

Golden Circle Awardees:

Ruby and Ping Chow

Club, an 80 year-old Chinese Women's club focused on fund-raising for Chinese causes. Her other volunteer work and affiliations in Seattle include past-president Delta Kappa Sorority Gamma, an officer of Cathay Post Auxiliary, board member of Chong Wa, assisting with the Miss Chinatown Queen Pageant, past-president of Jade Guild, early founding member and board member of Kin On Health Care Center, Women's University Club, Sunday School teacher at Chinese Baptist Church, and serving as an advisor to a young girls' club, Chittes.

Although Auntie Fran prefers not being in the limelight, the community knows her from the behind the scenes support. We have received the blessings of her compassionate wisdom and encouragement, her abundant volunteer time, her generous financial support and her gentle and calm demeanor. Young and old, we have all benefited from her selflessness.

A very dear friend once said about Auntie Fran, "You are one of those exceptional persons who knows the meaning of "Love Thy Neighbor." You give so much and ask for so little. You make your little corner of this earth rich and full of compassion and love."

Today, Auntie Frances Locke continues her lifelong devotion and service to the Asian community and the community-at-large.

For over 60 years, Ruby and Ping Chow have contributed immeasurably to the local community and Puget Sound society. Together, this dynamic duo threw themselves into supporting charitable projects, de-mystified Chinese cuisine and culture for Greater Seattle, and changed forever the face of local politics.

Their remarkable partnership began in the early '40s when Hong Kong opera star Ping Chow, stranded in New York City after the outbreak of WWII, joined the army. He met waitress Ruby Mar, an ardent Cantonese opera fan and armed services volunteer.

They married, moved to Seattle and started their family and the legendary Ruby Chow's restaurant. After the restaurant closed at 2 a.m., head chef Ping continued performing in Cantonese operas through his operatic connections, turned Seattle into a Cantonese opera capital. As author Frank Chin has pointed out, the sleepy backwater of Seattle, with its tiny Chinese population, drew the superstars of the Chinese operatic world. Ruby and Ping took care of them. Because of their selfless volunteer work, one troupe donated its gross receipts from a Seattle Opera House performance for the purchase of property to enlarge the playfield behind Chong Wa.

Ruby Chow's became the must go restaurant for Seattle's elite, visiting Hollywood celebrities and jazz greats. Using the restaurant and Chinese community as a base, they embarked on a public relations campaign to engender understanding of Chinese cuisine and culture in the general public. With other community leaders, they brought Chinese New Year celebrations into the public consciousness, and through their work with the March of Dimes, The Seattle Times and P-I Christmas Fund, and Seafair, brought into prominence a small Chinese community. Along the way, they published the first Chinese cookbook, hosted the first Chinese cooking show and started the first Chinese frozen food business. They formally started the Seattle Chinatown Dragon Team and the Chinese Community Girls Drill Team, which have benefited thousands of youths of Asian descent.



Ruby and Ping Chow

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In a break with tradition, progressive Chong Wa Benevolent Association members, dubbed "Young Turks" by both Seattle dailies, campaigned for and elected Ruby Chow president, the first woman president of any Chong Wa worldwide. Seven other women joined her on the board.

Under Ruby and Ping's leadership, the Chinese community began the annual Governor's Chinese New Year Dinner in 1964, the annual elders' banquet to honor the community's senior citizens, and Chinatown beautification projects, such as the public Chinatown bulletin board in 1965, and the hanging of 119 red lanterns across King Street.

They provided free meals for volunteers and free food for fund raisers for the Wing Luke Memorial Museum in its early, lean years. Many other projects benefited from their generosity.

At the request of then Mayor Wes Uhlman, Ruby Chow arranged with the federal housing director to locate the first two low income apartments in Chinatown and Japantown. She established the first language bank at Harborview Hospital, had a volunteer translate the city's health manual into Chinese so that the many restaurant workers could better prepare for the food service permit exam. And she had the first health clinic serving Asians moved from Pioneer Square into Chinatown proper.

In 1974, she and other members of Chong Wa called on the Seattle schools superintendent to start a transitional bilingual program for immigrants whereby the children would receive assistance in their native languages until they could function in an all English environment. She persuaded the county to hire the first court interpreters.

Politically, Ruby and Ping's relentless public relations campaign kick started the state's Asian political renaissance by first creating a favorable climate for Asian candidates.

And when Chong Wa, a non-profit, had to turn down Wing Luke's request for help in his bid for a seat on the Seattle city council, he turned to Ruby Chow, who rallied community support behind him. They had Chinese restaurants give out fortune cookies with "Wing Luke says ..." in them. She and Ping backed other successful candidates, and in time, Ruby Chow won a seat on the King County Council, the first and only Asian American to do so. Legislative aide Doug Eglington, said of her three terms, "She brought a personal touch to the council by bringing constituent issues to the fore, from the first airport noise abatement study to helping a Lebanese family to locating bus shelters in low income neighborhoods." Grateful constituents named a Georgetown park after her.

In the '90s, Washington state had so many Asian elected officials, far out of proportion to their population, that officials in the other Washington took note. Journalist Terry McDermott ascribed this phenomenon to Ruby Chow, noting that Gary Locke, the first Asian American governor of a mainland state, would not be governor were it not for her paving the way. Former Gov. Locke, in his first Lunar New Year Governor's Dinner speech in 1997 remarked, "The fact that I am here today goes back to the long time work of Ruby and Ping Chow."

They prevented use of the INS building as a jail and later, as a federal prison. Through "roast duck diplomacy," County Councilwoman Chow flew to Washington, D.C. with a Chinese roast duck, prepared by Ping, for a meeting with the late Sen. Warren Magnuson. To stop the proposed prison, they collected thousands of signatures on a petition and presented it to federal officials.

Ping and Ruby Chow helped virtually anyone who asked—from those seeking political office to appointments to high level positions. They have done so quietly and without fanfare. In so doing, they have improved the quality of life for thousands and left an indelible mark on local history.