



A history timeline of the Ming Quong home is the centerpiece of a New Museum Los Gatos exhibit that runs through this summer.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF NEW MUSEUM LOS GATOS

Lighting the Way

Orphanage for young sex slaves is now a modern treatment refuge

By JUDY PETERSON

The 1849 Gold Rush that attracted thousands of single men to San Francisco and created an appetite for prostitution also spawned a brutal practice in Chinatown that saw young girls kidnapped and sold as sex slaves. That historical sidelight set the stage for Donaldina Cameron's life work. Historians credit her for rescuing 3,000 enslaved Chinese girls and opening the Ming Quong orphanage for young Chinese girls in Los Gatos on Loma Alta Avenue in either 1935 or 1936. The exact date has apparently been lost to history.

Last month, more than a dozen Ming Quong orphans, many of whom are now elderly, returned to Los Gatos for a reunion. Among them was Nona Mock Wyman, author of "Chopstick Childhood in a Town of Silver Spoons," which recounts her experience at the Los Gatos orphanage. For reasons that are still unknown, Mock Wyman's mother abandoned her in the mid-1930s at the age of 2, then vanished. She described life at Ming Quong as regimented. "We'd wake up around 6 a.m. with a bell ringing," she said. "There was no heat, so you were freezing. We quickly dressed and went to the

dining room for breakfast, where you'd stand behind your assigned chair and pray. There was no talking allowed." The girls were all very polite, she added. "It was mostly fun," Mock Wyman said. "There were swings, a big yard, climbing bars and a teeter-totter. We played house a lot with pretend mothers and fathers." The young Chinese orphans walked to and from the University Avenue School in downtown Los Gatos and interacted with the community and their Ming Quong neighbors. "It was a good feeling," Mock Wyman said.

She was honored that the orphans were included in a New Museum Los Gatos exhibit that traces Ming Quong's history. The museum at 106 E. Main St. plans to keep the exhibit open through summer. The exhibit was researched by the museum's history curator, Amy Long, who called Cameron a "rock star." "This is a woman who risked her life," Long said. "She physically scaled buildings and fire escapes in the middle of the night to rescue children at a time when it was dangerous for women to speak out. Ninety-nine percent of the Chinese women who came

to California didn't come voluntarily. They were kidnapped or sold by their families as indentured servants or sex slaves. They didn't live long." In 1961, Cameron told the San Francisco Examiner her work began in 1895 "when I walked the streets of San Francisco with little, motherless Chinese girls, going from agency to agency looking for help. No one cared." She continued her mission for 42 years and became known in Chinatown as "Lo Mo," which means "the mother." But Chinatown tongs, infuriated with her,

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called her Cameron “Fahn Quai” or the “white devil.”

The tongs were the reason Cameron opened a home at Mills College in Oakland in 1925 and then the Los Gatos orphanage. She was trying to move the girls away from Chinatown. “There was nowhere for them to hide, so going to the home at Mills College or to Los Gatos made it difficult for the tongs to get them back,” Long said.

In Los Gatos, the girls lived on a 13-acre site that today is occupied by offices, housing and recreation facilities for Uplift Family Services, which offers a similar refuge.

Uplift annually helps 30,000 children and families recover from abuse, severe neglect, addiction and poverty. Although it’s one of the largest treatment programs in California, only a dozen boys and girls live there now since Uplift has become a more community-based program.

“We believe that kids do best in their own home, with support from parents, relatives or foster care,” said Darren DeMonsi, Uplift’s executive director. “The greatest indicator of a child’s success is the strength of the family bond.”

That philosophy, known as “wraparound,” was pioneered in the 1990s by Jerry Doyle, who was executive director when Uplift became known as Eastfield Ming Quong. That name was derived from the Eastfield Home of Benevolence, founded in San Jose in 1867, and the Ming Quong Presbyterian Mission Home for Chinese orphans, founded in 1874 in San Francisco.

