

In Memoriam: Frances Liang Chu

January 1, 1930 – July 21, 2020

By Rod Chu



Mom passed away quickly and comfortably at 8:40 am on Tuesday, July 21, 2020.

On the evening of July 19, I found her unconscious in her bed in my home. After quickly consulting with her doctor, I had her taken to the Ohio State University Medical Center Emergency Room. There the doctors determined she had suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage and would not be able to be revived. The Massachusetts and San Francisco family members joined me there over Facetime and were able to say their goodbyes that night. I was with her again the next day and stayed overnight with her in her hospital room. The next morning, I was at her bedside with her nurse and personal care assistant monitoring her vital signs and was able to say my final farewell just before she passed. Her final days and passing were very peaceful.

My sister joins me in offering these remembrances of Mom's life. Like most children, Laura and I grew up not recognizing what amazing accomplishments our mother had achieved during her life. However, in the early 1980s, a talented journalist from China befriended her and wrote a beautiful and informative news article about her in his Chinese newspaper. Mom translated parts of the article and provided a *NY Times* background story about the journalist for us. We are happy to share those pieces with you at <https://rchu.wordpress.com>

What an amazing life Mom led! Born and educated in Shanghai, Mom attended the prestigious girl's prep school, McTyeire, and Utopia University. She immigrated to America in 1948 to be with the Chinese-American U.S. Army master sergeant she met while he was stationed in Shanghai: our wonderful father, Norton Chu. They married in NYC. I came along a year later and Laura 2 years after that.

Unlike many of her contemporaries, Mom decided to work outside the home. First, at the request of the U.S. Immigration Service, she became a Chinese interpreter on Ellis Island (she spoke fluent English, Mandarin, Shanghai, Cantonese, and some Fukienese). Later, she worked for an insurance company and as a bookkeeper at Pan American World Airways, which provided hefty discounts for travel on Pan Am to her and her family. When Pan Am started their project to develop the world's first on-line

airline reservation system for international flights (PANAMAC), they held a company-wide aptitude test to find employees who might be capable of programming such a system. Mom aced the test and was made a manager of that project. Her logical mind enabled her team to solve some of the vexing problems not addressed by American Airlines in their contemporary project to develop the world's first domestic airline reservation system, SABRE – for example, how to handle flights whose schedules made it appear that they arrived before they departed (because they crossed the International Date Line).

My sister and I grew up thinking nothing of having a working mother who achieved prominence in a new field in 1963: real-time data processing systems. Today, I'd say it was a business version of the story told in the movie "*Hidden Figures*" about their women's spectacular computing activities at NASA in 1961.

Despite two busy careers, Mom & Pop made time to enjoy their travel privileges and flew all over the world, sometimes taking us with them. As Mom was an executive of the project that would bring Pan Am additional firsts in airline travel, their airport managers and city managers would treat us royally, upgrading us to first class, getting us luxurious rooms in Pan Am's world-class Intercontinental Hotels chain, and even providing us with their personal cars and drivers to show us around town. We would fly to places like Hong Kong and Copenhagen just to go shopping!

Her computer systems experience was recognized by IBM, who hired her away from Pan Am to help them on their SABRE efforts with American Airlines. There, SVP Bob Crandall noticed her expertise and they became good friends. That friendship continued for many years as Crandall became American's president and chairman.

One of her IBM colleagues moved on to Chemical Bank and persuaded her to join him there in his data processing department, accepting her condition that she be hired as the bank's first female Chinese assistant vice president. She soon was promoted and became Chemical Bank's first female vice president. She later moved on again to join one of her former Pan Am employees at Saks Fifth Avenue as their head of Data Processing Quality Control, where she enjoyed using her employee's discount to buy her designer clothing at one of her favorite stores – and shared that discount with her family (enabling Rod to become quite a well-dressed young businessman).

Throughout her working career, she cared about developing the talents of the staff, friends, and others around her. She took early retirement from Saks to allow them to use her salary to keep her staff on during their financial cutbacks.

In her retirement, she enjoyed the opportunities to travel more with her husband, who had earlier retired from his work for the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. She also extended her devotion to volunteer work for non-profit community organizations and quickly began to achieve new distinctions.

