

COMPASSION & RELIEF

SPRING  
2026

ISSUE  
**80**

**TZU CHI**



*USA Journal*



## Tzu Chi Academies: Grassroots Beginnings to a Nationwide Network

Growing Into Leadership: Tzu Chi Academy Graduate Stories

Helping Families Restore Stability After the Park Fire

John Fell's New Badge: A Legacy of Resilience

# CONTENTS

Contemplative Wisdom  
By Dharma Master Cheng Yen

03 | Editor's Note  
By Anik Ghose

04 | DHARMA STORIES  
The Loss of the Golden Feathers  
By Dharma Master Cheng Yen  
Translated by the Dharma as Water Team



COVER STORY  
**Tzu Chi Academies: Grassroots Beginnings to a Nationwide Network**  
By Yingying Li  
Translated by H.B. Qin  
Edited by Ida Eva Zielinska

18 | PORTRAIT  
**Growing Into Leadership: Tzu Chi Academy Graduate Stories**  
Translated by H.B. Qin  
Edited by Ida Eva Zielinska

**Carrying the Legacy of Love Forward: Melinda Wu's Story**  
By Jiali Liu

24 | **From Mischievous Child to Mentor: Elvin Huang's Story**  
By Chen Chen

30 | **Born Into Tzu Chi: Chloe Chen's Story**  
By Chen Chen

40 | **A Shared Path of Service: Amber Lee's Story**  
By Jiali Liu

FEATURE STORY

46 | **John Fell's New Badge: A Legacy of Resilience**  
By Pheel Wang  
Translated by H.B. Qin  
Edited by Adriana DiBenedetto

58 | **Helping Families Restore Stability After the Park Fire**  
By Ida Eva Zielinska

72 | **Steady Giving Is Tzu Chi's Heartbeat**  
By Ida Eva Zielinska

77 | **Dharma Q & A**  
By Dharma Master Cheng Yen

WORDS OF WISDOM

78 | **A Peaceful World Is Life's Greatest Blessing**  
By Dharma Master Cheng Yen  
Translated and Compiled by the Dharma as Water Team

80 | **Tzu Chi USA Directory**

Cover: Tzu Chi Academy students learn about the spirit of giving as they craft their very own unique bamboo banks. Photo/Jean W Hsuenter

- Publisher: Debbie Lee
- Publishing Director: Ting Fan
- Editor-in-Chief: Anik Ghose
- Deputy Editor: Ida Eva Zielinska
- Editor: Adriana DiBenedetto
- Art Director: Ling Soo
- Senior Designers: Tom Yang, Lixian Yoong
- Designer: Ruby Lau
- Contributors: Tzu Chi USA Volunteers

The Editorial Team sincerely thanks all contributors and invites feedback and contributions. Please contact us at [journal@tzuchi.us](mailto:journal@tzuchi.us). Read the online version at [journal.tzuchi.us](http://journal.tzuchi.us).



© Copyright 2026 Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation All rights reserved. All photos are the property of Tzu Chi unless otherwise noted. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage-and-retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. All articles contain the views of their authors, which do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation.



## CONTEMPLATIVE WISDOM

Thoughts for meditation, contemplation, and reflection

**Dharma Master Cheng Yen**  
Founder of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation

May there be love in the world, where people support one another.  
May our every thought be good, and may we create blessings every day.  
Pure hearts will create a pure land, and bring infinite blessings and virtues.  
With a harmonious society, there will be peace in the world.

# YOUR LOVE CREATES LASTING CHANGE



## ONE DAY, ONE DOLLAR RIPPLES OF KINDNESS

Tzu Chi began when 30 women, guided by Dharma Master Cheng Yen, saved small change each day in bamboo banks, trusting not in the size of their gifts, but in the strength of enduring compassion.

That same principle continues to guide us now.

With this knowledge close at heart, we invite you to join our **“One Day, One Dollar, Ripples of Kindness”** giving campaign.

A single dollar per day may seem small. Yet, like a drop of water touching a still pond, its impact can ripple outward — supporting disaster survivors, expanding access to medical care, delivering hope to families facing hardship, nurturing students’ futures, and protecting the environment. Through this collective movement of care, each ripple widens until it reaches every shore, creating a lifetime of change.

Join us.

**DONATE TODAY**



Compassion rarely begins with grand gestures. More often, it starts quietly, with a small decision to help, a moment of empathy, or a simple habit practiced day after day. Over time, these acts gather strength, spreading outward like ripples across water. One kindness touches another life, inspiring the next, forming a chain of care that travels farther than any single deed ever could.

This spirit has guided Tzu Chi since its founding nearly six decades ago. What began with followers setting aside small coins in bamboo banks to help neighbors in need gradually grew into a global humanitarian movement. The bamboo bank tradition reminds us that compassion is not measured by the size of a gift, but by the sincerity behind it. When many people give a little consistently, those small offerings accumulate into a powerful force for good.

In this issue of the *Tzu Chi USA Journal*, we explore how *Ripples of Kindness* continue to unfold through stories that show how acts of care can extend far beyond their beginnings.

Our cover story, “Tzu Chi Academies: Grassroots Beginnings to a Nationwide Network,” presents the history of Tzu Chi’s humanistic weekend schools in the United States. What began more than 30 years ago with early volunteers caring for and teaching one another’s children has grown into a thriving educational community dedicated to nurturing both knowledge and character. Today, 26 Tzu Chi Academies across the country help students cultivate gratitude, empathy, and service while learning Chinese.

The portrait stories of Chloe Chen, Elvin Huang, Amber Lee, and Melinda Wu then reveal how the values nurtured at the Tzu Chi Academies blossom into lifelong commitments to helping others. Their examples illustrate how early experiences in service and community can guide young people as they grow into compassionate leaders.

This issue’s feature stories also take us to Northern California, where communities continue rebuilding after the 2024 Park Fire. In “John Fell’s New Badge: A Legacy of Resilience,” a retired Chico fire captain who once helped others in times of disaster becomes a survivor himself and discovers the deeper meaning of the bamboo bank tradition. In “Helping Families Restore Stability After the Park Fire,” the story of the Morris family and the efforts of Tzu Chi volunteers and disaster case managers show how steady support can help survivors rebuild a sense of security and hope as they navigate the long road to recovery.

Across these stories, a common thread emerges: compassion grows through persistence, with volunteers, educators, donors, and community members all contributing in their own ways. As you read, we invite you to reflect on how ripples of kindness can extend far beyond a single moment, spreading across generations, communities, and the world. Because when compassion becomes part of daily life, its effects can reach farther than we imagine. 🌱

by **Anik Ghose**

# THE LOSS OF THE GOLDEN FEATHERS

*"Material things just help us live. If we cannot control our desire for them, not only will we start misbehaving, but we may also bring endless worries upon ourselves. Let us only take what we need. Otherwise, our greed will be like a bottomless pit, and we won't be able to get out."*

*Dharma Master Cheng Yen*

After her husband passed away, a woman took her three daughters with her to a rich man's house to be servants. The four of them lived a very hard life.

One day, a goose with golden feathers landed in front of the three girls. He said, "I am your father. I know that your life is very hard, and your mother has to work very hard to raise you. You can pluck some of

my feathers and sell them to make some money and live a better life."

Happily, the mother told her daughters to pluck his shiny golden feathers. Each of them pulled out four or five and bundled them together to sell. The money they made was enough to help them live a good life.

The golden goose promised to visit them every few days so they could pluck more of his feathers and sell them. Slowly, their lives got better and better.

One day, the woman said to her three daughters, "We can't even trust people; how can we possibly count on a bird? Even though this golden goose lets us pluck his feathers, what if he stops coming? How will we live? Next time he comes, let's pluck out all his feathers. If we can sell them all, we'll be rich forever." So, the four of them did exactly that.

Having lost all his feathers, the goose could no longer fly. So, the woman put him in a cage. Soon, his feathers grew back. However, the new ones were regular white feathers instead of golden ones. 🦢

*From Master Cheng Yen Tells Stories: The Loss of the Golden Feathers by Shih Cheng Yen, published in 2015 by Jing Si Publishing*

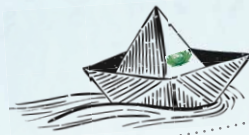
# Tzu Chi Academies: Grassroots Beginnings to a Nationwide Network

Written by Yingying Li  
Translated by H.B. Qin  
Edited by Ida Eva Zielinska

## 26 Tzu Chi Academies Across the United States



Students perform a group recitation at the graduation ceremony of Tzu Chi Academy, Los Angeles, on May 19, 2019. Photo/Wesley Tsai



On September 30, 1991, children from the Tzu Chi U.S. chapter's Chinese language class raise funds on the street for disaster relief in Central and Eastern China following severe flooding in May and June. Photo/Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation

## From Informal Care to Formal Education

The origins of Tzu Chi's educational mission in the United States can be traced back to April 14, 1991. To allow volunteers to focus on group practice, the Tzu Chi chapter in the U.S. (now Tzu Chi USA), encouraged by then-CEO Stephen Huang, established a Tzu Chi Youth Group in Cerritos, California. Meanwhile, across the nation, other educational groups for volunteers' children had already begun to take shape under different names.

There was no formal structure or curriculum, only a group of volunteers willing to offer their time and knowledge. That early spirit of accompanying one another's children became the foundation for the schools that were later established.

More than 30 years ago, when Tzu Chi was just beginning to take root across the United States, early volunteers – many from Taiwan – spent weekend after weekend teaching and caring for the children of other volunteers at the organization's offices. At that time, there were no classrooms, no schedules, and no educational systems, but they all hoped the children would not forget the Chinese language or lose their character and values as they grew up in America, while their parents devoted themselves to volunteering.

Little did anyone know that those heartwarming moments of teaching Chinese, making handicrafts, weaving Chinese knots, and simply spending time together would become the starting point for Tzu Chi's educational mission in the United States.

Emerging from those early efforts, the first Tzu Chi Academy in the United States was officially established on April 1, 1994. Over the past 30 years, what started as one school has grown into a nationwide network of 26 academies, bringing together thousands of students, parents, and volunteers in a shared educational community.



In November 1992, the Chinese language class at the New York branch of the Tzu Chi U.S. chapter – which later became Tzu Chi Academy, New York, established in 1994 – meets in a small office, with An Chang as its first teacher. Photo/Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation

In 1992, the Tzu Chi U.S. chapter launched Chinese language classes for youth, hoping to give Chinese American children the opportunity to learn Chinese, understand Chinese culture, and cultivate ethics and moral character. Initially, there were only six or seven students, but the program quickly grew to 30 or 40. As the needs of both parents and children increased, the curriculum evolved beyond Chinese language instruction alone to include enrichment classes, and an educational blueprint centered on humanistic values gradually began to take shape.



A Tzu Chi children's class in Northern California, seen here in October 1993, was established with the support of Hsiuchin Lin Wang, affectionately known as "Silicon Valley Grandma" and one of Tzu Chi's earliest volunteers in the U.S., then carried forward by Tzu Chi volunteer Mingling Hsieh. Photo/Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region



From June to July 1996, a children's class in the Greater Washington, D.C. area – a precursor to Tzu Chi Academy, Washington, D.C. – is held in Duchih Song's townhouse basement and consists of Dharma teachings, Tzu Chi stories, and sign-language skits or craft activities. Photo/Tzu Chi USA Greater Washington, D.C. Region

In 1993, the Tzu Chi U.S. chapter established its first Buddhist Tzu Chi Free Clinic in Alhambra, California (now known as Tzu Chi Health Center, Alhambra). In 1994, the chapter took its second major step by launching the first Tzu Chi Academy in the United States, Tzu Chi Academy, Los Angeles.

## Seeking Neither Fame nor Profit

Paulina Luan, who was a parent at Tzu Chi Academy, Los Angeles, in its early years and later became a key force behind Tzu Chi's educational mission in the United States, knows the school's history well. "One of the most important priorities of the U.S. chapter at that time was the Academy, and Stephen Huang was the key figure in launching it," she recounted. Huang was then Executive Director of the Tzu Chi U.S. chapter.

On January 16, 1994, the Tzu Chi U.S. chapter held its first preparatory meeting, formally proposing the establishment of a Tzu Chi Academy based on its existing Chinese language classes. However, the plan to open a Chinese language school stirred concern in the community. "It was questioned why Tzu Chi needed to



On August 23, 2008, Stephen Huang (right), Executive Director of Tzu Chi Global Volunteers, speaks about the qualities of a Tzu Chi educator during an intensive training day for Tzu Chi Academy teachers and Tzu Chi Teachers Association members. Photo/Meihsueh Lin

establish a school when there were already many Chinese schools in the area,” Huang said decades later when looking back at the early history of Tzu Chi’s educational mission in the U.S. on its 20th anniversary.

**At that time, we communicated with the heads of other Chinese schools to explain that Tzu Chi’s educational endeavors were not for fame or profit, but to integrate Master Cheng Yen’s concept of ‘holistic education’ into life education and implement it in the community.**

**Stephen Huang**

*Executive Director*

*Tzu Chi Global Volunteers*

“

## Giving Structure to Good Intentions

When the first Tzu Chi Academy was being built from scratch, everyone volunteered with enthusiasm, but the question of roles soon arose. Who would oversee academics? Who would handle enrollment? Who would take care of administration? Many responsibilities were simply taken on by whoever was willing.

Establishing a school was a completely new endeavor for the Tzu Chi U.S. chapter, and its Executive Director, Stephen Huang, was both the pioneer and the first principal of Tzu Chi Academy, Los Angeles. As the school’s administrative structure was formalized, Kuanwen Chuang became principal, while Liching Wu and Kueichu Wu served as vice principals. All of the teachers were unpaid volunteers.

With Tzu Chi Academy, Los Angeles, operating on a stable footing, demand began to emerge across the United States. Volunteers in Northern California, Texas, and elsewhere hoped to formally establish academies of their own. “This was a crucial turning point,” Paulina Luan said. For the Tzu Chi Academy system to expand nationwide, it would need a solid foundation in order to “grow into a large tree.” To make that possible, the Tzu Chi U.S. chapter formed an Education Advisory Committee to develop a replicable model and guide the expansion of Tzu Chi Academies across the country.

Already deeply involved in the day-to-day operations of Tzu Chi Academy, Los Angeles, first as head of the administrative team, where she helped introduce computerized operations, and later as vice principal, Luan was well positioned to expand her role beyond the school itself. During Yun Yan’s



In 1998, Paulina Luan (back row, second right) returns to Taiwan to receive Tzu Chi volunteer certification and, together with Tzu Chi volunteers from the United States, visits Master Cheng Yen at the Jing Si Abode. Photo/Courtesy of Paulina Luan



Yun Yan (front row, standing fifth left), then Acting Executive Director of the Tzu Chi U.S. chapter, participates in an event co-organized by Tzu Chi Academy, Los Angeles, the Tzu Chi USA Youth Group, and the Chinese American Parents Association for the Disabled. Photo/Courtesy of Yun Yan

tenure as Acting Executive Director of the Tzu Chi U.S. chapter, she was invited to become the chapter’s Executive Secretary, giving her the opportunity to take part in educational affairs at a broader level. She went on to serve on the Education Advisory Committee and as Director of the Education Development Office at Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters.

Paulina Luan essentially set aside her own career to devote herself to education. When the Tzu Chi Education Foundation was established in November 2004, she became its first Chief Executive Officer and later also served concurrently as Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Tzu Chi USA until stepping down on August 22, 2020.

Yan, who recognized Luan’s abilities early on, also served a term as Acting Principal of Tzu Chi Academy, Los Angeles, during her 1998 to 1999 tenure as Acting Executive Director of

the Tzu Chi U.S. chapter. “I have to mention that my daughter also graduated from the Academy,” she said. “Today, it has become highly sought-after. Many of my former neighbors now want their grandchildren to attend Tzu Chi’s kindergarten. It is very popular, and admission even requires a lottery.”