From those early roots Uplift Family Services this year is celebrating 150 years of helping children and families. Today the organization has more than 400 employees and numerous satellite centers throughout Santa Clara County. Its headquarters is at 251 Llewellyn Ave., Campbell.

Uplift also offers programs to residents in 29 other California counties.

“We want to allow children and families, wherever they are, to access our services,” DeMonsi said. “Our size allows us to develop cutting-edge programs and expand to areas that don’t have



Virginia Lee shares a scrapbook of pictures from when she was a child living at Ming Quong with fellow former residents during a recent reunion that began at the New Museum Los Gatos exhibit, ‘Radiant Light: The Story of Eastfield/Ming Quong’ and ended with lunch at the former Los Gatos facility.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGE SAKKESTAD

services like wraparound. So, we help them move from traditional care to wraparound.”

Most of the kids served by Uplift have mental health issues.

“The most common things we see are drugs or alcohol abuse in the home, and emotional, physical or sexual abuse,” DeMonsi said. “These families are often disconnected, so we have a family-finding service, develop a family tree and strengthen the family connection. We contact the family and, wherever possible, safely reintroduce them.”

Uplift’s strategy is to focus on a family’s strengths rather than its deficiencies.

“We treat the whole family,” DeMonsi said. “If there’s a parent with a drug or alcohol problem, we refer them. We believe parents can get their lives together and help the child become whole again.”

For whatever reason, the kids currently living at the Los Gatos facility can’t go home yet. “But they’re in constant contact with their families,” DeMonsi said.

The average stay in Los Gatos is anywhere from three to six months. During this time, the kids attend Los Gatos schools and try to lead normal lives.



This old photograph shows the entrance to the Ming Quong home in Los Gatos when it was still an orphanage. Although Ming Quong started out as a haven for Chinese girls, boys and girls from all races were admitted beginning in 1953.

Although Uplift does not release the names of its minor clients, it recently produced a video featuring a young woman named Destiny, who credits Uplift with giving her hope for a “life she never expected.”

Before receiving help from

Uplift, Destiny lived with her “medication addict” mother and her mom’s boyfriend—a drunk who “sometimes got a little too touchy.”

“Uplift has helped me grow as a person,” Destiny said. “I was told when I was younger that I didn’t

have feelings, that I had this thing called Asperger’s and that I was bad with people...so that’s what I believed. For a long time I was really, really numb. Uplift helps me to remember that I’m human and that I have emotions and I can feel things. It’s easier for me to accept who I am.”

Destiny added that Uplift’s support system was like “acquiring parents who want you to do your best, make mistakes and learn from them. They’re like, ‘No, you can’t fail, you have to succeed.’ They help me to become who I want to be.”

As a result of that support, Destiny is doing well in school, has a job and intends to go to college. “I have come to a point where I’m kind of able to help people myself, use my past experiences to make others’ lives a little less hard,” she said. “I’m ready for life. I’m ready to see what will happen. I hope for the best.”

Destiny is just one example of an Uplift success story: The organization boasts that 92 percent of the youth who exit its programs stay in a home setting, 95 percent stay out of trouble and 90 percent stay in school.

Although the organization receives most of its funding from government grants, fundraising plays a big role in Uplift’s day-to-day activities. Locally, the nonprofit operates the volunteer-run Unicorn Thrift Shop, 1181 Redmond Ave. in San Jose’s Almaden Valley, and the Happy Dragon Thrift Shop, 245 W. Main St. in Los Gatos.

“The Happy Dragon was started in 1958 by a mother and daughter who held yard sales to support Ming Quong,” DeMonsi said. “They wanted a more steady source of income, so they started collecting green stamps and raised enough money for the down payment on the Happy Dragon Building.”

Also in Los Gatos, the all-volunteer Butter Paddle Gift Shop is open daily, with 100 percent of proceeds donated to Uplift. The Butter Paddle is at 33 N. Santa Cruz Ave.

The Butter Paddle is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, simultaneously with Uplift’s 150th anniversary of service.

For more information, visit upliftfs.org or call 408-379-3790.

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