She had become the world's first female Rotary Club president – of the Chinatown NY Rotary – the first year after Rotary International had opened its membership to women. Her fellow Rotarians had been so impressed with her success in fundraising efforts that they quickly elected her president. (Since Chinatown Rotary's bylaws were grandfathered from having been spun-off from the NYC Rotary Club, that club did not have to abide by the Rotary International bylaws requirement that chapter presidents be a Rotary member for 7 years before being elected.)

In years following, when she moved to the Elmsford and Briarcliff Manor Rotary Clubs after her retirement from work, she was elected to her Rotary District's Foundation Board, on which she served many years before her stepping down from Rotary. During that time, she was recognized by Rotary International with their highest honor: the distinguished *Service Above Self Award*, granted to no more than 150 Rotarians worldwide – a *"Prestigious award for Rotarians who demonstrate their commitment to helping others by volunteering their time and talents."*

In 1972, the founding president of the Organization of Chinese Americans – OCA – asked her to form a local chapter in Westchester County, NY. Frances and Norton Chu brought together their Chinese and non-Chinese friends to form that chapter in 1973 and Frances became its founding president, adopting the motto *"Embracing the Hopes and Aspirations of Asian Pacific Americans."* During her 30 years of involvement, the OCA Westchester and Hudson Valley Chapter (OCA-WHV) developed nationally-leading development and recognition programs, such as: the *"From East to West: The Dynamic Achievers"* recognition of inspiring leaders who exemplified OCA's values; their annual fundraising Gala Dinners, with beautifully prepared journals that documented their chapter's many activities during the year; special events, such as one at NYC's Guggenheim Museum, with U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in attendance; full involvement of the chapter's multi-generational family members in OCA-WHV activities (which led, not coincidentally, to a number of happy marriages!).

Among her many other volunteer activities, she served on the board of The American Red Cross in Westchester County and helped raise funds for their new headquarters building in White Plains. She was also an active fundraiser for Beekman Downtown Hospital in NYC and led charity fashion shows for the Physicians' Wives League of Greater New York, featuring reproduction silk gowns worn by famed Chinese women

spanning 2000 years of history as well as modern Chinese fashions, all modeled by her beautiful friends, Laura, and herself.

She created The Chu Family Charitable Foundation, funded by her own and our family members' contributions, to facilitate donations to charitable organizations and causes that she supported.

She was an enthusiastic patron of the Friends of the Rockefeller State Park Preserve that provides additional resources to fund the maintenance and enhancement of the Preserve. She enjoyed their spectacular annual tree peony festival and having regular success fishing for largemouth bass on the beautiful Swan Lake that had been created by John D. Rockefeller on his estate in Pocantico Hills and was donated by the Rockefeller family to New York State as a nature preserve. Unlike most anglers, almost every time she went fishing there, she caught at least one keeper and she'd call friends to join her at her favorite Chinese restaurant where they'd clean and cook the fish as part of a scrumptious, festive dinner. She was delighted that many of our family could join her last year at the Friends' Gala honoring Bill and Hillary Clinton, who have also been supporters of and frequent visitors to park. She was delighted to have all four generations of her family there to share her love of this national treasure.

She enjoyed accompanying her son, granddaughter and grandson-in-law to events at their alma mater, Cornell University, in Ithaca and NYC. She learned of and was buoyed by Cornell's many distinctions and activities and had developed a cadre of Cornell alumni, faculty, and staff friends and admirers over the 50 years of her visits.

Hers was a small family, but the pride she took in them was enormous. She was never happier than when her family came to visit or when she visited them. Over the years, gatherings occurred in New York, Ohio, on Cape Cod, Nantucket, and Martha's Vineyard, and in Bolton and Boston, especially for festive family holidays. She beamed with joy every time we visited her great-grandchildren A.J. and Alexandra in their school's "Grandfriend's Day" just before Thanksgiving, learning about their schoolwork, and on seeing their performances, both in person and on video when she couldn't be there.

Never afraid of using the newest technologies, she kept up with current happenings by cruising the Internet with Google and learned new ways of staying connected with family and friends via cellphone, email, blogs, instant messaging, Facebook, Facetime, and WeChat. She diligently updated her blog, posting new discoveries she made or were shared by her friends on the Internet and had a large following of her <https://franceschusblog.blogspot.com> site. Using these means she kept her pledge to

declare her gratitude for her life, her family, and her friends – and the days she didn't, we quickly checked to see if she was ailing. She relished connecting the whole family on-screen together, particularly as we've been kept separated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

She continued to live independently in her home in Briarcliff Manor after Norton's passing in 1994, enjoying her numerous volunteer activities and getting together with friends – both her longtime friends as well as the many younger friends she made over the years. She and her friends truly enjoyed each other's company, particularly over delicious meals in their homes, in restaurants, celebrating the good fortune of friends at weddings and birthdays, and at gala charity events. Wherever she went, everyone was enchanted by her caring, generous compassion, gracious smiles, and elegant style.