**I believe that in the U.S., the best way for Tzu Chi to shine and make an impact is through education and medical care.**

**Yun Yan**

*Then Acting Executive Director  
Tzu Chi U.S. Chapter*

“

## Turning Structure Into a Replicable Model

While serving as Executive Secretary of the Tzu Chi U.S. chapter during Yun Yan’s term, Paulina Luan was also a successful



Yu-E Lin (left) and Wayne Chang (right), members of the team that established Tzu Chi Academy, Northern New Jersey, cut the cake at its inaugural ceremony on February 2, 1997. Photo/Tzu Chi USA Mid-Atlantic Region

businesswoman who ran a large technology consulting company. The other members of the Education Advisory Committee were likewise accomplished professionals from different fields.

Drawing on business management methods, the committee developed a complete set of standard operating procedures (SOPs) to cover all details, from the roles of the Principal and Vice Principal to standards for Academic Affairs, Finance, and Administration; from minimum class size to enrollment requirements; and from financial transparency to venue contracts. The SOPs were stored on portable discs commonly used at the time, so volunteers preparing to open a new school could take them back to their local areas and copy and paste the model.

However, SOPs on paper weren't enough. The education team emphasized that anyone hoping to start a school had to come to Los Angeles for firsthand observation, while those seeking to open a class needed a complete academic and administrative team in place. With regions spread so far apart, the effort could not go far without strict implementation. For that reason, when different areas were preparing to establish

a Tzu Chi Academy, the Education Advisory Committee required them to first observe a full Sunday of school operations in Los Angeles, from classroom instruction to administrative procedures and volunteer assignments, with clear demonstrations and explanations throughout.

When schools across the country were preparing for enrollment and opening day, the education team would always visit in person to offer guidance and support. "Back then, the team was small, and some members were balancing Tzu Chi responsibilities with regular jobs," Luan recalled. "Each time we visited, one or two Principals, Vice Principals, or Directors of Academic Affairs would join us to help review the overall plans and related documents, ensuring that each school had clear standards for course planning, administrative structure, and school operations."

At the same time, the education team respected regional differences, recognizing that each area had its own cultural background and community character. Without departing from the core spirit, they adapted to local conditions and made appropriate adjustments so that each school could retain its own distinctive identity.

Once the organizational structure and school systems were in place, the real challenge became recruiting faculty. In the early years, the Academies expanded rapidly, with schools opening in different locations. However, the pool of teachers came from diverse backgrounds. Some knew how to teach Chinese but were unfamiliar with Tzu Chi, while others were deeply familiar with the Tzu Chi spirit but lacked teaching experience. A balance had to be found between philosophy and professional expertise. This convinced the education team that faculty training had to be continual, with teachers travelling to Taiwan not for visits, but for genuine study.

## Ongoing Faculty Development in Taiwan

The education team arranged for teachers to travel to the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation's global headquarters in Taiwan to take part in Tzu Chi Teachers' Association workshops, children's education programs, and boot camps. Through these experiences, they learned how to integrate Jing Si Aphorisms into lesson plans and daily life. From craft design and camp activities to what teachers wrote on the board and how they guided students in class, every detail focused on learning how to bring the Tzu Chi spirit into everyday life, deepening teachers' understanding of Tzu Chi's philosophy and helping them avoid drifting from its core values.

"We go back at least two or three times a year, without missing a single year," Paulina Luan said with a smile. "The first time we went back, we learned that we could write 'Parents' love is as great as the sun' on teacups, naturally bringing Jing Si Aphorisms into our craft classes." This kind of exchange not only improved teaching techniques, but also helped align educational values.



"We consult Master Cheng Yen before doing anything. Tzu Chi's education system in the United States has been passed down from her. We must follow closely in the footsteps of the Foundation in Taiwan and of Master Cheng Yen," Luan said.

**Without the Tzu Chi Teachers' Association and the support of the Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan, we would not be where we are today.**

**Paulina Luan**

Former Chief Executive Officer  
Tzu Chi Education Foundation



A student from Tzu Chi Academy, Houston, shows a care recipient how to brush her teeth during a Tzu Chi free clinic event on November 26, 2009. Photo/Mingta Wu



▲ During an environmental protection class on February 13, 2006, students at Tzu Chi Academy, San Francisco, sort recyclable materials. Photo/Lulu Lin

◀ On April 17, 2010, Huini Wu, a humanities class student in Las Vegas, expresses the Jing Si Aphorism "Parents' love is as great as the sun" through drawing. Photo/Tzu Chi USA Las Vegas Service Center



▲ On Mother's Day, May 12, 2024, students at Tzu Chi Academy, Pittsburgh, serve tea to their mothers, expressing filial piety and gratitude. Photo/Kuochih Cheng

◀ Participants in the National Humanities Education Workshop at Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters tour the campus on June 27, 2008. The event brought together 141 faculty and staff from 19 Tzu Chi Academies across the U.S., along with educators from local Chinese schools. Photo/Chingwang Chen

That support from Taiwan is reinforced through ongoing study and administrative exchange in the United States as well. In addition to the standard operating procedures already in place, the monthly administrative meetings of Tzu Chi Academies across the country also help keep Tzu Chi's broader mission in clear focus.

Through ongoing study and exchange, teachers have come to understand that Jing Si Aphorisms are not meant for memorization, but for life education; not for preaching, but for teaching by example. There have been countless examples of children bringing the values they learn through Jing Si Aphorisms into family life, deeply moving their parents.

Luan recalled a pivotal moment from when she first joined Tzu Chi as a volunteer. One day, while cleaning the floor of the Buddha Hall, she overheard another volunteer happily sharing that her child had learned a Jing Si Aphorism at a Tzu Chi Academy: "A birthday is a mother's day of hardship," which teaches children to honor their mother for the suffering she endured in giving birth.

Hearing this, Luan was truly touched and came away wanting the same kind of values-based education for her own child. It was this transmission of values through Master Cheng Yen's Jing Si Aphorisms that led Luan to enroll her child in the Academy, and she later began promoting their teaching across the United States.

## The Class Parent System

Among the distinctive features of Tzu Chi Academies are their teams of "class moms" and "class dads," who serve as a bridge between teachers, students, and parents. Class moms were already involved in the Tzu Chi U.S. chapter's Chinese-language classes, the precursor to the Academies. Then, on September 10, 1995, as Tzu Chi Academy, Los Angeles, began its second academic year, the school officially added class dads for a practical reason.

At the time, the Academy was renting Clifton Middle School across from the Tzu Chi U.S. chapter office, and every classroom had to be restored to its original condition

after use. The added workload of moving materials, maintaining the space, and helping ensure campus safety led to the formal introduction of class dads. They received training before the start of the school year, and more than 20 fathers signed up for the first session.

Since then, every Tzu Chi Academy class has class parents. They are there not to look after or accompany their own children, but to serve the entire class. Many parents initially just wanted to spend time with their children, but the education team encouraged them to treat every child as their own, and the results have indeed been excellent.

The class parent system has become an important platform for volunteer development. Many of Tzu Chi's executives across the United States began as class parents at an Academy and gradually became involved

in Tzu Chi's missions through school activities. In this way, the Academies nurture not only students, but volunteers as well.

"Class dads, class moms, and parents come to the Academy at least 32 times a year," Paulina Luan noted. "Their attendance rate is even higher than that of regular Tzu Chi volunteers. And when Academy students take part in Tzu Chi activities, their parents accompany them as well."

**The Academy is a cradle of volunteers. There are countless examples of parents who began by accompanying their children and later became volunteers and leaders themselves.**

**Paulina Luan**  
Former Chief Executive Officer  
Tzu Chi Education Foundation



Tzu Chi Academy, Hawaii, established in 1996 alongside the formation of a team of class parent volunteers, rents Ala Wai Elementary School for Sunday classes. Photo/Tzu Chi USA Pacific Islands Region

Many students who graduate from Tzu Chi Academies go on to join Tzu Chi Youth groups or the Tzu Chi Collegiate Association, where they continue volunteering. Many also later return to serve in volunteer or administrative roles at the Academies. Others may leave after graduation, but years later, drawing on their own memories of attending an Academy, they send their own children there in turn. In this way, humanistic education is passed down from generation to generation.

Parents' willingness to send their children to Tzu Chi Academies is a vote of confidence in the organization. "We should be grateful to parents for entrusting their children to a Tzu Chi Academy, helping create a virtuous cycle," Luan often says.

## A Slow Yet Steady and Far-Reaching Mission

The logo of Tzu Chi Academies, "Passing on the Bodhi Spirit" (with *bodhi*, a Sanskrit term in Buddhism, meaning awakening or enlightenment), reflects the conviction of every volunteer who takes up Tzu Chi's educational mission, which is to help shape future generations. As Chingchuan Shih, Director of the Education Development Office at Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters, put it, "The Academy is not only a place for language and character education, but also an important starting point for passing on the Tzu Chi spirit."



◀ Students at Tzu Chi Academy, Long Island, and their family members assist with a winter clothing distribution on December 13, 2014. Photo/Huangchuan Wang

▶ Arcadia Fire Chief Chen Suen speaks at Representative Judy Chu's 15th annual Congressional Women of the Year Awards Ceremony in Arcadia, California, on April 19, 2025. A graduate of Tzu Chi Academy, he reflected on the school's impact on his life and expressed gratitude for Tzu Chi's long-standing contributions to the community. Photo/Jennifer Chien



At a Lunar New Year celebration for parents and children at Tzu Chi Academy, Irvine, on February 18, 2024, Chingchuan Shih distributes traditional red envelopes symbolizing blessings and good fortune to students. Photo/James Huang

**Many children are brought to Tzu Chi Academies by their parents at a young age to learn Chinese and humanities, and they grow up in the Tzu Chi family. From initial passivity, they gradually become active participants who are willing to give. Their wish is no longer simply to be cared for and supported, but to learn from the volunteers' selfless dedication and example.**

**Chingchuan Shih**  
Director

Education Development Office  
Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters

“

Unlike other areas of Tzu Chi's work, where a patient's relief may be seen immediately after a medical consultation or disaster survivors may be moved to tears the moment they receive emergency cash aid, passing on the Bodhi spirit does not produce instant

results. Shih is therefore often asked what Tzu Chi Academies have accomplished and where those children have gone. Though her answer focuses on just one element within the Academies' humanistic education, it points to an impact that is far-reaching. "Through the teaching of Master Cheng Yen's wisdom in *Jing Si Aphorisms*, character is quietly nurtured over time. Compassion and love take root in children's hearts and continue to grow throughout their lives," she explains.

"Over the decades, we have also seen many children grow up and remain with Tzu Chi, wholeheartedly taking on the responsibility of carrying its missions forward," Chingchuan Shih adds. As Paulina Luan has said, education is the slowest mission, yet also the most profound undertaking and an important link in the transmission of Tzu Chi's Dharma lineage. 🌱



# Carrying the Legacy of Love Forward: Melinda Wu's Story

Written by Jiali Liu  
Translated by H.B. Qin  
Edited by Ida Eva Zielinska

Early on a weekend morning in the parking lot of Tzu Chi USA's Cerritos Service Center in Southern California, volunteers are busy setting up tents and arranging boxes of produce neatly. Some of the older volunteers strain to make out the small print on the distribution lists through their reading glasses. Others find the information on the tablet screens they hold difficult to navigate. Still others, speaking limited English, attempt to communicate with Spanish-speaking residents, since English is neither group's first language and the exchange can be challenging. Amid the crowd, Melinda Wu moves back and forth, patiently demonstrating how to scan documents for volunteers unfamiliar

with the electronic devices, then turning to explain the process to residents coming to collect food. Her presence helps keep the distribution on track.

Such a coordinating role has become routine for Wu. A college student who commutes from home, she volunteers at weekend distributions whenever she can. "It feels natural to me. Whenever I'm in Cerritos, I come to Tzu Chi. Young people are more familiar with computer systems and have more stamina, so I take on extra tasks to help senior volunteers with duties that are less convenient for them."



◀ In 2012, Hurricane Sandy sweeps across the U.S. East Coast, claiming at least 52 lives and leaving approximately 200,000 people displaced. Eight-year-old Melinda Wu joins volunteers and takes to the streets to collect donations. Photo/Courtesy of Melinda Wu



▲ In 2025, Melinda Wu serves as the emcee at a community Lunar New Year celebration in Southern California. Photo/Courtesy of Melinda Wu

Few people know that Wu's at-ease manner did not emerge overnight. It is a habit formed early, shaped during her years at Tzu Chi Academy, as she entered the world of Tzu Chi step by step as a child.

## Gradually Taken to Heart

Melinda Wu's first encounter with Tzu Chi came in 2009. At age four, she traveled to Taiwan with her family. Because her aunt, Hungju Wu, was involved with Tzu Chi, they visited the Jing Si Abode in Hualien, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation's global headquarters, where Dharma Master Cheng Yen resides. For the young child, it wasn't a trip with a specific purpose so much as time spent following her family's lead. "I don't remember much about that visit," she said. "What I do recall is that the whole family returned to Taiwan together that year. It was joyful."

Wu's earliest clear memories are from when she was five. Living in Cerritos, she traveled to Tzu Chi Academy in Irvine, California, by car every Sunday. The 40-minute drive didn't feel like a burden. "I never resisted going to the Academy; I actually found it fun," she recounted. For her, learning Chinese wasn't difficult. In the cozy classroom, the teacher was kind and classmates were enthusiastic. Wu was so motivated that she even brought her homework along during lunch breaks. "I always finished my dictation assignments, so my parents never had to worry."

Learning Chinese was only the surface. The deeper influence came from the Academy's humanistic environment, which began to shape her outlook over time. Wu remembers the Jing Si Aphorisms taught in class – such as "Count your blessings, cherish them, and sow more blessings" – as well as the bamboo bank story. She also remembers watching a video one day and, afterward, beginning to



Melinda Wu (front row, right) leads a sign language performance as Tzu Chi Collegiate Association members celebrate their graduation at the University of California, Riverside. Photo/Courtesy of Melinda Wu

carry reusable utensils. “Since then, I have almost never used disposable chopsticks again. Whenever I dine out, I always bring my own.” This wasn’t compliance after a reminder. It was a choice that had naturally become part of her.

During those years at the Academy, Wu’s mother served as a class mom, often helping with charity sales at the Jing Si Book Corner stall outside the classroom. Later, her aunt became a certified Tzu Chi volunteer and served as a class advisor for the Tzu Chi Youth program when Wu was in fourth and fifth grade. Wu’s weekends were spent not only in the classroom but also at various events: environmental activities, bamboo bank drives, and fundraising efforts. “I didn’t think much about it then. I just followed my aunt and mom and went whenever I had the chance,” she said lightheartedly, recalling those days.

Wu wasn’t only accompanied by her family, but also treated like the volunteers’ own child. Some knew her favorite foods, some reminded her to bundle up when it got chilly, and others, when she caught a

cold, sent a flurry of messages urging her to rest well... These seemingly ordinary acts of care steadily built a sense of security within her.

**Every time I attend a Tzu Chi activity, it feels familiar and I feel at ease.**

**Melinda Wu**  
Graduate  
Tzu Chi Academy, Irvine



With this constant companionship, Tzu Chi had long become part of her “everyday life,” and the desire to give back gradually took root in her heart. “Whenever I have the chance, I’m willing to step forward, even if it’s just an extra pair of hands. I hope to lighten the burden on the senior volunteers.”

This resolve wasn’t a sudden impulse. It grew along with her, guiding her step by step from a cared-for child to someone willing to move to the front of the crowd and take on responsibility as a future Tzu Chi volunteer.

## Stepping Into the Relay of Responsibility

“In 2017, I attended my first U.S. National Tzu Shao (Tzu Chi Youth) Camp. To be honest, I went somewhat reluctantly because I was quite shy when I was younger, and I didn’t speak much, especially with strangers.” Nearly a decade later, Melinda Wu still remembered her hesitation. That year, she was a middle school student and didn’t have many expectations for the camp. It was her aunt’s encouragement that finally gave her the courage to take that step.

