

State's first Asian-American optometrist, wife honored for achievements

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Tony Chan, a retired Albuquerque optometrist, and his wife, Carolyn. Tony Chan recently received the prestigious Spirit of America Award from the Chinese American Citizens Alliance. Carolyn received the same award in 2015. (Marla Brose/Albuquerque Journal)

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — In August 1959, Tony and Carolyn Chan rolled into New Mexico with little more than \$400 and Tony's recent degree in optometry.

Both had grown up in Chinese-American communities in northwest Mississippi, but hoped New Mexico would be both a refuge from Tony's severe allergies and a good place to launch his career.

They were heading to Albuquerque, but, thanks to foresight and fortitude, their first stop was Farmington, a decision that paved the way for a successful optometry career that lasted Tony until his retirement 15 years ago and led to a lifetime in and a commitment to their adopted home for both Tony and Carolyn.

A proper introduction

Tony knew that the state optometric association was holding its convention in Farmington that August.

"I had come to let them know who I was, because if I didn't I'd be coming in as a real stranger," Tony, now 85, said. "If I introduced myself they would be more conducive to accepting me. It worked."

Tony Chan became the 172nd licensed optometrist in New Mexico and the first Asian-American optometrist licensed in the state. He would later become president of the New Mexico Optometric Association and receive the association's Lifetime Achievement Award. That's just skimming the surface.

Both Tony and Carolyn, 81, have been engaged throughout their lives in education, philanthropy and civic action locally and nationally.

"I really went out into the (Albuquerque) community," Tony said. "I joined the Lions, the Jaycees, Toastmasters, any organization that was open to me. We pushed heavily whenever we got involved in anything. We worked our way up in the leadership ranks."

Last month, during its biennial national convention in Chicago, the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, the nation's oldest Asian-American civil rights organization, awarded the Spirit of America Award to Tony Chan.

The award, the most prestigious presented by C.A.C.A., recognizes individuals "who embody the indomitable spirit of our nation" and whose achievements have improved the lives not just of Chinese-Americans but all Americans. Carolyn received the same award in 2015, making the Chans the first husband-wife team to be so recognized.

"I can now walk beside my wife and not behind her," Tony joked while accepting the award during the Chicago convention.

Grocery stores and

delta dances

Tony Chan was born in Boston and spent his early years in New Haven, Conn. His father was an importer and later went into the laundry business.

"I worked with my dad in the laundry," Tony said. "I remember, when I was 5, standing on a crate and operating this big sheet iron on a roller."

When Tony was 6, his father died. His widowed mother, who spoke little English, Tony and three siblings lived for a time on public assistance. When Tony was 8 or 9, his family followed a relative who relocated from Boston to the Mississippi Delta.

Tony lived in Ruleville, Miss., a town of about 500, and worked in family grocery stores in Ruleville and nearby Cleveland, Miss. There were only three or four Chinese families in Ruleville, and the Chinese children attended the white schools in what was still a segregated society. Tony's challenge was not so much that he was Chinese as that he was from the north.



Tony Chan was the first Asian-American optometrist licensed in New Mexico. He practiced for more than 40 years.

"I was the Yankee kid," he said during a recent interview at the Northeast Heights home he shares with Carolyn. "I fought them all. Most of the time I won, which made it better. And I was good at athletics — basketball and football. I established myself."

Carolyn Hong Chan was born in Greenville, a Mississippi Delta town. She said that during her childhood, the town had a population of about 40,000, 30 or so Chinese-American families and 50 Chinese grocery

stores. She worked in a family grocery from an early age, standing on Coke crates to make change for customers.

Carolyn attended a Chinese school early on. It was not until about 1947, when she was in sixth grade, that she went to a white school.

"In Greenville, black, white, Chinese, Lebanese and Jewish families were all living together," she said. "We got along with all the kids. You never really questioned why you were going to one school and friends you played with were going to other schools."