Although she lived alone for many years, she never wanted for a lack of dedicated friends who looked after her every need. As one of Rod's lifelong friends noted in remembering her: *"Frances was a role model as a senior who 'lived juicy' – so fully engaged in life."*

About 4 ½ years ago, Rod persuaded her to spend more of her time living with him in New Albany, OH rather than having him fly in to visit her one or more times each month in New York. She loved seeing the fauna and flora in my yard and adjoining golf course, especially the pretty hummingbirds constantly flitting to and from the feeders and the club's resident swan, who she named Billy. Her 50-year-old Night Blooming Cereus plants also celebrated their move to Ohio, treating us most summers to the delights of over a dozen deliciously scented blossoms that opened and faded overnight – unique experiences that she insisted we share with friends and neighbors, even though invitations were, necessarily, at the last minute.

Although her health has offered her challenges during the past 12 years, the superb medical care she received has pulled her through lymphoma, open heart surgery, endocarditis, blood infections, pneumonia, and other ailments, restoring her each time to a good quality of life. To maintain her health, though, she really needed exercise. With two casinos in Columbus, she got her exercise safely and happily by walking within them to find her favorite penny slot machines. When she lost money there, she didn't consider her losses to be from gambling, but rather were her "entertainment fees" that she then justified by restating as so many cents per step her entertainment amounted to, thus encouraging her to walk more. To be fair to her rationalizations, though, the Columbus casinos have been much less greedy than those in and around New York. She loved exploring new machines to discover the fun, creative bonuses they offered,

and she became really excited when she hit a few big jackpots, including one giving her \$15,000 on a 60-cent bet!

We can all be thankful for our good fortune that our Mom had been with us for 90 ½ years. Those years have been rich and extraordinary ones for her, her family, and her many friends and colleagues. For more than 70 years, she was able to truly live the American Dream and extend that birthright to her entire family and to many who knew her.

She was blessed with children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren (who are now teenagers!). Her husband, Norton Yuen Chu, passed away on June 24, 1994 at age 72, and her father-in-law, Chun Chu – who lived with them for almost their entire lives in NY – passed at age 102 on February 12, 2000. She is survived by: her son, Roderick Gong-Wah Chu, who resides in New Albany, Ohio; her daughter, Laura Chu Burke and her husband David Burke, in Bolton, MA; her grandson, Steven Fadden and his wife Shari Rosenzweig, in San Francisco, CA; her granddaughter, Karen Fabbri and her husband Gian Fabbri, and their children A.J. and Alexandra, in Boston, MA.

It's too soon to announce any final memorial arrangements, but Mom told us a few years ago that she did not want a big funeral. Although we noted that her many friends would want to pay their respects personally, she insisted that her funeral be limited to only our immediate family. Given the current COVID-19 crisis, we think it especially appropriate to respect her wishes in this regard since she would want everyone's health to be as protected as possible.

She will be interred in Kensico Cemetery, Valhalla, NY (near her Briarcliff Manor home), where our father's and grandfather's remains are at rest. Mom designed the memorial stone for our family plot, uniquely inscribing on it our family's core values which their lives so exemplified: LOYALTY, FILIAL PIETY, INTEGRITY, PHILANTHROPY.

Although we are grateful for the overwhelming outpouring of statements of sympathy, remembrances, and food and floral gifts we have already received, please do not send additional flowers or gifts to us, the funeral home, or cemetery. Instead, if you wish, please consider making a contribution in Mom's memory to:

Chu Family Charitable Foundation
18 Twin Maple Road
Bolton, MA 01740

Cornell University - Chu Family Scholarship

Box 37334

Boone, IA 50037-0334

or online at <https://www.johnson.cornell.edu/alumni/giving/>

Friends of the Rockefeller State Park Preserve

P.O. Box 8444

Sleepy Hollow, NY 10591

or online at <https://www.friendsrock.org>

All contributions to these organizations are tax deductible to the extent provided by the tax law.