That experience turned out to be the first time Wu was truly immersed in the Tzu Chi Youth community, with young people from across the United States gathered together. The camp wasn’t just a schedule of activities and classes. It offered a structured introduction to Tzu Chi’s missions and values. For the first time, Wu saw so many peers her age, from different cities and backgrounds, dedicating themselves and taking on responsibility in their own ways.

“Back then, there weren’t many Tzu Shao from Cerritos, maybe just a few dozen,” she recalled. “But at the national camp, seeing one or two hundred gathered together, the vibe was truly different.” Through repeated sharing and interaction, she also learned from more senior participants and slowly opened up.

Wu later attended the University of California, Riverside, where she joined the campus Tzu Chi Collegiate Association. Over time, she moved from simply participating in activities to helping coordinate events and eventually serving as president. The shift brought more than a change in title: It brought real pressure and responsibility. “Before, it was just helping out when I participated. But once I joined the Tzu Chi Collegiate Association, I started taking on more responsibility.”

When Wu began planning events, coordinating volunteers, and scheduling activities, she gained a clearer view of the intricate preparations involved. “So many things require planning far in advance.



Melinda Wu (front row, second left), then-president of the Tzu Chi Collegiate Association at the University of California, Riverside, poses with members during a social activity she helped organize. Photo/Courtesy of Melinda Wu

That’s when I truly appreciated how dedicated the senior Tzu Chi volunteers are. If there is anything I can do and am good at, I will definitely help.”

In 2024, after the COVID-19 pandemic, the in-person U.S. National Tzu Chi Youth Camp resumed. This time, Wu was no longer a participant. She was the Deputy Chief Coordinator. Preparations for the September camp – including inviting staff, planning courses, handling registrations, and coordinating with headquarters and local contacts – began as early as March. Once the camp launched, days were filled with classes and activities, while evenings became hours of repeated discussions, process refinements, and staff rehearsals, often lasting well into the night. “It truly wasn’t an easy job,” she admitted.

As Wu moved between senior volunteers and younger participants, she came to realize that the people she had relied on in her youth were aging. Different generations also had different expectations about pace, format, and innovation. “A lot of the time, my role is to get both sides to take a step back,” she said. On one hand, she needed to understand the veteran volunteers’ years of accumulated experience and practices; on the other hand, she had to listen to the ideas of younger staff and participants. That kind of coordination requires patience and understanding, and above all, a willingness to carry the legacy forward.

**Before, it was the senior volunteers who guided us through everything. Now, I hope to gradually take over and help shoulder more of their responsibilities.**

**Melinda Wu**  
Graduate  
Tzu Chi Academy, Irvine

Looking back on the journey from 2017 to 2024, Wu’s role changed, and so did her place within the group. But to her, it was never about taking someone’s place. It was about carrying forward what she had received and, little by little, taking on her share of responsibility. In that sense, it was a relay.

## Discovering the Wider World of Tzu Chi

In late 2024, Melinda Wu traveled to Taiwan to participate in the Global Tzu Chi Collegiate Association camp. During a heartwarming discussion forum, she stood at the front of the stage as the emcee. Within the forum’s respectful atmosphere, she guided the program from one sharing segment to the next in a steady voice and saw a different side of Tzu Chi. “I truly realized how vast Tzu Chi really is after returning to Taiwan.”

In the United States, Wu’s involvement with Tzu Chi USA largely centered on community service. This trip was the first time she fully stepped into the broader scope of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation’s humanitarian efforts. People spoke about the hardships of international disaster relief and shared how Tzu Chi chapters were established overseas. The stories moved her deeply and prompted her to rethink her role within the organization.

During preparations for the Global Tzu Chi Collegiate Association camp, Melinda Wu discusses course content with a staff member. *Photo/Courtesy of Melinda Wu*



In 2025, Melinda Wu (second row, left) performs sign language at the Tzu Chi USA Charity Concert, representing the younger generation of Tzu Chi volunteers. *Photo/Courtesy of Melinda Wu*

**In the U.S., our work primarily involved helping those in need within our local communities. But returning to Taiwan and hearing these stories made me realize that the Tzu Chi spirit is a legacy that must be passed down from generation to generation.**

**Melinda Wu**  
Graduate  
Tzu Chi Academy, Irvine



After the camp, Wu went to the Jing Si Abode in Hualien once more. The familiar path she had walked as a child now felt different. The tenderness of being cared for and guided in her youth transformed into a solemn commitment. “I want to bring what I learned in Taiwan back to the United States, accompany more young people, and pass it on.”

Life didn’t slow down after Wu returned to the United States. While continuing her studies, she interned at Tzu Chi USA’s Education Development Office, learning the details of administration and training, convening meetings, planning events, and coordinating with regional contacts. The work wasn’t always “fun,” Wu admitted, but the longer she did it, the harder it was to step away.

In addition, Wu remained deeply involved in supporting activities for Tzu Chi Youth and the Tzu Chi Collegiate Association. She helped coordinate Tzu Chi Youth classes

across regions, designed synchronized community service initiatives spanning multiple states, and organized opportunities for young people to visit Taiwan, hoping to share the moments on the Tzu Chi path that had moved her most.

“Many Tzu Shao volunteers leave after high school graduation, and I wonder, ‘If someone stayed by their side and offered a hand, would they stay connected?’” Wu said. She doesn’t rush to make young people stay. Instead, she helps them get to know each other, work together, and find the roles that suit them best through mutual companionship. “Not everyone needs to take on responsibility immediately, but at least they shouldn’t lose the connection,” she added. Above all, she hopes that for the younger generation, Tzu Chi isn’t just a childhood memory, but a “home” they return to often even after they have grown up.

Looking back on Melinda Wu’s journey, from being led by the hand into the Jing Si Abode at age four to choosing to step forward and take on responsibility today, her life wasn’t transformed by any single moment. Tzu Chi had long become the rhythm of her life, as natural as breathing or walking: If she didn’t remain involved, she would feel something was missing. Now, she models that steady, natural way of showing up for the next generation, and the path continues onward. 🌱



## From Mischievous Child to Mentor: Elvin Huang's Story

Written by Chen Chen  
Translated by H.B. Qin  
Edited by Ida Eva Zielinska

“Tzu Chi has been a part of my life since childhood,” said Elvin Huang, 26, an engineer at Texas Instruments and deputy group leader of the Tzu Chi High School Group in the Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region. It’s hard to imagine that this part of his life, which now spans 22 years, began a bit rockily when he was four years old.

Every Saturday morning, his father would drop Huang off at Tzu Chi Academy, San Jose, California. The playful boy and his four best friends often challenged their teachers in class, earning them the affectionate nickname “the Five Tigers.” Yet Huang stayed

with Tzu Chi from preschool through his upcoming certification as a Tzu Chi volunteer. He has grown from a child who was loved and cared for into a young man who loves and cares.

### A Childhood Filled With Love

Now that Elvin Huang has a busy schedule centered on work and volunteering, he has little time to look back. Yet as he begins to reminisce, cherished memories of being cared for come rushing back. “When I was a little boy, Mom and Dad would accompany me to Tzu Chi Academy. Later, because Mom



Elvin Huang is a graduate of Tzu Chi’s humanistic education system, beginning at a young age and growing up under the guidance of teachers and volunteers at Tzu Chi Academy, San Jose. *Photo/Courtesy of Elvin Huang*

taught piano lessons on Saturday mornings, Dad was the one who took me. Then, after seventh grade, Mom took over again.”

This seemingly simple transportation routine reflects Elvin’s parents’ commitment to his humanistic education. Each weekend, the half-hour round-trip drive, plus more than three hours of classes, consumed nearly the entire morning. But they never complained; instead, they became actively involved.

Tzu Chi volunteer Mingling Hsieh was Huang’s teacher during his Pre-K year at Tzu Chi Academy. She was deeply impressed by his parents. “His father was very tall, and it was he who took Elvin to class most of the time. Though the little boy struggled to sit still at first, his father persisted in bringing him to learn and patiently accompanied him,” she recalled. “I also knew his mother, a piano teacher, was very busy, yet she still

Tzu Chi volunteer Mingling Hsieh, 72, who taught Huang during his Pre-K year at Tzu Chi Academy, San Jose, also served as the first principal of Tzu Chi Academy, Cupertino, dedicating two decades to the school’s development. Although retired, she continues to chaperone Tzu Chi Youth from Pre-K through eighth grade in the Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region. *Photo/Courtesy of Mingling Hsieh*



Starting in Tzu Chi Academy, San Jose’s Pre-K program, Elvin Huang builds a lasting connection with Tzu Chi through its humanistic education. *Photo/Courtesy of Bob Chen*

made time to accompany him to class, which showed how important she considered his education at the Academy.”

There was one time Hsieh spotted Huang’s father playing basketball at the school. “I casually asked, ‘Why aren’t you volunteering?’” she shared. Her seemingly playful nudge unexpectedly spurred Huang’s father to become more involved. He not only drove his son to school, but also took on the role of a class dad.

"I still remember Dad performing with us at Tzu Chi activities," Huang said, looking back at one scene from his childhood. "We did the children's song 'Harvesting the Carrot.' Dad wrapped himself in a white blanket as the carrot, and we kids pulled him," he described with a chuckle.

He then shifted to memories of his mother's involvement. "When we volunteered at nursing homes, Mom always came with me. She would play piano for the elderly," he said. "My parents didn't just drive me to places; they actively participated alongside me. Since there were over 30 students in our class, they would help look after the younger kids, too. Volunteering with Mom and Dad was truly wonderful."

## Both Infuriating and Hilarious

When Elvin Huang attended Tzu Chi Academy, he and four other boys constantly left their teachers both exasperated and amused. "We were so mischievous, teachers called us the 'Mischievous Five,'" he recounted.

"They were full of ideas and really good at being funny," Mingling Hsieh said with a smile. "They loved doing the opposite of what they were told to do. If we told them to sit down, they would stand up. If we asked everyone to sit, they would move to the back. They just wouldn't follow instructions. It was both infuriating and hilarious, but honestly, they were adorable."

"These students are the children of Tzu Chi volunteers. They were together at the Academy from a young age, playing, studying, and growing up," Bob Chen said. He has long chaperoned youth in the Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region and has accompanied many students over the years. Yet these particular children left a deep impression on him. What's even more remarkable is that these once-mischievous boys continue walking the Tzu Chi path together to this day.

"One of us received Tzu Chi volunteer certification a year before I did," Huang said. "After I graduated and returned to Northern California, we co-led the Tzu Chi High School Group and served as teaching assistants



Bob Chen (standing left) chaperones Tzu Chi Youth from the Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region, including Elvin Huang (standing, sixth left), during activities at Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters. Photo/Courtesy of Tzu Chi Academy San Jose

together. After he was certified, he asked me, 'Hey, do you want to get certified too?' 'Sure,' I replied. To this day, we still chat often. I can talk to them about anything. We're truly like family. Another boy's mother is a teacher at our Academy. She watched us grow up, playing and fooling around. Every time I see her, I say, 'Hello, Auntie!'"

For Huang, calling her "Auntie" is not just a polite form of address: It reflects a family-like closeness.

**The volunteers at Tzu Chi Academy cared deeply about me. Their kindness went beyond a typical teacher-student relationship. It still feels like family, like an aunt or uncle and a nephew.**

**Elvin Huang**

*Graduate*

*Tzu Chi Academy, San Jose*



Bob Chen also witnessed this enduring bond. "Kids are more willing to get involved when they have peers with them," he said. "That is one reason Huang has stayed so involved with Tzu Chi all these years. The guidance and companionship of the senior volunteers are crucial, too."

## The Tall Figure Who Disappeared

One day, Elvin Huang's carefree childhood came to an abrupt end. Mingling Hsieh recalled how the tall figure who always dutifully dropped him off at school suddenly disappeared from the entrance. Huang seemed to mature overnight.

"His father's passing changed him profoundly," Hsieh said. "I remember his dad had been ill for some time. On the day his father passed, we went to their home to recite prayers for him. I remember Elvin telling me

that with his father gone, he needed to help his mother, to care for her and his younger sister." Hsieh felt heartbroken yet proud of the child. "That must have been the period when he matured the fastest."

During those sorrow-filled days, the companionship of Tzu Chi volunteers became a vital source of support for Huang's family. "I believe this experience gave Elvin Huang's mother deep trust in Tzu Chi, convincing her that her child should continue growing in Tzu Chi's educational environment," Hsieh said. On subsequent weekends, she saw Huang's mother taking over the school runs. Though life grew busier, her commitment remained unwavering.

Huang didn't bring up that period in the interview, but he often spoke about his father – the dad who performed for the children on stage wrapped in a white blanket, the dad who drove him to school every weekend, rain or shine... Those moments have become some of his most cherished memories, and his mother has tirelessly carried his father's love forward.

## More Than Just Learning the Language

Elvin Huang admits that studying Chinese wasn't what he enjoyed most at Tzu Chi Academy, but its cultural courses and volunteer service opportunities deeply captivated him. "I realized Tzu Chi Academy was truly different from regular schools, and even from the Advanced Placement Chinese program I took in high school. I especially loved the humanities courses at Tzu Chi, like flower arranging and tea ceremony. I looked forward to every class."

Mingling Hsieh also observed another side to the playful little boy. "Back then, we volunteered at a nonprofit nursery garden



Elvin Huang and his teammates sort plastic waste during a Tzu Chi Youth environmental activity. Photo/Courtesy of Elvin Huang

featuring California native plants. We helped with planting, weeding, and cleaning up debris. I watched Elvin push cartloads of debris, walking and working tirelessly... His quiet dedication moved me deeply. He truly approaches tasks with utmost dedication. You never need to remind him of anything. Even then, I sensed this child wasn't just highly proactive. He genuinely possessed sincerity and committed himself voluntarily."

Hsieh's observation resonates with Huang's own feelings about service. "I've always loved volunteering since I was young. I enjoy helping others through my actions; it feels incredibly meaningful."

"Our Academy's vision differs from other Chinese language schools," Bob Chen said. "They focus primarily on Chinese language instruction, while we incorporate an additional humanistic dimension, integrating principles of conduct, cultural literacy, and moral cultivation into our curriculum."

He brought up the tea ceremony class as an example. "It's not merely about drinking tea. It encompasses etiquette and profound insights into Chinese culture. Each time tea is brewed, it calms the mind. The music, the movements of the senior volunteers as they

serve and prepare the tea... even the most restless children settle completely in that setting. When the children offer tea to their parents, it becomes part of practicing filial piety," Chen elaborated.

"I remember one year when I chaperoned a Tzu Chi High School Group and shared the concept of filial piety with them. The moment I used the English term 'filial piety,' a student told me, 'It's like you're speaking a foreign language. I've never heard that term before.' They had never encountered this concept in school," Chen added. "I was quite shaken by this and realized how lacking moral education is for American youth. It strengthened our resolve to excel in humanistic education."

**When children practice filial piety, especially when children in the U.S. do so, some parents are moved to tears. When a child kneels to offer tea, the emotion is profoundly different. This is precisely why parents are so eager to send their children to Tzu Chi Academies.**



**Bob Chen**  
Tzu Chi Volunteer

The education at Tzu Chi Academy isn't just for students; it also emphasizes the

"shared growth" of teachers and parents. "For example, if students attend an environmental protection class, it's just the teacher teaching the students," Chen explained. "How would parents know the importance of what we teach? That's why we also have parent classes where parents attend together. Usually, we invite senior volunteers or experts to host seminars on environmental topics. This way, parents can align with their children's environmental classes. When children ask questions about environmental protection, parents are better prepared to join the discussion."

This holistic educational approach, designed to foster the growth of the whole family, has strengthened bonds within Elvin Huang's household. "I still remember our tea ceremony classes. Parents would attend, and the teacher would show us how to brew tea and serve it to them. After offering tea, I even gave my parents a hug and massaged their backs. They were deeply touched," Huang shared.

