Chinese Americans’ big give

New foundation taps Asian donors

BY RENEE FROJO
San Francisco Business Times

Buck Gee is a second-generation Chinese American who, after making his fortune in Silicon Valley’s high-tech industry, turned to philanthropy.

He joined numerous boards of nonprofits serving Chinese American immigrants and became a donor at the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, giving money for scholarships to help those in his community.

“I was certainly lucky, and I wanted to help other Asian Americans achieve a similar fortune,” said Gee. “But as I looked around, I noticed that there weren’t many other Asian Americans engaged in the community foundation (or) giving big gifts. So I started questioning: Where are all the Asian Americans giving money?”

Gee now has the answer. He and other local Asian American philanthropists have teamed up to form the Chinese American Community Foundation — a first of its kind.

As one of the fastest-growing demographics in the Bay Area, Asian Americans have also become one of the leading groups of givers. Their giving, however, tends to be segmented, and they have been largely underrepresented in mainstream philanthropic foundations, leaving what could potentially be a massive pool of untapped wealth on the table.

But that could be about to change — starting with the Chinese.

“Here individuals give a lot,” said David Lei, another philanthropist who joined Gee and Dr. Roland Lowe — a Chinese elder and award-winning philanthropist who sits on the board of the San Francisco Foundation — to form the CACF. “Our goal now is to build up this Chinese American philanthropic community.”

Bridge the gap

While there are more than 385 foundations run by individual Chinese families in the Bay Area, there are no community foundations dedicated to identifying need and raising money for Chinese organizations in the region.

With a $40,000 seed grant from the San Francisco Foundation and a $1 million matching donation from Lowe, CACF officially launches next month. Its aim is to bridge the gap between donors and established nonprofits to create a long-term, sustainable pool of money to support organizations serving local Chinese and Asian American communities.

Within the next three years, the organization aims to raise $5 million and has set up donor-advised funds with the San Francisco Foundation and the Silicon Valley Community Foundation while it seeks 501(c)(3) status. The organization will also strive to elevate the status of individual gifts and make a greater impact in the Chinese community.

“It’s simply easier to do things as a community than individually,” said Lei.

Few foundations around ethnicity

While there are a number of local organizations that work specifically with Asian donors — such as the Asian Pacific Fund, which has distributed $5 million in grants over the past decade, or Give2Asia, which has raised more than $200 million for investment across 23 countries — there are few foundations that unite specific ethnic donor groups.

According to Dien Yuen, a philanthropy consultant and now executive director of CACF, each ethnic group identifies itself differently, “and they all want to create a community of donors like their peers.”

Korean immigrants, for example, want to give to the Korean diaspora, while Indians want to donate back to India, and Vietnamese want to give to other Vietnamese, she said.

While younger or second- and third-generation immigrants are increasingly identifying as Asian American, the same is not so for the older generations, who still remain bound by their communities.

“Peer giving is extremely important in most Asian communities because it’s based on trust,” Yuen said. “They’re suspicious of nonprofits because of where they come from. So we need to have training and education around those things.”

501(c)3 and tax deductions are also new concepts for many Asian American immigrants, she added.

As for broader Asian American representation in mainstream foundations, “there’s still a long way to go,” said Yuen.

Younger generation leads shift

Mari Ellen Loijens, chief business, development and brand officer at the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, agreed that Asian donors have been underrepresented in mainstream foundations, she added.

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Younger generation leads shift

Marti Ellen Loijens, chief business, development and brand officer at the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, agreed that Asian donors have been underrepresented in mainstream foundations, she added.

“We have to look at many factors — including where the Chinese are from, how long they have lived in the U.S., why they came, how they assimilated and what their values are — in order to provide a picture of who and how they give,” Yuen said.

The Silicon Valley Community Foundation recently did a similar report on Indian American philanthropy in the Bay Area that provided valuable insight.

Through its work, CACF hopes to do the same. And many have confidence that it will succeed.

The Chinese American community is “really incredibly philanthropic,” said Sara Ying Rounsaville of the San Francisco Foundation. “CACF will be a critical center to galvanize that philanthropy.”

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“The Asian community is primed for finally getting some recognition for a philanthropic spirit that has long been here,” said Loijens.

Before, donors like Gee or Jen-Hsun Huang, co-founder of Nvidia — who made a very public $30 million gift to Stanford University — were the exception, said Loijens, as public giving has not been part of the Chinese tradition. “That’s Asian philanthropic thinking,” she said.

As Asian Americans start to change where they give and how they give, CACF will serve as a good step in the direction of forming a more cohesive community of donors, she added.

While there’s a lot of anecdotal evidence that philanthropy is growing among Chinese Americans in the Bay Area, there’s still little data on the amount of funds the group has contributed or how donors in the community prefer to give. That’s one project CACF plans to take on with help from the Silicon Valley Community Foundation.