, leading her grandmother, over her mother's protests, to consider selling Violet for money. And her mother's health was frail much of the time, but they could not afford a doctor. Violet remembers the night when neighbors gathered at her sick mother's bedside, fearful that the woman wouldn't survive to see the morning. Fortunately, her mother recovered.

Violet recalls selling vegetables that she had grown herself to make a little money to help the family. Many times the only meat they had was the fish that she was able to catch. She fetched water for the family from a well a couple of blocks away from her home. Although she knew the gnawing feeling of deep hunger, she considered herself lucky, for there were others around her who were even less fortunate. As a child, she saw babies abandoned along the side of the road by parents who could no longer care for them. More than 60 years later, Violet still remembers those scenes and gets emotional, remembering that she was helpless to do anything about them.

But Violet was never afraid to work hard to get what she and her family needed at the time, whether it was water, fish, or for herself, an education. Attending school in China was not compulsory during Violet's youth. However, her young mind hungered to know things and to learn, but she was told they had no money to pay the tuition. Violet promised to work extra hard to find ways to earn the money for tuition. After much pleading and begging, her mother finally gave in and found someone generous enough to lend them money to pay the necessary fees. Violet was finally going to get what she wanted most—an education. Thus began three years of Violet's formal Chinese education and the start of a quest for schooling, which continued during her later life in America.

After World War II ended, Violet's father, by then a veteran of the U.S. Army, sent for his family to join him in the United States. Violet and her mother boarded an ocean liner, the SS Marine Lynx, in Hong Kong and arrived in San Francisco in November 1946. For the two, it was exciting to be sailing toward a

new life and a reunion with their husband and father, but the 21-day journey was also a fearful one, as they sailed through typhoons and windstorms. They were happy when they docked in San Francisco, at long last setting foot in California, in the Chinese people's fabled "Gold Mountain."

Mr. Wong settled his family in Oakland, where Violet finally got to know her father. Having grown up in America, he was more affectionate and open with Violet than her mother was. Mrs. Wong, who was steeped in Chinese tradition, was more reserved, less demonstrative. Although Violet had assumed so many adult-like responsibilities for herself and her mother while living in China, Violet's father treated her like the youngster that she was, instead of as a small adult. Together, they played children's games, like hide-and-seek, and she would squeal in delight when he tickled her.

Fondly remembering all the things they did together, --warm experiences of the kind that help children be children, Violet says, "My father taught me how to love and to be loved."

The idyll was short lived, for her mother soon became pregnant and gave premature birth to the older of Violet's two brothers. The delivery was difficult for a woman whose health was never robust, and Violet again was thrust into the role of caregiver for her ailing mother and, now, her new infant brother. Despite the doctor's recommendation not to have any more children, Mrs. Wong was pregnant again within months; another baby followed the next year. During her early teens, with Mrs. Wong's poor health, Violet did much of the childcare for her two young brothers. Thus, she has become a mother figure for them throughout their lives. "The burden of caring for the babies, household chores, and schooling kept me so busy I did not have time for being a child", she laments. But she juggled caring for her brothers, a responsibility that fell primarily on her shoulders, with attending her beloved school, an experience she relished.

Violet had had some wonderful educational experiences in Oakland, particularly in junior high school. She encountered further difficulties because of the language barrier, and the schooling she so cherished in China did not

transfer easily to her new home. Consequently she spent much of her first months in the U.S. getting situated at the appropriate grade level.

Talking about arriving in American at the age of 12, Violet says, "I had to hop, skip and jump though my elementary schooling because of my age. Not being able to speak a word of English was very difficult at first. But with some loving and caring teachers along the way, I managed to get through... When I was in junior high (or middle school as it is now called) one particular teacher made a huge difference in my life. Her name was Miss Hazel Cox. She not only taught me well academically, she (also) gave me the confidence, assurance and encouragement when I needed it most. I was very shy and she believed in me and she wanted me to believe in myself. I shall never forget the trust and confidence she placed in me."

Violet also fondly remembers two young boys from her neighborhood who rode their bicycles to her house every morning so the three could bike to the school, about 10 blocks away. These two boys made her feel welcome and gave her the experience of enjoying friends her own age.

It was also in Oakland that Violet's religious education began. She attended Sunday school in a Baptist church, where she first learned about Jesus and his teachings. Mrs. Major, her Sunday school teacher, was very kind and patient with the young Chinese girl who barely spoke English. She not only taught Violet about Christ but also about life in general. Mrs. Major gave Violet all the attention she needed to help her learn more and more. She taught Violet to be charitable and kind to others, no matter what the situation. Mrs. Major became another role model for the young girl, particularly when Violet herself became a Sunday school teacher at St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Stockton, when her own children were young. To this day she is an active parishioner in the church.