"Receiving a humanistic education from a young age taught me filial piety and gratitude," he noted. "Now that I've graduated from college, my relationship with my family remains strong. That's why I can still live at home instead of rushing to move out, as many others do right after graduation."

## Achieved Through Collective Efforts

From enrolling in the Pre-K class at age four to receiving his Tzu Chi volunteer certification at 26, Elvin Huang has been with Tzu Chi for over two decades. Looking back on his early years at Tzu Chi Academy, he appeared a bit embarrassed. "I want to apologize to my former teachers because I was a bit too mischievous," he said. "They were all so kind and considerate. Even though they knew I was naughty, the teachers

still devoted themselves wholeheartedly to teaching us."

**The person I am today was shaped by the Tzu Chi Academy.**



**Elvin Huang**  
Graduate  
Tzu Chi Academy, San Jose

For 2026, Elvin Huang has planned an exceptionally busy schedule. "At the end of June, I will lead 60 youth to Taiwan for the U.S. National Tzu Shao (Tzu Chi Youth) Camp. This number holds special significance as we mark Tzu Chi's 60th anniversary." He will then complete his final training session and return to Taiwan in October for his Tzu Chi volunteer certification.

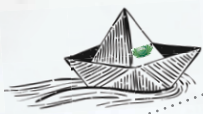
Hearing this news, Mingling Hsieh couldn't hide her joy. "Master Cheng Yen has entrusted educators with a responsibility to 'sow the seeds of compassion.' It truly warms my heart to see Elvin, one such seed, sprout and flourish."

From one of the rebellious "Mischievous Five" to a capable young leader, and from receiving love to giving love, the once spirited little boy who dreaded Saturday mornings now leads a new generation of children along Tzu Chi's path. Twenty-two years are enough for a seed to grow into a grand tree.

"I am deeply grateful to my parents, for it was through them that I had the opportunity to receive Tzu Chi's humanistic education from a young age," Elvin Huang said. With his roots now firmly planted, he concluded, "Tzu Chi gave me sound values and ignited my passion for volunteering. I hope to help the next generation of Tzu Shao (Tzu Chi Youth) become Tzu Ching (Tzu Chi Collegiate Association members) and, in time, grow into senior volunteers." 🌱



2011



## Born Into Tzu Chi: Chloe Chen's Story

Written by Chen Chen  
Translated by H.B. Qin  
Edited by Ida Eva Zielinska

“I was born a Tzu Chi volunteer,” Chloe Chen said, with a hint of pride in her voice. The year she was born, 2007, marked her mother IJung Lin and father Chienhui Chen’s fifth year with Tzu Chi. In 2011, when she was four, Chen’s parents enrolled her in the Pre-K class at Tzu Chi Academy, New York, in Queens, which serves students from Pre-K through grade 12. From then on, the family of three crossed the bridge from New Jersey every weekend, driving Chen to class rain or shine.

Fifteen years later, the little girl who once had to be woken at 6 AM and ate breakfast in the car is a freshman in the School of Nursing at

Stony Brook University. Now an adult, Chloe Chen remembers her years at Tzu Chi Academy in detail, including the teachers and volunteers who cared for her like family, and the friends she grew up with.

But Chen’s connection to Tzu Chi did not end when she graduated from the Academy. “If Tzu Chi weren’t in my life, I would feel like something was missing,” she said.

### A Family Rooted in Tzu Chi

IJung Lin and Chienhui Chen arrived in the United States in 2002, at a time when



▲ Chloe Chen serves tea to her mother, IJung Lin, putting into practice what she learned at Tzu Chi Academy, New York, which she began attending at age four and where she learned Chinese along with the values of gratitude and giving. Photo/Tzu Chi Academy, New York



▼ IJung Lin holds Chloe Chen as a baby. Photo/Courtesy of IJung Lin

New York City was still recovering from the trauma of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As recent arrivals, the couple soon learned about Tzu Chi USA’s Northeast Region chapter. “Friends knew my husband was skilled with computers, so they invited us to join,” Lin said. “After coming to Tzu Chi, we both started helping in the media team. Since I studied design in high school, I began handling the branch’s posters and event designs.”

Lin still remembers those early mornings. “Everyone shared the same aspirations, so we looked forward to going to the office every Sunday. We would all go out early to clean up the streets and then recite sutras. I always arrived early to help with showing videos and stayed for meals afterward,” she recounted. Tzu Chi gave Lin and her husband a sense of “home” in a foreign land, and they became increasingly involved. “From that point on, we became quite active in volunteering with Tzu Chi.”

Chloe Chen was born on March 17, 2007, St. Patrick’s Day. From the moment she arrived, she naturally became part of the world of Tzu Chi through her parents.

Growing up in a community that was deeply committed to social service, Chen was inspired from an early age. “Seeing my parents volunteer at Tzu Chi with such passion, I said, ‘I want to do that too.’ Instead of sitting idle at home, I would rather spend that time doing something meaningful that helps others,” she shared.

**Since both my parents volunteer at Tzu Chi, it felt only natural for me to be a volunteer as well.**



**Chloe Chen**  
Graduate  
Tzu Chi Academy, New York

## Crossing Bridge After Bridge

In 2011, Chloe Chen began attending Tzu Chi Academy, New York, and her mother also started volunteering there. At the time, the family lived in New Jersey and drove for more than an hour each weekend to reach the school in Queens, a routine they maintained for seven years. “Going to Chinese school was never a painful experience for me. I might be different from others because my parents were by my side,” Chen shared.

To manage this weekly commute, the family developed a route and a schedule. The drive meant crossing multiple bridges and navigating New York City traffic. “To get to the school, we had to cross two bridges. First, the George Washington Bridge, and then, to save money, we took a toll-free bridge, the Queensboro Bridge,” IJung Lin recalled. As she spoke about those years, her tone carried no complaint, only appreciation for the time they spent together.

“Every time we went to class, we would wake her up around 6 AM, make breakfast at home, and leave. We would always arrive at school by 7:30. Then, for the half hour before class started at 8 o’clock, she would eat breakfast and review Chinese in the car.” Faced with such a tight schedule, Lin said she felt grateful that Chen actually enjoyed it.

## Rehearsing Until They Knew It by Heart

In 2014, as Chloe Chen entered third grade, she met IFang Miao, a teacher who would profoundly influence her and accompany her through graduation from Tzu Chi Academy.

Miao first learned about Tzu Chi while residing in Taiwan. “There was a Tzu Chi hospital right in Xindian, where I lived,” she said. After moving to the United States, she became involved with Tzu Chi through her son. “My

► Chloe Chen (bottom left) is among the students taught by IFang Miao (top left) during her first year at Tzu Chi Academy, New York. Photo/Tzu Chi Academy, New York



◀ After rehearsing extensively, Chloe Chen (middle) and her classmates perform “Give Love” on stage. Photo/Tzu Chi Academy, New York

child attended Tzu Chi’s Pre-K program. After I volunteered a few times as a class parent, a teacher I got along with asked if I would be interested in teaching at the Academy. Later, with a recommendation from our class teacher, I enrolled in the Seed Teacher training program.”

encouragement kept them going. Looking back, Chen smiled. “Despite our frustration, we ended up winning first place both years.”

Beyond the sense of achievement that came with winning the competition, the song’s lyrics and melody also helped shape Chen’s outlook on life.

Miao worked in banking and had no teaching experience when she joined the staff at Tzu Chi Academy. To guide herself, she held on to one simple, sincere belief. “I knew only one thing: I wanted to teach my students as if they were my own children,” she said. “My son was in second grade at the time, and Chloe was in third grade, so I taught them with love and patience and shared everything I knew.”

**‘Give Love’ resonates with me just as its title suggests. This song constantly reminds me to give love anytime, anywhere, and to give it to those in need. It prevents me from questioning, ‘Why am I doing this?’ when engaging in Tzu Chi activities. Instead, it makes me more grateful for the opportunity to help others.**

**Chloe Chen**  
Graduate  
Tzu Chi Academy, New York



Miao still remembers the details of that period. “Actually, it was my first year teaching when I taught Chloe. At that time, I wasn’t



▲ Chloe Chen and her parents take part in the 2016 Mother’s Day event at Tzu Chi Academy, New York. Photo/Tzu Chi Academy, New York

▼ Chloe Chen (middle) not only learns Chinese and humanities at Tzu Chi Academy, New York, but also makes many like-minded friends. Photo/Courtesy of Chloe Chen





Chloe Chen (right) and a fellow graduate take a commemorative photo with IFang Miao at their Tzu Chi Academy, New York, graduation ceremony. Photo/Courtesy of IFang Miao

very familiar with Tzu Chi songs. For the song selection, I listened to every song. When I heard this song, I felt the melody was warm, and the lyrics aligned with the spirit of Tzu Chi, which is to share love.”

Once the song was chosen, serious rehearsals began. Miao learned the song, choreographed a dance to go with it, and taught the students to sing at the same time. “It was actually quite stressful. I listened to the song repeatedly at home every day. I listened to it so constantly that my husband said the melody must have been stuck in my head. By the end, even without the music, the melody would naturally play in our minds,” she recalled. “So I understand why the kids got frustrated during rehearsal. But we weren’t just rehearsing a song. We learned perseverance, teamwork, and striving toward a shared goal during the process.”

Miao’s sincere dedication earned her students’ affection in return. Years later, Chen and Miao still meet for meals, and Miao listens as Chen shares what’s on her mind. “We’re not just teacher and student. We’re friends now,” Chen said.

This teacher-student relationship, blending mentor and friend, is rare and precious in education. Miao has witnessed Chen’s growth. “Chloe is considerate and mature,” she observed. “I often feel that her consideration for others is not only the result of humanistic education. It is also largely shaped by her childhood experiences helping at Tzu Chi events with her mother. Seeing her mother serve others every day naturally taught her to care about others. I believe her compassion isn’t forced. It flows naturally from within.”

**Chloe’s initial intention has never changed. She knows gratitude, is willing to give, and takes initiative in serving. Even after graduating from the Academy, she returned to my class for three years as a volunteer helper. That is truly rare, and it shows her enduring commitment to Tzu Chi.**

**IFang Miao**  
Former Teacher  
Tzu Chi Academy, New York



## Wisdom Carried Into Daily Life

Tzu Chi Academy’s varied humanities curriculum enriched Chloe Chen’s childhood. She loved diabolo (Chinese yo-yo) class, and calligraphy was another favorite. “When learning calligraphy, you have to calm yourself down. Otherwise, the characters won’t have that humanistic touch and won’t look beautiful,” she explained. “I learned a lot from calligraphy class, including the importance of patience.”

Chen also applies the wisdom she gained at the Academy in her daily life. “During school exams, our teachers incorporated passages from Jing Si Aphorisms, so we memorized a lot of them almost every year,” she shared. One phrase, in particular, left a deep impression on her. “*Getting angry is actually punishing ourselves for the mistakes of others.*”

“When my mom gets angry, I’ll quote this Jing Si Aphorism to her, and she will calm

down quickly,” Chen noted. For mother and daughter, the aphorism has become a kind of shorthand at home. IJung Lin remembers one instance of when it came up after she had lost her temper.

“She suddenly blurted out, ‘Mom, why are you angry? Getting angry is actually punishing ourselves for the mistakes of others,’” Lin recounted. “I was completely stunned. I immediately thought adults really should control their emotions. I’m so happy my child brought what she learned at school back into our family life.”

## Service in Practice

Chloe Chen began volunteering at a hospital during her senior year of high school, where she encountered a situation that stayed with her. “There was a veteran volunteer named Mengchu Li,” Chen remembered. “She

Having grown up with Tzu Chi, Chloe Chen sees volunteering as a natural part of her life. “Helping others makes me happy,” she says. Photo/Courtesy of Chloe Chen





Following the magnitude 7.4 earthquake that struck Hualien, Taiwan, in 2024, Chloe Chen joins Tzu Chi USA's street fundraising in New York for disaster relief. Naturally shy, she found it challenging, but the humanitarian outlook she gained at Tzu Chi Academy gave her the courage to step forward. *Photo/Courtesy of Chloe Chen*

was perfectly fine, but one day, she started coughing. After seeing a doctor, she was diagnosed with cancer. Within a week, she was lying in a hospital bed, and a few days later, she passed away."

The experience deepened Chen's understanding of what it means to be accompanied on the Tzu Chi path. "On the day she passed, I happened to be volunteering at the hospital. It was a deeply moving scene, seeing Tzu Chi volunteers rush to the hospital to recite prayers for her, with her family by her side," she described. "I stayed there too, helping them with whatever they needed. I

felt the principles I learned at Tzu Chi gave me strength and inner resilience in moments like this, allowing me to comfort her family."

Chen began volunteering in other settings, too. IJung Lin remembers a Tzu Chi blood drive she attended with her daughter, where Chen helped donors review the registration forms and confirm their eligibility. "Watching her chat with donors, you could feel her genuine care and patience in her tone," Lin said. Chen's volunteer service has continued to this day, reflecting the humanistic education she received at Tzu Chi Academy.

**Education at the Academy is not only about learning the Chinese language. It is also about fostering kindness and warmth.**

“

**IJung Lin**  
*Tzu Chi Volunteer*

As her daughter's involvement in volunteering expanded, Lin's own path of service continued alongside, even through unexpected challenges. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022, Lin assumed the role of principal at Tzu Chi Academy, New York. Around the same time, she was diagnosed with a rare disease, yet she still chose to take on the responsibility.

"During my treatment, people from Tzu Chi offered me tremendous support like a family, especially emotional comfort," she said. Master Cheng Yen's teachings also sustained her through this arduous period. "Master gave me immense strength. Her guidance empowered me to accept this responsibility with courage and helped me understand that taking on this role is a way to repay the school for years of nurturing children."

As she watches her daughter grow through Tzu Chi, Lin feels deeply grateful. "I never imagined she would join Tzu Ching [Tzu Chi Collegiate Association] so spontaneously, pursuing Tzu Chi from her heart. Looking back, I realized that it all stems from her years at Tzu Chi Academy. The influence is subtle yet enduring."

I Fang Miao and her husband – pictured here while their son was attending Tzu Chi Academy, New York, and Miao was teaching there – continue volunteering at the school even after their son graduated. *Photo/Tzu Chi Academy, New York*

## A Place That Feels Like Home

Fifteen years at Tzu Chi Academy, New York, made the school feel like home to Chloe Chen. As a Chinese American who grew up in the United States, Chen said she received family-like care from teachers and volunteers there. "At the Academy, nearly everyone besides the teachers is a volunteer. They give up their weekends to help at school and look after students," she emphasized.

As principal of Tzu Chi Academy, New York, IJung Lin added context about what sustains the school's culture of care. She said many volunteers serve out of heartfelt commitment, without expecting anything in return. She also pointed out that the teachers aren't motivated by pay. "Honestly,



the teachers aren't here for the money. They have a loving heart," Lin said. "If you actually run the numbers, what teachers receive is modest because they invest so much time outside of class grading assignments, answering parents' questions, and so on."

One of those teachers, IFang Miao, exemplifies that spirit of commitment at Tzu Chi Academy, New York. "Teaching all these years, I truly feel that what I do isn't just teaching the Chinese language. It's genuinely caring for each child. Because of that, I've become close friends with many parents, which I find incredibly precious," she said. "It started as a teacher-parent relationship, but because of the children, we met every Saturday at school. We would chat and share about their children's lives, and over time it grew into a close bond."

Even after Miao stepped down from teaching in 2025 due to health reasons, she and her family remain active volunteers. Her husband continues to serve as a class dad at the school every Saturday. "My husband joked, 'My son has graduated, does that mean I can graduate too?'" Miao said with amusement, adding that she always encourages him to keep going.

**Our children graduated, but our compassion never graduates. That's why my husband continues to devote himself as a class dad at the school.**

**IFang Miao**  
Former Teacher  
Tzu Chi Academy, New York

## Where Values Take Root

Currently, more than 430 students are enrolled at Tzu Chi Academy, New York. During the registration period each year, parents even queue overnight to secure a spot for their child. As a former parent and current principal of the Academy, IJung Lin understands their dedication. "Many parents say they come here because we don't just teach Chinese, we teach humanities."

