

Dr Leslie Lam

# BIG HEARTED



For Datuk Dr Leslie Lam, success in life means doing something meaningful for others. Eight years ago, during a vacation in Myanmar, he met the country's medical director, who asked if he could provide some medical training and services in the country. The cardiologist took the opportunity to organise a team of about 10 doctors to Myanmar, where they performed free operations and trained doctors and hospital staff. Since then, Lam and other doctors have volunteered their services in several places including Hanoi, Brunei and the Seychelles.

"We are in a fortunate position and it is wonderful to share. To me, it is no use becoming successful and doing nothing for others. There is no payment in these trips. In fact, everyone is foregoing a week of earnings when they volunteer and it is something that we enjoy doing. We usually go for about a week, work five days and enjoy two days as tourists. It certainly adds a new dimension to our work," says Lam who is a pioneer in cardiology using non-surgical procedure to clear blocked arteries, known as percutaneous transluminal coronary angioplasty.

Born in Singapore, Lam grew up in the vicinity of Mount Faber. "We lived in a house that overlooked Sentosa. I used to go boating a lot and fish overnight in a sampan. It was a most enjoyable time of my life. I could climb up any coconut tree, chop the fruit and enjoy my drink up in the tree. I would also catch spiders. I caught so many that I sold them at a dollar for a champion. That was a lot of money because my daily allowance was only 10 cents then," recalls Lam, who nearly went on to join the family banking business.

"My grandfather founded the Kwong Lee Bank in 1905 with his brother and left strict instructions that no expansion was allowed. It remained a five-branch bank for the next 60 years because he felt that he had accumulated enough wealth for the next three generations," relates Lam. "However, by the time it came to my generation, there was nothing left for me," he laughs.

By Low Yit Leng

Lam's father and a brother also became bankers. "In fact, my father had wanted me to do accountancy. Everything was planned. After my O levels I was supposed to become an articled clerk. Then I thought about it. I loved to roam the jungle every day and I just could not see myself sitting behind a desk for eight hours a day. Then one night, I saw my dad and said, 'Dad, it's totally not in me at all to become an accountant.' He was mad at first, but eventually he agreed that I should go overseas for my further studies."

Lam went to Dublin and chose medicine. "It was much more exciting. I enjoyed my training very much and was given a lot of opportunity to work with doctors who were doing operations. At that time, I wanted to do

*"My father had wanted me to do accountancy. Everything was planned"*

something more challenging than just cutting up people. Cardiology was very challenging as it became more procedural and interventionist to save lives."

Lam remained in Dublin for 12 years. "It was a most wonderful time of my life, even though I was earning 37 pounds a week (about \$100) as an intern. The people were friendly and easy and they have become friends for life. We still go back to Dublin to meet our friends once every two years. I also learned to appreciate the Irish whisky and Guinness."

In 1982, he decided to come home. "It was my former boss, Professor Ward, who was very honest when he said, 'Leslie, you may become my right hand man but you will never take over my job because there are about 10 Irishmen waiting for it. You cannot play second fiddle all your life.'" Lam took his advice, returned to Singapore and joined a local hospital for seven years before going into private practice. Three years ago, Lam,

who has been in practice since 1967 was appointed governor for the region by the Society for Cardiac Angiography and Interventions based in United States, a first for a doctor in this region.

He names Professor Ward as one of the most influential persons in his life. "He has great common sense and he is one such person who can put things through step by step. I learned a lot from him, not only as a doctor but also about his approach to life and how to work hard and play hard as well."

Lam has learned to have a few indulgences in life. Besides playing golf at the Singapore Island Country Club, Lam loves wines. At home, he has an impressive cellar with more than 4,000 bottles, including some of the most exquisite labels. "My appreciation of wines started during our stay in Dublin,"

says Lam who is married to another doctor, Ivy Yap, who shares his love for wines. "When our two daughters went overseas to study, we converted one of the rooms to a cellar and started to stock up. We love having friends over to sample the wines with cheese during the weekends."

Lam used to buy wines from Europe but has since relied on local wine merchants. "In the past, when they arrived from overseas, I was disappointed to see the labels all tattered and torn. I found the local wine merchants here very good because I like to have my wines arrive in good condition. I buy wines to make myself happy — it is like some women, who go on a shopping spree when they are a bit down," he smiles.

Lam's elder daughter, Patricia, is studying at Harvard University while his younger daughter Katherine is at Princeton University. Like his father who does not believe in handing down wealth, Lam says: "I have told my daughters that when I die, they will not get money from me. I will give them the best education money can buy but they will have to work for things they want. They agree. It is good because it gives them something to strive for and I certainly feel that a self-made person commands much more respect." ■