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Foundation Works to Erase Stigma for Asian Families of Disabled Children

The Foundation for Disabled Youths was started in 2004 by a mother wanting to find other families like hers.

By Melanie C. Johnson <http://walnut.patch.com>

Ben Su might not have relatives here in California, but he is surrounded by family.

Su serves as president of the Foundation for Disabled Youths, an organization started in 2004 by a mother seeking the support of other parents like her. What makes the group atypical is that it is made up of almost all Asian families, mainly Chinese.

"In Chinese families, when you have disabled children, it's not widely accepted," Su said. "It's like 'have you done something in a past life to deserve this?'"

A major goal of the Foundation for Disabled Youths is to help erase that stigma, to encourage parents and their children to come out of the shadows, he said, adding there are around 3,000 such families in Southern California.

Most of the families the Hacienda Heights-based foundation aims to reach are first generation Americans, often prevented from getting the help or resources they need because of a language barrier, he said.

The group started with six families but has grown to 60. The "angels," as Su calls them, range in age from four to 60. They have a range of disabilities from cerebral palsy to autism.

Su, chief executive officer and president of the City of Industry-based Prosperity Wealth Management Group, got involved with the foundation in 2006 after attending a financial insurance industry event where the youth performed.

The foundation provides weekly activities for the members from arts and crafts to music to sports. Every month, they go on some sort of excursion, Su said. While the disabled children and adults are enjoying their activities, the parents meet for their own classes.

The organization relies on around 50 volunteers, mainly students who attend Diamond Bar, Walnut, Rowland Heights and Troy high schools. Su said they are always looking for more.

Erica Yang, a Walnut High alumna, said she was looking for a way to meet some required volunteer hours for school. Yang, who now is a pre med student at Cal Poly Pomona, said she had worked with seniors who had become disabled by disease or age. But the 19-year-old said she had never been around the severely disabled

before she began volunteering with the foundation five years ago.

"It was almost a shock to me," Yang said. "I was shocked at how wide the variety of the disabled."

Yang said she felt the need to just jump right in and this year is teaming up with Wu to run the volunteer program.

"I honestly just enjoy the experience," she said. "Every different angel has a different personality. You get to know them on another level. You become friends with them."

Su said most of the volunteers speak Chinese, but it's not a requirement to serve.

"With the angels, language is not an issue," he said. "They need to feel your presence. They just need to hear your voice."

With a disabled child, it takes a while to make a connection, he said. The volunteers are urged to always talk to them and if they want to dance, dance with them, Su said.

His connection to the families the foundation serves came out of his desire to help, but has grown beyond that. For Su, who was born in China and raised in the Philippines, the foundation has given him a sort of surrogate family away from home.

"This is like my hobby," he said. "I interact with them. I do things with them. They're like my family."