Like Lin's daughter, Chloe Chen, former teacher IFang Miao's son grew up in Tzu Chi as well. "After graduating from the Academy, my son returned as a volunteer helper. He then continued participating in Tzu Shao [Tzu Chi Youth] activities, volunteering at nursing homes... Children learn many good virtues at Tzu Chi, such as gratitude, respect, and love."

After 24 years with Tzu Chi, Lin said, "Tzu Chi has become part of my life." For graduates of the Academy, she hopes Tzu Chi will continue guiding their path in life. "I always tell them, 'After graduating, wherever life takes you, whether traveling or studying or working in different cities, if you see people in the blue-sky-white-cloud uniform, you will know this is an organization you can trust.'"

For Chen, Tzu Chi Academy, New York, still holds special significance. "What makes me happiest is seeing my friends every week at the school. We have a group chat where classmates who grew up together share updates about our lives. Sometimes we arrange to meet for meals and catch up."

**Because we grew up together from childhood at Tzu Chi Academy and share the same background and common experiences, we became lifelong friends. I feel friendships like this are truly rare.**

**Chloe Chen**  
Graduate  
Tzu Chi Academy, New York



Although university studies keep Chloe Chen increasingly busy, she said that "Tzu Chi has become completely integrated into my life." The love and compassion she learned at the Academy continue to guide her future plans. After graduating from Tzu Chi Academy at 16, she later joined the Tzu Chi Collegiate Association at 18 and chose

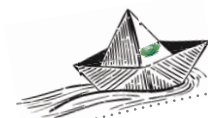
to pursue nursing in college. Her mother, IJung Lin, sees her daughter's path as a reflection of the values she learned through Tzu Chi. "Choosing nursing is not just about making a living in the future; it is meaningful work that puts care into action, caring for others and giving back to society."

**Some children stay involved with Tzu Chi as volunteers after graduating, while others don't return. But I believe the values they learned at the Academy have already taken root in their hearts and will surely sprout at some point in the future.**

**IFang Miao**  
Former Teacher  
Tzu Chi Academy, New York



Chloe Chen remembers her time at Tzu Chi Academy, New York, fondly, and all the friendships she established, which last until today. Photo/Tzu Chi Academy, New York





## A Shared Path of Service: Amber Lee's Story

Written by Jiali Liu

Translated by H.B. Qin

Edited by Ida Eva Zielinska

“The certification day truly felt like a family gathering,” Amber Lee said, looking back on January 18, 2026, when she officially became a certified Tzu Chi volunteer during a ceremony at Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters. On stage with other certification recipients, Lee looked out at familiar faces in the audience. Volunteers who had watched her grow up were there to witness the moment.

Many childhood friends were also receiving their certification alongside her. They had met when they were young and, years later, found themselves walking the same path side by side once more.

For Lee, becoming a certified Tzu Chi volunteer wasn't a sudden turning point, because Tzu Chi has been part of her story since early childhood. “I honestly can't recall a time in my life without Tzu Chi,” she said. “Everything with Tzu Chi just feels like a natural progression of growing up.”

Amber Lee's mother, Huichun Lin, watched from the audience as Lee stood on stage. Seeing her daughter there, Lin quietly reflected on how their shared Tzu Chi journey had begun years ago, the moment she first took Lee by the hand and walked into Tzu Chi Academy, San Dimas, in California.



Amber Lee (fifth left) takes a commemorative photo with senior volunteers who have known her for years after officially receiving Tzu Chi volunteer certification at Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters on January 18, 2026. Photo/Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters

### Integrating Character Education Into Daily Life

Amber Lee was seven years old when she began attending Tzu Chi Academy, San Dimas. She doesn't remember the details of that first day. What she does remember is the weekend routine that followed: her mother driving, Lee in the passenger seat, the street scenes sliding by outside the window. That familiar route became part of her life for years.

“I wasn't really concerned about how well she learned Chinese,” Huichun Lin admitted. Sending her daughter to the Academy wasn't about grades or outstanding performance. Instead, she hoped that while her daughter was still growing up, she would gradually develop a sense of values and what matters.

Indeed, at the Academy, language learning is only one part of the curriculum. While

children study Chinese characters in class, they also take part in activities that build values and foster environmental awareness, and visit nursing homes, practicing respect and compassion through service. These activities aren't aimed at producing “educational achievements,” yet over time they weave character education into the children's daily lives.

As a child, Lee never felt she was being “lectured” at the Academy. She simply followed along with everyone else and, without realizing it, began to develop a way of understanding right conduct and making sense of the world. “There are many things you only realize later, looking back, that you had already learned back then,” she observed.

Lin remembers a small shift that happened at home. “I noticed Amber started asking her dad to sort the trash,” she said with a smile. It wasn't a homework assignment. It was a child beginning to form her own habits and judgments

about environmental responsibility in daily life. The moment made Lin realize that the impact of humanistic education doesn't hinge on what is taught in a single class, but on how children begin to see everyday routines differently once they return home.

## Mother and Daughter, Side by Side

Back then, Huichun Lin spent nearly every weekend at Tzu Chi Academy, San Dimas. Initially, she simply helped out in the school office, handling small but essential administrative and financial tasks. "I didn't think much about it at the time. My child was studying here, and so many volunteers were willing to give their time. I just wanted to lend a hand." So while Amber Lee attended classes, Lin worked in the office.

Lee often lingered after class, not rushing home but instead settling into a corner of the office to wait while her mother finished

up. For Lee, Tzu Chi wasn't a place "to serve," but a warm, secure space. "When I waited for my mom in the office, the Tzu Chi volunteers she worked with were especially kind to me. I remember seeing them every Sunday, and they would always greet me and chat. Those 'aunts and uncles' practically watched me grow up." That companionship didn't fade as she got older.

After Lee graduated from the Academy, her mother heard from volunteers that there was a Tzu Chi Youth (Tzu Shao) Group she could participate in and brought her back to Tzu Chi. "I joined the Youth Group in eighth grade and quickly fell in love with the atmosphere there," Lee said. "We Tzu Shao members were especially close, and we could go out together to help others. Having good friends by my side while also getting to meet different people and help others, those two things combined made me realize soon after joining the Youth Group that I wanted to stay with Tzu Chi and participate in its activities."



After graduating from Tzu Chi Academy, San Dimas, Amber Lee (middle) joins the Tzu Chi Youth Group and participates in its activities. Photo/Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters

Throughout middle and high school, Lee held various leadership roles in the Tzu Chi Youth Group. "When I was a Tzu Shao, the team members I led came from different schools and regions, not just my own classmates. So I had to learn how to make everyone feel included and build team cohesion from scratch."

After graduating from high school, Lee attended the University of California, Berkeley, where she joined the campus Tzu Chi Collegiate Association and later became its president. These experiences introduced her early to the weight of responsibility.

**Being able to shoulder so much responsibility during high school and college was truly invaluable.**

**Amber Lee**  
Graduate

*Tzu Chi Academy, San Dimas*



The skills Lee developed through her leadership roles, first in the Tzu Chi Youth Group and later in the Tzu Chi Collegiate Association, didn't stay only within volunteer activities. The inner strength cultivated through humanistic education also supported her through the pressures and challenges of a demanding university environment.

"I learned to be grateful and cherish what I have," she explained. "The Academy profoundly shaped me. If I have a stressful day at school, I remind myself that being able to worry about these 'troubles' is already a blessing. At least I have food, clothing, and a place to live."

As her daughter continued to move forward, Lin remained by her side. After years of assisting at Tzu Chi Academy as a parent volunteer, she became a certified Tzu Chi

volunteer in 2013. When volunteer leaders for the Tzu Chi Youth Group were in short supply, she took on that role, a commitment she has upheld for 13 years. "Initially, it was definitely because my child was there," she admitted. "But I stayed because I saw this place supporting so many children as they grew, and I wanted to be there for them." Through the years, mother and daughter continued on this shared path, one moving from childhood into adulthood, the other accompanying her along the way.

## Seeing Suffering Up Close

Amber Lee first encountered the profound impact of "witnessing suffering" while still in elementary school. At the time, Huichun Lin was participating in Tzu Chi's volunteer training program. She often accompanied volunteers during home visits and medical outreach and brought her two daughters with her.

During one free dental care outreach event, the two sisters helped their mother at the site. Dentists examined patients inside a Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic, while volunteers provided free haircuts nearby. As they worked, Lee and her younger sister watched people come and go with curiosity.

In the haircut area, a man noticed the two girls and suddenly remarked, "You both look just like my daughter." The children instinctively asked, "Where is your daughter?" He said his wife and daughter had been swept away by the tsunami triggered by a major earthquake in Japan and never returned.

At that moment, everything seemed to go still. Lin recalled that the children were so shocked they couldn't say anything. Later, the man's story was published in the Tzu Chi Journal. Lin read the article to her daughters

and asked, “Do you remember the man we met at the free clinic that day? He was a tsunami survivor.”

“Only by witnessing these things in person can children truly understand what it means to cherish blessings,” Lin said. She realized that for her daughters, this wasn’t a lesson taught, but an insight into the real world. For the first time, they understood that people could lose everything in a single catastrophe. “At such a young age, it was through volunteering with me at Tzu Chi that they

were exposed to realities children their age would never normally experience.”

Looking back years later, the children rarely spoke about what they saw, yet those scenes had quietly shaped the paths they chose. Lee’s younger sister decided to pursue dentistry as a career, a choice influenced by what she had seen at that free clinic. As for Lee, she kept those insights close to her heart. Much later, they resurfaced when she found herself once again witnessing suffering up close.



Over more than a decade on the Tzu Chi path, Huichun Lin and Amber Lee have accompanied one another as mother and daughter, witnessing each other’s growth and supporting one another spiritually. *Photos/Tzu Chi USA*



## Coming Full Circle

In January 2025, massive wildfires erupted across Southern California. Amber Lee and her mother, Huichun Lin, traveled to affected neighborhoods to help survivors register for assistance. Unlike when she was a child, this time Lee wasn’t only lending a hand in the background. She sat with each survivor, listened to what had happened, and guided them through applying for the aid they required. “In past Tzu Chi activities, my interactions with community members were mostly just exchanging greetings. But that time, I had to truly listen to their stories,” she recounted.

Many of the survivors endured immense trauma. Some of them just wanted someone to talk to. Lee keenly sensed that what the survivors were experiencing wasn’t a temporary inconvenience, but a moment when their lives had been abruptly disrupted. “I saw that people facing the same situation reacted completely differently, and that scene has stayed with me.”

**While helping them, I kept thinking, ‘I truly want to develop more skills to better support these communities.’**

**Amber Lee**

*Graduate*

*Tzu Chi Academy, San Dimas*

“

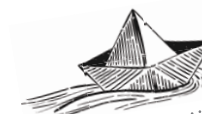
As a result, Lee changed her major from economics to law and was admitted to the University of California, Irvine School of Law. For her, law isn’t about abstract theory, but a practical toolkit for helping those in genuine need.

“In law school, I realized my classmates were also using their expertise to assist disaster survivors, and some are still doing it today,” Lee said. “They even mentioned Tzu Chi. That moment felt incredibly meaningful and showed me how the skills I’m learning can genuinely serve communities better in the future.”

Everything seemed to connect. Lee described it as coming full circle, from starting as a volunteer to pursuing further education because she wanted to do more, and finally seeing new possibilities for helping others in her new role.

On the day Lee received her Tzu Chi volunteer certification, Lin looked on from her seat as her daughter stepped forward. In that moment, she felt not overwhelming emotion but a calm certainty about the choices she had made in guiding her daughter over the years. “I never really set specific goals for her to achieve. But seeing her stand there, I felt a deep sense of peace,” she said.

Today, Amber Lee is no longer just the daughter of volunteer Huichun Lin, and Lin is no longer merely a mother who stayed because of her child. Each has found her own footing within Tzu Chi, yet they remain aligned and continue moving in the same direction. Lin’s steady companionship was the foundation for Lee to step into responsibility, and Lin, in turn, was inspired to take on more herself. In their shared journey, Great Love is no longer only something taught: It is a path that both are willing to continue walking. 🌿



# John Fell's New Badge: A Legacy of Resilience

Written by Pheel Wang

Translated by H.B. Qin

Edited by Adriana DiBenedetto



Photo/Courtesy of John Fell

“I met... and I may not pronounce it right... Tzu Chi? Is that correct?”

John Fell, a retired captain with the City of Chico Fire Department, spoke with the level-headed, approachable demeanor of someone who had spent decades serving others on the front lines. “I kept [a filled bamboo bank] in my truck,” he said. “I tried a couple of times to drop it off, because your office isn’t open all the time.”

The local office John visited was the Tzu Chi Chico Recovery Center, a mid- to long-term reconstruction service hub established after the 2018 Camp Fire. As Tzu Chi case workers often conduct visits in disaster areas or at survivors’ homes, John wasn’t able to return his bamboo bank on more than one occasion. Still, he remained determined.



Photo/Arthur Chih

Retired Chico Fire Captain John Fell has dedicated his life to protecting his community. When the 2024 Park Fire erupted, he became a disaster survivor himself. On August 11, 2024, he visited the Tzu Chi Chico Recovery Center to receive emergency financial assistance and requested a bamboo bank. Placed in his home, it serves as a daily reminder to pass on the love.

“It was a rainy day,” said John. After arranging a time with the staff, he ultimately succeeded in returning the bamboo bank. “I was able to get it to somebody, and I said, ‘I want another one.’ So, she gave me another one.”

John has become very familiar with the local neighborhood over the years, from residences, to businesses, and organizations alike. However, “I really didn’t know anything about your organization until I went to the disaster center,” he said, “and when I needed help after my disaster.” John’s home had been severely impacted by the 2024 Park Fire that devastated Northern California’s Butte and Tehama counties, burning a shocking total of 429,603 acres. “They told me that they get donations all over the world and that people donate to help people like myself. And that’s when I thought, well, maybe I can give back... And that’s what I’m trying to do, in my little way, is just give back a little bit,” he shared. “[It] just seemed so unique that someone from Taiwan came all the way over here to help me, and I was very impressed by that, and like you said, not only from Taiwan but all over the world, people take these bamboo banks and use them to donate, and I thought that was kind of very unique and very special, and I want to be part of that.”

**It was a ‘now the shoe’s on the other foot’ kind of thing. I mean, I always felt empathy for people, always tried to give them some understanding, a shoulder to lean on... You know, do the same thing Tzu Chi did for me.**

“

**John Fell**  
Retired Captain  
Chico Fire Department

## A Lifetime on the Front Lines

John Fell had lived in Chico for more than 50 years, and spent most of that time protecting the region as a firefighter. After the 2018 Camp Fire, he also spent four months commanding charred tree removal efforts in the devastated town of Paradise, California.

At 70, John speaks about the profession with equal parts warmth and wisdom. “I started firefighting when I was 18,” he shared, while describing the quick problem-solving that makes all the difference when it comes to saving lives. “People call us when they’re having the worst day in their life,” he said, pausing. “And I know that, because I’ve had the worst day in my life... But it’s like, you’ve got to take chaos and make sense out of it and stop it. That’s what firefighters do.”

Yet, his eyes held no boastfulness, only a deep understanding and respect for the science behind the flames and the people who help put them out. Fighting flames brings one into a sobering proximity with impermanence, and so, John’s perspective is defined not by congratulations, but by

care for all those he leads. “I’d always make sure that everybody that went out with me in the morning came back with me in the evening. Depending on the complexity of the fire, the geographics, and the fuels, it could be... it keeps your senses sharp, because you’re always watching out for the way the wind’s going to change, and fuels change, and topography changes,” he explained.