Tony graduated from Ruleville High School in 1951. Carolyn graduated from Greenville's E.E. Bass High School in 1953. The two had met at Chinese-American community dances held mostly in Greenville and Cleveland, but life took them separate ways for a time.

'You'll Never Know'

A few years after graduating from high school, Tony joined the Air Force but because of his allergies received a medical discharge within 90 days. He worked at various jobs in San Francisco and Hayward, Calif., and in Washington, D.C., before enrolling in D.C.'s George Washington University, which he attended until a stepbrother, an optometrist, advised him to consider optometry as a career. That's when he transferred to the Illinois College of Optometry in Chicago.

Carolyn had married and moved from Mississippi, but she returned to her home state after her husband was killed in a plane crash. She completed a degree in English and speech at Mississippi State College for Women, now Mississippi University for Women, in 1958. It was that year that Tony, a year shy of completing his optometry degree, returned to Mississippi for a visit. The two met again at a Chinese-American dance in Cleveland.

"I was singing 'You'll Never Know' and when I finished, he came up and hit on me," Carolyn said.

"I discovered she had a college degree and thought she would be good for my career," Tony joked.

They were married in Greenville in 1958.

Albuquerque bound

Carolyn taught school in Chicago while Tony completed his optometry degree. When he had done that, they drove from Chicago to Farmington and then on to Albuquerque.

"I came from Ruleville, which had a very small population, and I felt I needed a larger city, such as Albuquerque, to draw (optometry patients) from. It's a little more difficult being Asian. Could I get people who were not Asian to come to me?"

In Albuquerque, Tony connected with optometrist Roy F. Menning, whom he had met briefly at the Farmington convention.

"He was looking for an associate, and I was looking for a place to go," Tony said. "He didn't know me, and I didn't know him. We both didn't know."

But they came to terms and Dr. Tony Chan started his career at Menning's office at 128 Monroe NE.

"He liked me," Tony said. "After three months, he said, 'You want to go into a partnership?'"

It was a partnership that lasted 17 years before the two parted amicably and pursued separate professional paths.

"I myself, as a professional, did not feel a whole lot of discrimination because of my ethnicity," Tony said. "I felt fairly well accepted."

If there were any barriers, Tony Chan found a way to get over them. To date, he is the only Asian-American to serve as a trustee of the American Optometric Association, and he has been a member of the national board of the C.A.C.A.

He has served as president of the Executives Association of Greater Albuquerque, the local chapter of

Toastmaster International and the Heights Lions Club. He has been an active supporter of the University of New Mexico's Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, the Albuquerque Historical Society, New Mexico PBS and the Mississippi Delta Chinese Heritage Museum in Cleveland, among others.

For her part, Carolyn taught elementary school in Albuquerque for several years, served as chair of the National Advisory Council on Bilingual Education during the Reagan administration, was president of both the New Mexico Optometric Association Auxiliary and the Auxiliary to the American Optometric Association, president of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science foundation and president of the national C.A.C.A.



A portrait of Dr. Tony Chan and his sister Barbara Moy, taken in Boston in 1934, is among the collection of family photos in the Chan's Albuquerque home.

In 2009, she received the Spirit of Philanthropy Award presented by the New Mexico Association of Fundraising Professionals, and she continues to be involved with museums and historical preservation projects. She is working now with the Albuquerque Museum of Art and History on an exhibit about the Chinese experience in New Mexico, scheduled to open in June 2018.

Common ground

The Chans have two children, a son, Russell "Rusty" Chan, who edits movies for Albuquerque's My50TV, and a daughter, Mamie Chan, an optometrist who took over her father's practice. They have two grandchildren.

"Before we even had kids, Tony and I talked about how, if we were ever successful, we would give back to our community," Carolyn said.

She believes their experience with different races and ethnicities in Mississippi and Chicago helped make them feel at home in Albuquerque.

"We were open to understanding the community," she said. "We went to all the different festivals — Native American and Hispanic. We had Jewish friends. We had an understanding that we all had the same aspirations for ourselves and our children and that education is the key for everyone."