

Gens de cœur

An activist in practice and politics

As an openly gay physician, Dr. Alan Tai-Wai Li brings a unique appreciation, empathy and perspective to his twin passions of medicine and social activism.

“It all seems natural when I look back,” the 41-year-old doctor says of his work with immigrants and refugees, people with HIV infection and AIDS, and those who face economic hardship and discrimination. But this career path certainly wasn’t planned.

Since graduating from the University of Toronto in 1985, Li has worked as a salaried physician at the Regent Park Community Health Centre in downtown Toronto. Happenstance brought him there.

“I didn’t really know much about community health centres — we weren’t exposed to them in medical school. I was looking for locums and several CHCs approached me. I picked Regent Park because it deals with a high-needs population and there was active outreach with the Southeast Asian community.”

Why has he stayed? “It surprises me every day — the complexity of the human condition and how nonclinical conditions affect health.”

He is also a veteran of the Casey House Hospice, an institution he became acquainted with when his best friend developed AIDS and went to Casey House to die. “Here, too, I had to learn on the job. At first, I knew nothing about palliative care.”

Li was Casey House’s medical director in the late 1990s and saw it through a challenging transition period that arose after people with AIDS began living longer because of new drugs. This led to an increased need for coordinated care between the hospice and acute care facilities.

Li is also past national president of the Chinese Canadian National Council, an organization he joined at the urging of fellow activist Amy Go. “As the council’s first openly gay president, he built trust and respect and helped the CCNC to respond not just to questions of racial discrimination but also to discrimination based on sexual orientation [within its own community] and to poverty issues,” says Go, executive director of the Yee Hong Centre for Geriatric Care.

Li is also a past president of the South East Asian Service Centre Community, Gay Asians Toronto and Asian Community AIDS Services. Yvette Perrault, a counsellor at the AIDS Committee of Toronto during the 1980s, says he approached her about building bridges with the gay Asian community. “He said he needed help. He was never pushy, but

he was completely persistent. In the end, his group used our offices on Saturday, when we weren’t in.”

Li arrived in Canada when he was 16 to attend boarding school in Winnipeg. “My family always wanted me to be a doctor. My grandfather was a doctor and when he got older, he wanted someone to succeed him. My father had become a writer and translator.”

His father and mother have since moved to Canada and retired in Mississauga, Ont. “The whole mindset when I first immigrated was to ace everything, get into medical school and report back to my family. I spent my holidays studying.”

After completing a bachelor of science at the University of Manitoba, Li arrived at the U of T medical school immediately after police raids on the city’s gay bathhouses, which triggered a massive community protest. Li then connected with the Gay Asians Toronto group and became the keynote speaker in 1982 when the Gay Pride Day parade convened in Grange Park, next door to Toronto’s Chinatown.

However, he was not open about his sexual orientation at medical school. “It was not a supportive environment,” he says. “There was little open discussion on the issue.”

It was not until his clinical clerkship that Li really began to enjoy medicine. “I began to see medicine as an art and a humanitarian profession, and it began to make more sense to me.”

Today he is described by many colleagues as a gentle, thorough doctor who is a good listener and good team player. Dr. Jim Moore, a Casey House colleague, says Li stands out because of his ability to see what needs to be done and then to go out and do it. Li’s latest project is an example: he is bringing together a coalition of community organizations to help immigrants and refugees with HIV/AIDS who face complex legal and treatment-access barriers.

When it comes to social justice, says Li, he learned to do by doing. He learned about race issues and the politics of sexual orientation, community organizing, outreach to immigrant groups and systemic discrimination by “doing the work.” He has also worked as a writer and editor of *CelebrAsian*, a magazine aimed at gay Asians, and has produced several variety shows.

Li and his partner of 14 years, Keith Wong, study Cantonese opera together, taking weekly lessons. Due to a heavy schedule his last public singing performance was in 1995, but Li hopes to have more time for such pursuits in the near future. — Ann Silversides, Toronto



Jasmine Sinclair

Dr. Alan Li: learning on the job