In the early 1950s, Violet's family eventually moved to Lodi, California, where she graduated from Lodi High School. Though she was living the life of an adult, Violet still had the same dreams and aspirations she had as a little girl. She dreamed of getting married, having one boy and a girl and making a

happy home. But there was more to the dream, too. Violet dreamed of a full college education and a successful career. After graduation, she was faced with a major decision that would affect her for the rest of her life. Should she respect her parent's wishes and go along with a pre-arranged marriage, or should she do what she wanted most and pursue the college education she prized?

She made her choice to go to college, a decision that to her was a definitive step toward coming of age. Having fended off prospective suitors selected by her parents, she was determined to continue her education at Stockton Junior College (now San Joaquin Delta College). It was a challenge because not only did she know little about applying for college, she didn't have any transportation, either. But with the strength and determination she had shown already in her young life, she solved the transportation problem with the help of a friend, enrolled at the college, and graduated two years later with her Associate of Arts degree.

Violet also met her husband-to-be, Charlie, at Stockton College, and they became engaged soon after graduation. Although she chose not to marry any of the young men selected by her parents, Charlie met with her parents' approval. Her father gave her some advice that she well remembers, telling her *not* to live with her in-laws. Although her husband came from a family of ten children, his mother advised them to have small family. Violet happily followed the advice of both parents.

With marriage and children—the daughter and son she had hoped for—Violet fulfilled her parents' ambitions for her and two of her own goals. With her A.A. degree in hand, she accomplished a third goal. Only that of a career remained ahead.

After her children were in school, Violet took her degree and went to work for Stockton Unified School District as a school secretary. "Even though I did not have a big career, working in the schools was quite satisfying for me, because of some of the people I've met along the way and some of the best bosses I've

had. I also felt I had the best of the two worlds—as a mother and wife and as a working woman—because I chose a job that freed me to be a full-time mother.”

Violet and her husband are members of the Stockton Cathay Club, an organization founded in 1947 by a group of Chinese WWII veterans. The Cathay Club sponsored many activities for the Chinese community—New Year’s dances, black bass derbies, picnics, Boy Scout and Cub Scout troops. The club’s main activity now is awarding scholarships to high school and Delta students of Chinese descent. The Cathay Club has also supported other worthy causes in Stockton, as well as outside the Stockton community. Its current membership includes persons other than those of Chinese descent. Asked why she belongs to the club, Violet states, “I am Chinese and being with other Chinese and belonging to a community organization that helps and supports our people while having fun are pretty good reasons.”

Now that she is a grandmother with a rich and varied life behind her, Violet wants her children to understand her experiences growing up in China. World War II significantly set the course of her childhood and affected her family’s circumstances; she spent her impoverished childhood in a country wracked by war with all its privations, separated from her father and saddled with caring for a sickly mother.

But her experiences strengthened her as a person. She advises future generations to take on all the difficult challenges in life by working hard, enduring, and tackling obstacles with all their hearts and minds. Understanding and appreciating the difficulties in life comes at the price of experiencing hardships. Her experiences raising her brothers, for instance, helped her become a good mother to her own children. She believes that hard work—and communication, too—are the keys to happiness.

She will tell her grandchildren about attending Baptist Church, where she learned about kindness, patience, and Jesus Christ. She was also share with them stories about Mrs. Major, who was her role model as a teen. And, most importantly, she will be sure they know about her father, who was so easy to talk to. Happiness still lightens her day whenever she thinks about him.

Although Violet's beloved father died of cancer soon after his grandson—her son--was born, Violet is grateful for the time she had with him. Over the years, Violet's mother's health improved significantly as she grew older. Now, older and having become less traditional, her mother shows affection more easily to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Being the caretaker for her mother and her brothers during the early part of her life and having to devote so much time to their needs has not embittered Violet Chan. Accepting those roles strengthened her, and she considers her life a good one. She is a beloved wife, daughter, sister, mother, grandmother, aunt, and cousin. Her family—children and grandchildren plus her mother, her brothers and their families—have happy get-togethers on ordinary occasions as well as holidays. These events often include maternal relatives, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Along with enjoying family events, Violet has a special fondness for playing tennis. It's a sport she took up as an adult—and one that allows her, though a mother and a grandmother, to still find simple pleasure like a child.

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