For decades, John and his team have successfully extinguished blazes with such care and patience, saving homes, lives, and panicked animals. “Another time, we saved a cat in a big sycamore tree,” he recounted, a bit of mirth finding its way into his expression. “I told my firefighter, I said, ‘Put your full turnout gear on. Put your gloves, your helmet, your big heavy jacket, because when you pick him up, he may not be happy, and he may scratch and bite the heck out of you.’ Which he did.” Thankfully, both the feline and his human friend were deeply pleased to be reunited.

John is also very familiar with how giving can strengthen communities. “We have a fund in the fire service in our fire department. It’s called the Ray Head

Fund. And Ray Head was a captain back in 1970. He is the only line-of-duty firefighter death we’ve had in the city of Chico. He died on a fire called the Silver Room Fire.” Now, the fire department uses this memorial fund to help those impacted, including burn survivors who need nutritious meals to aid in their healing. “So, we worked with the hospital, and we set up — this is before Uber Eats and DoorDash — we basically worked with some local restaurants and got him some high-calorie meals delivered instead of the hospital food. Just stuff like that. And then, people who lose their homes or their vehicles that need to get to work, we would donate money to help them. Kind of like what you guys did for me.”

## The Night Everything Changed

Over the years, Northern California has experienced a series of increasingly destructive wildfires.

“We had the Camp Fire, we had the Dixie Fire, we had the Bear Fire, we had the North Complex, we’ve had the Park Fire. There isn’t one community in Butte County

that hasn’t been affected by wildfire,” John Fell shared with solemnity. “Every town has a scar to prove it.”

Seasonal firefighters, too, once worked three or four months each year. Today, many serve far longer as wildfire seasons grow more intense.

“People argue about climate change, but I’ve seen how fire season has changed, and how when I first started fighting fire back in 1974, a big fire was like 500 acres, and a campaign fire was like maybe three to 5,000 acres. That was a big fire — three to 5,000 acres was big; 10,000, *really* big. Now, we’re having these mega fires, half a million acres, you know, and losing thousands of homes,” John explained. “A seasonal firefighter for CAL FIRE [California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection] would work maybe three, four months. Now, they’re all working nine months.” Then, the seasons would become wetter and colder, and fires would be far rarer.

With this groundwork laid, he also shared his observations on changes in fire formation, and how, once trees burn, another fuel model emerges. “We get more brush.

Summer 2024 saw wildfires erupt across Northern California. Pictured is the Park Fire. Photo/Courtesy of California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection

When the trees are standing, they shade the ground so it doesn't warm up, and a lot of the other shrubs can't grow because they don't get the sun. As soon as the timber goes away and gets burnt, it gets replaced by brush, because now the brush gets all that energy from the sun," John said, continuing, "And brush fires burn faster than timber fires." Sparked by a lightning storm and stoked by dry, hot, and windy weather, intense fire incidents known as "complex fires" have also impacted communities in Northern California, merging due to wind conditions and terrain. It would be one such fire that marked the beginning of a spiral of tragic events.

"Even though I'm retired, I still am active in the fire service as a retired annuitant, and I'm on a U.S. Forest Service incident command team, and my team was assigned to a fire in a county just a couple of counties south of us called Plumas County," he said. "I was on a fire called the Gold Complex. It was a Complex. And we were by an area called Graeagle." In July 2024, while John was working on the Gold Complex Fire in Plumas County, news arrived that another blaze had ignited closer to home: the Park Fire.

"I was on the [Gold Complex Fire] for a couple days when I was notified that the Park Fire in Chico had started. And I felt fairly secure about staying with my team," said John. "Over the 30 years I worked with Chico, we had numerous fires in the park, and never seemed to have a problem containing them... But this fire had a mind of its own." At first, John felt relatively safe based on prior experiences with similar fire situations over decades of service. He never imagined how uncontrollable this one would prove.

"It kind of ran under the power lines, and it was difficult to get air assets onto the fire because of the high voltage power lines. So, later that day, I heard the fire had made significant run and increased the acreage, so I told my incident commander that I was going to demob and go home, and by the time I got home, the fire had already penetrated my house." His son, a captain with CAL FIRE, had rushed to the scene with four fire engines and a water tender. "And their efforts... they could not put the fire out. It established itself pretty well into the attic. So, I got there just in time to watch the fire destroy my house," John recounted.

By the time he stood before his home, it was midnight. The flames had already engulfed the roof, advancing relentlessly into every inch of the house, inside and out. Wearing wildland fire gear, John rushed inside to salvage whatever he could, but the flames were too intense. However, he was able to escape with a cherished familial treasure his great-grandmother had painted.



"I kind of feel like I let my family down by losing all my generational belongings. It's still kind of like, you still feel that way sometimes, you know? My great grandparents had it, my grandparents, my dad, and then I had gotten it... and then it's gone. It was family stuff, like a lot of my grandfather's badges when he was a fireman, my dad's flag from his funeral as a veteran, stuff like that."

Even amidst the retelling, John continued to offer his expertise, explaining how the fire behaved with an educator's patience. "There's a thing called a diurnal wind change," he began, illustrating how convective movement drives warm air up canyon, while colder, denser air sinks. "So it comes down, and it's called 'outflow.' And that's what got our house. It came back down canyon about midnight, and it came down our drainage, and it was kind of like a tsunami of fire, and it has high-velocity wind behind it." John described how the

fire had taken some homes, then skipped over others before resuming its devastating path, affecting his neighbor's home before consuming John's. "I always figured that fire would come during the day, with a diurnal wind coming from either the north or the south, depending on the weather pattern. So, it kind of caught me off guard. But now that I saw the fire behavior, and saw the fire analysis, I saw where it happened. There's seven homes lost in my neighborhood, and after I called my son and told him that there was a fire in the neighborhood, and he brought his fire engines down, no other houses burned. They were able to make a stand at my house, and then they had resources available, so none of my other neighbors burned after my house. So, that was a good thing."

John's wife had also not been at home when the fire began, but was staying nearby, taking care of their son's little girl while he was at work.



▲ Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region volunteers visit the disaster area to assess the situation, and witness widespread devastation. Photo/Minjhing Hsieh

◀ After the Park Fire, John Fell and his wife stand before the ruins of their home of 34 years. Photo/Courtesy of John Fell

## Learning the Bamboo Bank's Legacy

Having burned for two months before being fully contained, the Park Fire destroyed more than 700 structures, and the fire ranks as the fourth-largest wildfire in California history by area burned. Tzu Chi USA's Northwest Region volunteer team immediately mobilized and headed to disaster recovery centers to gather information on affected residents.

John Fell first met Tzu Chi at a disaster recovery center, where volunteers recorded his information and learned about his situation. He met with them once again at Tzu Chi's Chico Recovery Center on Willow Street, where John was provided with a cash card to help his family get started again. "It was \$1,000, which I thought was

a pretty substantial sum. I was very grateful for that amount. During the first months after the fire, everything we owned was destroyed. We had nothing. I had the clothes that I had taken with me on the fire."

This disaster marked John's first encounter with Tzu Chi and introduced him to their bamboo banks. Tzu Chi's cash cards contain the love of people all over the globe who care deeply, and wish to make a tangible difference wherever relief is needed most.

And, many times, that love is delivered through daily acts of kindness, placed into a bamboo bank. John knew that the cash cards were made possible through the generosity of others, but was surprised to learn the bamboo banks played such a powerful part, too.



At disaster relief distribution sites across the United States, volunteers always have bamboo banks on hand. In the photo, Tzu Chi holds its first round of cash card distributions for Park Fire survivors in Chico on August 10, 2024. Photo/Andy Chiang



Volunteers hold multiple distribution events at the Tzu Chi Chico Recovery Center. Photo/Andy Chiang

"I mean, I assumed that it was like it's a contribution that you make for other people," he said. "Kind of like we do at the Red Cross, the United Way, but I really didn't know anything about your organization until I went to the disaster center, and when I needed help."

**I want to basically try, you know, one quarter at a time, one 25-cent piece at a time, to kind of give back to your organization so someone else can benefit like I did.**

**John Fell**  
Retired Captain  
Chico Fire Department

“

And indeed, this very same spirit has echoed across decades, beginning in the heart of one woman. In February of 1966, Tzu Chi's founder, Dharma Master Cheng Yen, then a nun in her twenties, visited a disciple's father who had recently undergone an operation at a private medical clinic in Fenglin, Taiwan. Upon saying farewell for the time, she was struck by the sight of blood and quickly inquired about

what occurred. The medical clinic's staff relayed a horrible tragedy. They explained how a woman experiencing labor complications had presented to the clinic in urgent need of care to save her baby following an exhausting eight-hour journey. However, she was turned away, unable to provide the security deposit.

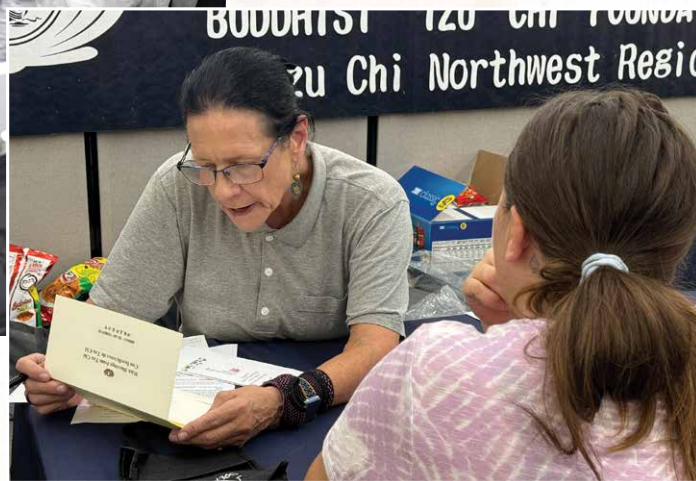
Stunned and heartbroken, Master Cheng Yen knew she had to do something. Joined by her disciples, she set aside funds over the course of a year to raise the amount needed for someone like that woman to receive the treatment they need and so deserved. Together, her followers, 30 women, put small change into a bamboo tube each day before purchasing any food for themselves, whilst crafting baby shoes to sell.

And so, on a chilly January morning in 1983, a group of nuns and female lay followers carrying tools gathered in a field in Hualien. Their goal: Clear a space where a new hospital would one day stand. Once dismissed as a daydream, the Tzu Chi General Hospital was inaugurated in 1986.



◀ Before Tzu Chi's first round of Park Fire relief gets underway, volunteers are reminded to introduce the bamboo bank's origins. Photo/Andy Chiang

▶ A Tzu Chi volunteer reads Master Cheng Yen's letter of comfort to Park Fire survivors. Photo/Andy Chiang



The Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation's footprint of charity and humanitarianism now spans the globe. To this day, Tzu Chi continues to use a symbolic iteration of these bamboo tubes – the Foundation's signature bamboo banks – as an everlasting reminder of this noble act.

"One thing we do exceptionally well in the U.S. is that every time we conduct emergency relief, the bamboo bank becomes something every volunteer actively introduces." Minjhing Hsieh, Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region's Deputy Executive Director, has participated in disaster relief distributions across the U.S. for decades. During the massive wildfire relief efforts in Northern California in recent years, he served both as the core of the command team and as a volunteer sitting at small tables listening to the stories of survivors.

"There are three things we always do at distribution sites," began Hsieh. "Introducing Tzu Chi, reading Master's letter of comfort, and explaining the bamboo bank. These must be included when we

interact with disaster survivors. We always remind every volunteer of this during the pre-distribution briefing."

For large-scale distributions, volunteers must maintain smooth operations at every stage, ensure on-site safety, and coordinate personnel and supplies. When asked why they still make a special introduction for the bamboo bank, Hsieh answered without hesitation: "We actually consider this the most important part," he said, drawing on decades of experience.

"We want survivors to understand that this aid accumulates from small contributions, which deeply resonates with them, realizing that strength comes from all directions. Their eyes light up when they hear this, genuinely surprised. Additionally, telling the bamboo bank story helps bridge the gap with the survivors; it can be used to initiate meaningful conversations." With this knowledge, volunteers hope survivors can feel that they are not alone, and that they are going forward with the love of so many who care about them.

Yet, many volunteers didn't feel this way initially, including Hsieh, who has been through many disaster relief efforts. "Years ago, introducing the bamboo bank to disaster survivors felt awkward. They came seeking help, yet we asked them to donate spare change; it seemed strange. Once, an official from another organization who didn't understand the practice told me it wasn't appropriate. They argued that since we were there to help disaster survivors, how could we possibly be fundraising in that context? But in recent years, this other organization has come to understand our motivation, that we're not raising funds, but offering a small way to empower; paying it forward, and passing on love. That's our true purpose. We hope survivors can help others once they've recovered."

**It's crucial that we don't ask for donations in large amounts. We encourage them to save small amounts regularly. As for how they use these funds, we don't mandate they give back to Tzu Chi. If they go to church, they can donate there, or support other organizations they believe in; it doesn't have to be Tzu Chi.**

**Minjhing Hsieh**  
Deputy Executive Director  
Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region



During the 2018 Camp Fire distribution, Tzu Chi invited survivors they had assisted to participate in Buddha Day ceremonies in early 2019. One ceremony was held at the Tzu Chi Chico Recovery Center, and another at a century-old elementary school near the disaster area.

"When we invited them, we told them that if they had received a bamboo bank during last year's relief distribution and



▲ While many disaster survivors did not know Tzu Chi, after reading Master Cheng Yen's letter of comfort and learning about the bamboo bank story, they open their hearts and share their grief. Photo/Andy Chiang

◀ Minjhing Hsieh, Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region's Deputy Executive Director (left), embraces a disaster survivor, knowing that a truly caring presence is often just as crucial to recovery as monetary aid. Photo/Andy Chiang



On May 19, 2019, Camp Fire survivors are invited to participate in a Buddha Day Ceremony where some families return filled bamboo banks. This photo was taken at Tzu Chi USA's Chico Recovery Center. Photo/Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region



On July 21, 2019, Tzu Chi Northwest Region volunteers travel to Magalia, California, to provide a free medical outreach event for Camp Fire survivors. Here, a survivor returns a filled bamboo bank received during the 2018 distribution and asks Minjhing Hsieh (right) for three new bamboo banks to take home. Photo/Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region



Bamboo banks brought back by Camp Fire survivors fill the table, touching volunteers deeply. Photo/Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region



found it meaningful, they could bring it back." Having lived in the U.S. for years, Hsieh has come to recognize and admire Americans' strong sense of individual autonomy. Hsieh and all frontline disaster relief volunteers soon grasped the profound significance and impact of Master Cheng Yen's bamboo bank through each distribution experience. "They share in that spirit," continued Hsieh. "Even though they know the amount is small, they recognize how action has its own significance. Later, two Buddha Day ceremonies saw over a hundred people in attendance, and over four hundred people attending another. Roughly one in two guests brought back their bamboo banks! It was completely unexpected. This gave me confidence, showing our fellow volunteers did a good job passing on this spirit. My view on introducing the bamboo bank has changed, too. I now approach it with ease, and if I skip it, it feels like I'm missing something crucial. The monetary value itself isn't large, but the feeling is truly different."

Small change amplifies love; the compassion infused in these coins is priceless. In the photo, Tzu Chi USA Chico Recovery Center team members combine donations made by Camp Fire survivors who wished to pass their care onward. Photo/Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region

## A New Family Legend

After losing their home, John Fell and his wife moved into a temporary rental.

"We don't have a lot of furniture right now because we're going to move to the new house," John said, seated at a desk in the rental home, a bare wall behind him. "So, we're kind of at a very minimalistic point in our lives. We don't have much." Before the fire, the walls of John's home had displayed decades of memories: awards, certificates, and badges from the fire departments where he served. "I mean, I worked for, let's see, one, two, three, four different fire departments, so I had a lot of, you know, memorabilia from those departments."

Most of those items were lost. However, John turned then to retrieve something from nearby in the room. "This is a replica of my helmet shield. It's a replacement," he said, examining the new, bright red shield, bearing the words *CHICO FIRE CAPTAIN* across the top. "It's got my name on it, and I got a replacement helmet. I got a lot of replacement stuff."

John had always stood on the other side of disasters, helping and reassuring survivors across decades of committed service. Now a survivor in more ways than one, he has stepped into the shoes of the many people he's protected in the past.

"If you ever want to make the gods laugh, make a plan," he said. "So, I had a plan, and then I got this thing called cancer. I've been fighting cancer for the last six months. So, it's kind of like another thing to deal with. Right now, I am in remission, and I'm cancer-free, but it was just another thing to deal with." It was an occupational hazard for many firefighters, John explained, even despite all of the protective equipment they wore.

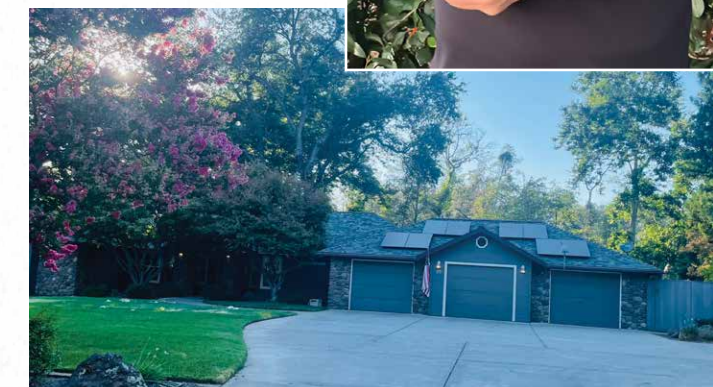
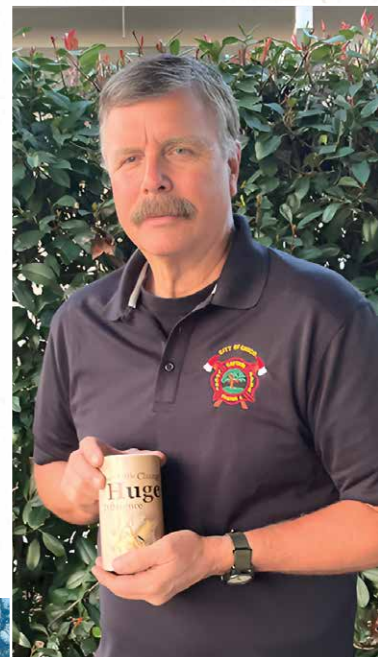
He shifted gears with a wry smile. "So, right now, I'm good; everything's good. Everything is really good. We're rebuilding. I'm cancer-free, and I've got no complaints."

John's neighbor, a draftsman, is the very same individual who designed his home 34 years ago. After the fire, he contacted his neighbor once more with a request: "*Build me the same house.*" So, we're building the same house." Construction is expected to be completed in June 2026.

Today, John Fell continues to restore the symbols of his service, with care for his community ever at the forefront, through the lasting spirit of the bamboo bank. 🕊️

▶ Life isn't always smooth sailing. Yet, John Fell fills one bamboo bank at a time, hoping to make a difference for someone else when they need it most. Photo/Courtesy of John Fell

▼ John Fell's home before the Park Fire. Photo/Courtesy of John Fell



# Helping Families Restore Stability After the Park Fire

Written by Ida Eva Zielinska

On October 24, 2025, Havyn Morris walked across a bare, fire-scarred clearing, the dirt beneath her feet raw and open to the sky, the ground only beginning to green again in patches. A horizon of blackened trees surrounded the white trailer she was approaching, one that her grandfather, James Morris, had used his work truck to place on the family homestead in Cohasset, California.

Bobbie Rae Jones, a disaster case manager from Tzu Chi USA's Chico Recovery Center, was just behind her as they stepped inside, and the 20-year-old exclaimed upon looking around, "Yay! It's a stove. I get to cook and bake. I'm so excited! I love it."

The trailer's interior furnishings were simple but complete, including a compact bathroom, sleeping area, dinette, kitchen with cabinets and sink, and right there, the stove that made her grin. After more than a year of displacement and uncertainty since the Park Fire burned through the region in 2024 and upended the Morris family's stability, the arrival of the trailer felt like a fresh start for Havyn, a home, finally, that would soon put an end to months of couch-surfing.



Havyn Morris hugs Bobbie Rae Jones, a disaster case manager at Tzu Chi USA's Chico Recovery Center, after Jones helped secure a trailer that will soon be Havyn's home in Cohasset, California, following months of displacement since the 2024 Park Fire. Photo/Kitty Lu

For her grandparents, too, James and Renee, married 36 years, daily life was no longer as it was before the wildfire. “This would have been the porch right here. And then the front door was here. The living room was here. There was a hallway here and a bathroom and two bedrooms...” James described wistfully as he traced the interior of the house that once stood there, now just bare ground, tree stumps nearby marking where majestic evergreens grew and cradled the home.

**We lived up here for about 25 years before the fire. We had a manufactured home, three-bedroom, two-bathroom. Yeah, all my family lived in this house up until the fire.**



**James Morris**  
*Park Fire Survivor*

“James was the second case I opened and I met him and his wife out on the property,” Jones recounted. “It was a really sad day because they were removing the hazardous

▼ As Havyn Morris looks at the trailer that will soon be her home, the tension of the chaotic months after the Park Fire begins to ease. *Photo/Kitty Lu*



trees and there was this really large tree. It was actually, I found out later, the biggest tree in Cohasset, and it was being taken down that day and his wife was crying...”

To make matters worse, the insurance the couple had been paying for since 1997 was inactive. “They cancelled it three months before, they dropped our insurance. We didn’t know we weren’t insured,” James said. A mason with his own business, he had lost more than the family’s residence as well. “All my equipment was here. That all got burned down.”

The family relocated to an RV trailer that they parked behind James’s mother’s house in Thermalito, a census-designated place generally considered part of Oroville, about 40 miles from Cohasset. “The trailer, my mom purchased for us, because we didn’t have any money at that time because of the loss of business, and



▲ The window beside the bed in the trailer looks out on Cohasset’s quiet landscape, which Havyn Morris truly appreciates. “I really prefer to be up here. It’s quiet, it’s a small community, it’s really mellow.” *Photo/Kitty Lu*



Only stumps and fire-damaged trees surround the spot where the Morris family’s home once stood in Cohasset, California. *Photo/Kitty Lu*

things were slow right before the fire. After the fire, unfortunately, we had to live off our credit cards, and our credit went down. We’re trying to rebuild that, but it’s a slow process,” James noted.

While the material losses were severe and the financial situation was dire, what added to the family’s misery was the fact that although they had secured shelter, the space could not comfortably accommodate the whole household under the same roof. Before the fire, at their home in Cohasset, James and Renee had two adult sons living with them, along with two granddaughters, Havyn and her younger sister. Now, in the trailer, with two dogs and a cat in there too, the space was cramped. “It’s just pretty crowded. So I figured I would go somewhere else for the time being,” Havyn said. By July 2025, her sister also found somewhere else to stay. “So we were all kind of separated. There’s four of us in there now,” James added.

For Havyn, the decision to move out came at an emotional cost, as she had become accustomed to the daily presence of her grandparents, which was suddenly absent. “I also didn’t have a way to go see them or



James Morris stands outside the RV trailer behind his mother’s house in Thermalito, reflecting on the long road to recovery after the Park Fire. *Photo/Kitty Lu*

anything since I didn’t have a vehicle until probably two to three months after the fire. I only talked to them on the phone.”

**The most difficult thing was not being around any of my family. I didn’t have the support system that I normally have, which are my grandparents.**



**Havyn Morris**  
*Park Fire Survivor*



Since the Park Fire destroyed their Cohasset home, Havyn Morris's grandparents, James and Renee Morris, and two of their sons have been living in a crowded RV trailer parked in Thermalito, which can't easily accommodate the full household that once lived under one roof in Cohasset. Photo/Kitty Lu

Havyn and her sister had already endured more than their fair share of trauma even before the Park Fire. One reason was that they are known among disaster case managers as “dual-impact” survivors, having also been affected by a previous disaster, the Camp Fire. Havyn was in middle school at the time, living with her mother and siblings.

“Both the Camp Fire and the Park Fire were the scariest moments,” Havyn admits. “With the Camp Fire, I was on my way to school and I got separated from everyone besides my little sister.” The girls made it to safety but at a certain point during their escape, Havyn’s sister was pulled from a burning car and now suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). For this reason, knowing there was no room for everyone in their grandparents’ trailer after the Park Fire, Havyn left so her younger sister could stay.

The impact of the Camp Fire reached even farther for the siblings. Their mother, who

was a renter without insurance, didn’t apply for available wildfire disaster relief assistance after the family lost their home, and the household received no financial support from other resources. This led to continual displacement from one housing solution to another. They were eventually taken in by James, and while the sisters stayed, their mother was eventually asked to leave due to substance abuse issues.

Sadly, to add to their woes, Havyn and her siblings’ childhood has been perpetually marked by instability due to their parents’ lifestyle choices. “My dad has been in and out of my life through my whole entire life. He is currently in San Francisco in rehab, and my mom is an alcoholic, so I don’t want to be around her. I prefer to be around my grandparents,” Havyn, who suffers from complex PTSD, anxiety, and bouts of depression, confided.

This is why Havyn’s current situation, displaced since the Park Fire and essentially

never having the opportunity to truly settle since the Camp Fire, was disheartening. When Jones learned about it from James, for whom she had been putting together several aid applications over the course of several weeks, she decided to meet her and was genuinely impressed.

“She’s very strong. She’s very resilient,” Jones observed. Through all the turmoil, Havyn had managed to finish high school and attend college. With help from part-time jobs and college grants to cover living expenses, she was able to stay afloat and graduate, with plans to start working in the salon industry building her clientele. “I’m a licensed cosmetologist and I’ll be taking my state board soon to become a licensed barber,” Havyn is happy to say.

Jones ascertained that Havyn’s principal need was a family support system, which she had found with her grandparents and uncles.

**I could see that she needed help getting back home. She said, ‘I want to just be back home with my papa.’ And I said, ‘I’m going to help you get back home.’**



**Bobbie Rae Jones**  
Disaster Case Manager  
Tzu Chi Chico Recovery Center

Purchasing a trailer to place on James’s land in Cohasset was the optimum solution at this juncture, as the whole household was planning to return there as soon as possible. Jones was determined to make it happen, although there were obstacles ahead as the Park Fire was not a typical disaster in terms of possible government assistance.

## When Recovery Resources Fall Short

Several historic catastrophes had impacted Butte County even before the Park Fire. The Camp Fire razed the town of Paradise and killed 85 people in 2018, becoming California’s deadliest wildfire to date. In 2020, the North Complex fires destroyed over 2,300 structures and killed more than a dozen people, followed by the Dixie Fire that grew so large that it became the first known wildfire to burn across the Sierra Nevada, crossing the mountain range and spreading onto the other side.

And then, on July 24, 2024, the Park Fire ignited in Chico’s Bidwell Park, about 15 miles west of Paradise, and quickly grew into the fourth-largest wildfire in



James Morris leans in to hug his granddaughter Havyn Morris, who has relied on her grandparents for stability amid family upheaval. Photo/Kitty Lu



▲ Volunteers staff Tzu Chi USA's Park Fire disaster relief station at the Local Assistance Center in Chico on August 6, 2024. Photo/Judy Liao

◀ A Tzu Chi volunteer surveys Park Fire damage at a Cohasset property during disaster assessment efforts on August 7, 2024. Photo/Judy Liao

California history, burning 429,603 acres across Butte and Tehama counties. While the fire began in Chico, the worst structural losses were concentrated in foothill and mountain communities north and northeast of the city.

Tzu Chi USA's Northwest Region volunteers responded quickly, thanks in part to the proximity of the Tzu Chi Chico Recovery Center, which had been established following the Camp Fire to facilitate mid-to-long-term recovery services to individuals and families impacted by that calamity. Overall, the Park Fire destroyed 713 structures and damaged 57. In Cohasset, a census-designated place about 18 miles from Chico, local reporting estimated that roughly 90% of homes were destroyed.

Tzu Chi's disaster relief distributions in August 2024 provided \$104,500 in cash

card aid, yet it was evident that assistance beyond the immediate emergency phase was crucial. In early 2025, even more severe wildfires erupted in Southern California, and many organizations providing disaster case management shifted staff and resources and ended services for Park Fire survivors. For those still displaced, the pullback added hardship on top of hardship, triggering renewed anxiety and a fresh wave of uncertainty about recovery.

Moreover, although the Park Fire was the fourth-largest wildfire in California history, survivors didn't receive assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). "We have a unique situation here with the Park Fire because FEMA didn't approve it as a disaster. I actually tried to send an appeal with a group of us here to have FEMA come and

help survivors, but it was denied," Bobbie Rae Jones explained. "When people are denied a declaration from FEMA, they don't get the immediate individual assistance to help repair the things in their homes that burned down."

Jones said the funding gap has reshaped recovery on the ground.

**One of the things that I'm dealing with right now working with Park Fire survivors is that there aren't enough funds to help them even to live in a trailer on their property. Before, I could request funds to rebuild a house. Now, I can't even request enough funds to repair the well.**

**Bobbie Rae Jones**  
Disaster Case Manager  
Tzu Chi Chico Recovery Center



Another issue was the loss of partner support. "When I started working, we had three or four other organizations where we were all working together as a team to go out into the Park Fire burn scar and help survivors. Now, it was very challenging for other organizations to help because they didn't have any funding specifically to hire people for the Park Fire. So, they had to lay off their employees, or they went to different departments," Jones said.

And there was more to contend with. "When the Camp Fire happened, about \$70 million came in, in donations. When Park Fire happened, about \$100,000 came in. So it's a drastically different disaster," Jones added.

Nonetheless, Tzu Chi USA's aid for Park Fire survivors continues through disaster case management and steady community presence. Since the emergency-phase disaster relief distributions in August 2024, volunteers have provided recovery support through long-term efforts, helping survivors navigate the barriers that remain.

This commitment has also opened a path for local residents to step forward, transforming aid recipients into caregivers. That momentum came into focus in September 2025, through a volunteer orientation event.

## From Survivors to Volunteers

The *Connection and Coalition for Recovery* gathering on September 14, 2025, was held at the Cohasset Community Association's building, nestled among the towering pines that dominate the region. Led by Minjhing Hsieh, Tzu Chi USA

► The Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region team poses for a group photo during the volunteer orientation held at the Cohasset Community Association's building on September 14, 2025. Photo/Event Participant



◀ A Tzu Chi volunteer introduces the objectives of the *Connection and Coalition for Recovery* volunteer orientation event. Photo/Sai Leong Wong

Northwest Region's Deputy Executive Director, alongside 20 volunteers from San Jose, Santa Rosa, and Sacramento, the event brought together 30 disaster survivors interested in becoming community volunteers. The participants were all local residents, and even they were surprised by the turnout.

"We really hope for this event to be more of a dialogue rather than a presentation. So we've designed a lot of activities and interactive parts where we really hope to focus on getting to know you..." a Tzu Chi volunteer said, addressing the attendees filling the community space. And that's what ensued: a program that included presentations introducing Master Cheng Yen, Tzu Chi's origins, its missions, and the bamboo bank spirit, combined with volunteer sharing and opportunities for the participants to mingle, discuss, and get to know each other and the Tzu Chi volunteers present.

Julie Bos, one of the volunteers, is herself a Park Fire survivor and was recently hired to join the Tzu Chi Chico Recovery Center as one of its disaster case managers. She first volunteered with Tzu Chi in 2019, helping Camp Fire survivors after the November 2018 blaze. "I felt compelled to go do that work because I was burned in an explosion in 1985, and what I know from trauma is that sometimes it's hard to just listen to the person who has been traumatized, and help them while supporting their choices. I learned how to say, 'I will do what is best for you, not what is best for me,'" she shared.

Bos fondly recalls how she was received during the Camp Fire mission by one of the Tzu Chi volunteers. "He walked up to me and put a scarf around my neck and made me feel comfortable to be who I am. I didn't feel nervous or anxious or having to perform. I just had to be a good soul. And that was it." After she lost her

home in the Park Fire and Tzu Chi volunteers came to Cohasset, Bos was glad to hand him the bamboo bank she had received a year before. "I kept it with me even though I didn't have a home. I was so happy to give it back to him completely full, knowing that we're going to keep continuing to help the world," she recounted. "All of us want to help make the world a better place and make communities stronger everywhere we go."

Bos truly exhibits the heart of what it means to be a volunteer. "What's important is showing people kindness, compassion, patience and tolerance, and love," she said. "Because those are the things that people are needing the most." She also emphasized the importance of community. "Cohasset is a very small community. We had about 1,000 people here before the fire. We only have about 300 here now; 425 houses were lost. But we're a strong community. We love each other... There's a lot of love in this small community."

Seth Mitchell, also a Park Fire survivor, is a perfect example of that community spirit. He is a Cohasset Community Association board member and community leader. "I'm one of the Park Fire Heroes here up in Cohasset. I stayed during the Park Fire to help save the community infrastructure



Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region Deputy Executive Director Minjhing Hsieh (right) joins a table discussion during the volunteer orientation event. Photo/Sai Leong Wong



Julie Bos (right), a disaster case manager at the Tzu Chi Chico Recovery Center, shares her insights on volunteering during the *Connection and Coalition for Recovery* volunteer orientation event. Photo/Sai Leong Wong

and the homes that were where we are today, in the green zone,” he explained. By “green zone,” he was referring to a central pocket of the Cohasset community that didn’t burn.

Even so, Mitchell was more interested in celebrating Tzu Chi volunteers’ enduring presence in the community. “We didn’t have enough people’s homes burned and fatalities in the fire, which would spark FEMA and state funding. We relied on the foundations that came up during and after the fire to help,” he noted. “I have felt great compassion with the Tzu Chi Foundation because they continue to provide support. And the attitudes within the community have changed because people have gotten the support. We’ve gained more smiling faces, which brings others into a better

state of mind in recovery. Because what we’ve found is that a lot of people are having trouble moving back in...”

Bobbie Rae Jones confirmed the challenges that persist in Cohasset. “There’s a lot in need,” she said. “There’s a lot of people that are living in tents on their properties. They don’t have water. They don’t have power. And as a disaster case manager, I can access funding through the partner agencies, different tables, to help request those funds for the survivors so they can get their power reinstated, so they can purchase a trailer, and do many, many other things.”

The volunteer orientation event was also an opportunity to let residents know that help was still available. “There are



Bobbie Rae Jones comforts a distraught participant during the guided meditation session at the volunteer orientation event. Photo/Nancy Ku



At the end of the volunteer orientation event, some participants complete registration forms, formalizing their interest in becoming community volunteers with Tzu Chi. Photo/Minjhing Hsieh



Seth Mitchell, a Cohasset Community Association board member, engages in conversation with fellow community members during the *Connection and Coalition for Recovery* volunteer orientation event. Photo/C.M. Yung

resources for people that have been affected by the fire. And if you have tried to get resources, you had a disaster case manager, and it didn’t work, or you know somebody that still needs some assistance, there will still be time to come through the Tzu Chi Chico Center to get assistance through that. So if you or you know somebody that still needs assistance, please, you can contact our office,” Jones told the participants.

The conversation also turned to practical steps the community could take to reduce risk and strengthen essential services. Locally, Seth Mitchell will work with Minjhing Hsieh to promote a water tower installation project, since some Park Fire survivors are still living on land without water. He explained that the project would also strengthen the community’s preparedness ahead of future wildfires. “We have it for that reason too. The Tzu Chi Foundation has offered to help us get that for the community.”

Since the orientation session lasted four hours, the Tzu Chi team additionally made time for Tai Chi exercises to help participants loosen up after sitting for

much of the program, along with a guided meditation set to music, during which volunteers served tea. As everyone settled, surrounded by others who had also endured the Park Fire’s ferocity and aftermath, some felt their emotions rise to the surface and broke down in tears.

The *Connection and Coalition for Recovery* event concluded with the classic Tzu Chi song “Love and Care for All,” aptly capturing why so many Cohasset residents came. They were there to explore how they could step forward to support their community as it heals from a wildfire that left so much destruction in its wake, and to strengthen readiness for what may lie ahead.

**I’m very glad we could hold such a different kind of new volunteer training here in Cohasset today. After it ended, several people signed up and expressed willingness to become Tzu Chi volunteers, and they also hope to take part in the next activity.**



**Minjhing Hsieh**  
Deputy Executive Director  
Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region

## Step by Step Toward Home

It was a few weeks after the volunteer orientation event in September 2025 that members of the Morris family could mark a milestone on their path to recovery after the Park Fire, with the arrival of the trailer that would soon be Havyn's home. One practical advancement at a time, even while navigating limited funding and finding creative ways to secure support, Bobbie Rae Jones had been keeping the Morris' recovery plan moving forward.

"Working on these disasters with very few funds, you have to be very strategic," Jones said. To help make it happen, she tapped into available Camp Fire resources. "It's not normal for a Park Fire disaster case manager to go to the Camp Fire and ask for funds, but because she is a Camp Fire

survivor, they allowed me to go to those funding tables, and I requested funds to get her a trailer so she could move back onto the property with her family when they return."

**Bobby, she's been great. She's always checking in to make sure we're... if we need anything, she's just really been very helpful.**

“

**James Morris**  
*Park Fire Survivor*

Jones assessed Havyn's next needs as a generator, a fridge, and other essentials, since she has no household belongings. For Havyn, the steady support is helping her navigate the emotional roller coaster associated with complex PTSD. "I definitely do have some of my ups and downs. But



▲ Inside the trailer that will soon be her home, Havyn Morris listens as Bobbie Rae Jones outlines a plan for securing the essential equipment and household basics Havyn still needs. *Photo/Kitty Lu*



► Havyn Morris helps her grandfather James Morris move bricks as he prepares to install septic piping on his property in Cohasset, California. *Photo/Kitty Lu*

how I look at it is, I just have to keep a smile on my face. That's the best thing I can do. I can't hold on to the past. I have got to move forward," she said resolutely.

**To see her trailer, and to see this is going to be her home, and give her the opportunity to live back with her family in the same area, it brings me so much joy.**

“

**Bobbie Rae Jones**  
*Disaster Case Manager*  
*Tzu Chi Chico Recovery Center*

Jones is continuing to assist Havyn's grandfather, James Morris, as well. The ultimate goal is to secure funding to rebuild a home that can accommodate the whole family, and in the meantime, they are proceeding step by step. Once infrastructure is recovered, the plan is to bring the trailer that is now parked in Thermalito,

and one that they hope to acquire for Havyn's younger sister, onto the property as soon as possible. "I'm trying to get that ready. I got the power, waiting on the power, but today I'm going to be doing the sewage system so we can hook into the trailers when we get up here. We got a temporary permit to live on the premises while we're rebuilding," James reported.

Looking back on how far they have come, and how Tzu Chi has played a part in their progress restoring stability after the Park Fire, both Havyn and James are grateful. "The one thing I've learned is you just never know when you need to reach out for help. And luckily, there are plenty of people who help," James said. "I absolutely love the help. We all appreciate it very, very much," his granddaughter Havyn added, her cheerful, optimistic tone suggesting that some of the anxieties of the past were finally beginning to ease. 🌱



Standing on his property in Cohasset, James Morris, his granddaughter Havyn Morris, and Bobbie Rae Jones review progress and priorities in the family's Park Fire recovery plan. *Photo/Kitty Lu*



Tzu Chi's founding *bamboo bank spirit* encourages everyone to set aside a little each day to help others in their time of need, a tradition that continues until today. Photo/Tzu Chi USA

# Steady Giving Is Tzu Chi's Heartbeat

Written by Ida Eva Zielinska

Tzu Chi began with a heartfelt commitment expressed by Dharma Master Cheng Yen's first followers, who set aside a little each day in coin banks made from bamboo. Their simple daily practice created a fund to assist families in need in Hualien, Taiwan, where Master Cheng Yen established the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation in 1966. This was how Tzu Chi's *bamboo bank spirit* was born, where regular giving to help others is a way of life.

## Carrying Our Founding Tradition Forward

The bamboo bank tradition reminds us that it is not the size of a donation that matters most: It is the sincere, benevolent intention behind it. What began as a shared daily act of compassion grew into a worldwide movement as more people joined, each offering what they could. Like drops of water forming an ocean, these steady acts of giving have enabled Tzu Chi to bring care and relief to people in 139 countries and regions around the world to date.

## TZU CHI'S GLOBAL FOOTPRINT

Compassion in 139 Countries/Regions



- |                        |                    |                  |                                  |                |
|------------------------|--------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|----------------|
| Afghanistan            | Cote d'Ivoire      | Italy            | Niger                            | Somalia        |
| Albania                | Croatia            | Japan            | North Korea                      | South Africa   |
| American Samoa         | Czechia            | Jordan           | Northern Mariana Islands         | South Korea    |
| Argentina              | Denmark            | Kenya            | Norway                           | South Sudan    |
| Australia              | Djibouti           | Kosovo           | Palestine                        | Spain          |
| Austria                | Dominica           | Laos             | Pakistan                         | Sri Lanka      |
| Azerbaijan             | Dominican Republic | Lebanon          | Papua New Guinea                 | Sudan          |
| Bangladesh             | Ecuador            | Lesotho          | Paraguay                         | Sweden         |
| Belgium                | El Salvador        | Liberia          | Peru                             | Switzerland    |
| Belize                 | Eswatini           | Macao            | Philippines                      | Syria          |
| Benin                  | Ethiopia           | Madagascar       | Poland                           | Taiwan         |
| Bhutan                 | Fiji               | Malawi           | Portugal                         | Tanzania       |
| Bolivia                | France             | Malaysia         | Puerto Rico                      | Thailand       |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | Germany            | Mali             | Romania                          | The Gambia     |
| Botswana               | Ghana              | Marshall Islands | Russia                           | Timor-Leste    |
| Brazil                 | Greece             | Mauritania       | Rwanda                           | Togo           |
| Brunei                 | Guatemala          | Mexico           | Saint Lucia                      | Tonga          |
| Bulgaria               | Guinea-Bissau      | Micronesia       | Saint Martin                     | Tunisia        |
| Burkina Faso           | Haiti              | Moldova          | Saint Vincent and the Grenadines | Turkey         |
| Cambodia               | Holy See           | Mongolia         | Sao Tome and Principe            | Uganda         |
| Canada                 | Honduras           | Morocco          | Senegal                          | Ukraine        |
| Chad                   | Hong Kong          | Mozambique       | Serbia                           | United Kingdom |
| Chechnya               | India              | Namibia          | Slovakia                         | United States  |
| Chile                  | Indonesia          | Nepal            | Sierra Leone                     | Venezuela      |
| China                  | Iran               | Netherlands      | Singapore                        | Vietnam        |
| Colombia               | Iraq               | New Zealand      | Sint Maarten                     | Zambia         |
| Congo                  | Ireland            | Nicaragua        | Solomon Islands                  | Zimbabwe       |
| Costa Rica             | Israel             |                  |                                  |                |

Monthly giving is today's way of carrying the bamboo bank spirit forward. By becoming a monthly donor, you are choosing a rhythm of compassion that beats alongside other caring hearts, joining a community that shows up consistently and strives to leave no one behind in a time of need.

### Why Monthly Giving Matters

Disasters and hardships do not arrive on a schedule. Needs also do not end when the headlines fade. Tzu Chi's work includes urgent disaster relief, but it also encompasses year-round programs that require ongoing funds, such as helping families who are struggling to make ends meet, offering medical care, supporting education, assisting people through life's unexpected setbacks, uplifting under-resourced communities, and more.



During a disaster relief distribution, a care recipient learns about Tzu Chi's origins and bamboo bank spirit, a story that has inspired many around the world. Photo/Tzu Chi USA








While our volunteers are always ready to serve, giving their time freely and paying their own way to get to and stay wherever they go, they still need resources to launch new missions and keep programs going. Your monthly donation can empower their efforts and strengthen their capacity to meet needs without pause.

Monthly giving creates a dependable foundation that helps our teams nationwide plan ahead and ensures our charity and medical programs can be maintained and expanded as necessary. It also helps volunteers be ready before the next emergency, because when a disaster strikes, speed matters. And, it helps assure that relief can be sustained from emergency response through mid- and long-term recovery.

In Tzu Chi, we often say, "We are all one family in this world." Monthly giving is a practical way to embody that spirit. Together, we can respond to needs the way a family does: attentive, present, and ever ready to act. It is choosing to stay close, to keep showing up, and to be part of a community that offers steady care to people facing hardship, wherever they are.

When compassion becomes a habit, it becomes a force for good that sends ripples far and wide. Join the Tzu Chi family of monthly donors. 🌱

A Monthly Donation = Endless Ripples of Care	
 \$10 /month = <b>\$120 /year</b>	
 \$25 /month = <b>\$300 /year</b>	
 \$50 /month = <b>\$600 /year</b>	
 \$75 /month = <b>\$900 /year</b>	
 \$100 /month = <b>\$1,200 /year</b>	

### A Little Consistently Amounts to a Lot

As the bamboo bank spirit shows, even a little given routinely can become a lot over time. It becomes something even more meaningful than a single moment of generosity: It becomes a quiet promise that someone can count on. It's like saying, "I'm here with you." Month after month, your compassion becomes a constant presence, a stream of hope.

DONATE TODAY



ONE DAY, ONE DOLLAR  
RIPPLES OF KINDNESS



## YOUR LOVE CAN BE THERE DAY AFTER DAY

When someone is facing loss, uncertainty, or hardship, what matters most is knowing they are not alone.

Tzu Chi brings compassionate support through **disaster relief, community services, medical and charitable care, education, and environmental action**, guided by a global and interfaith spirit. While a one-time gift can help in a moment, recurring donations help kindness stay.

Through steady monthly support, we can keep showing up for families rebuilding after disasters, for neighbors who need ongoing care, and for communities working toward a safer, more hopeful future. It is a simple choice that turns goodwill into a lasting presence.

Begin your journey as a regular giver and let your love be there day after day, creating **ripples of kindness** that endure.

**BEGIN NOW**



## Illuminations

Dharma Master Cheng Yen responds to questions and comments from visitors, volunteers, staff, and disciples.

### CULTIVATE BLESSINGS

**Question:** *How can we live a meaningful life?*

**Answer:** *When we are in good health, we should cultivate more blessings; when our surroundings permit, we should form more good affinities and not waste time. In this way, we will naturally feel grounded in life.*

### LET COMPASSION GUIDE INTERACTIONS

**Question:** *How can ordinary people achieve the most basic level of compassion?*

**Answer:** *In our daily lives, we must treat others with love, confidence, and a forgiving heart so that people and matters can be in harmony. When interacting with others, we should try to achieve the state that “there is no one that I do not love, no one that I do not trust, and no one that I cannot forgive.” That is compassion.*

### EQUALITY COMES FROM UNIVERSAL LOVE

**Question:** *How can we achieve equality?*

**Answer:** *If you love everyone, that is equality. 🌱*

Excerpts from Pure Wisdom by Shih Cheng Yen, published in 2022 by Jing Si Publishing

# A PEACEFUL WORLD IS LIFE'S GREATEST BLESSING

*"With a tranquil and peaceful heart, the road is smooth. With a broad and open heart, the road is wide."*

*Master Cheng Yen's Teachings | Translated and Compiled by the Dharma as Water Team*

The new year has passed, and the Lunar New Year is approaching. Every year at this time, during year-end blessing events, the atmosphere is festive, but I also feel how truly quickly time passes. There is a saying, "With each passing day, we draw closer to death." With each passing day, being peaceful and at ease is itself a blessing. We should not only reverently pray for our own well-being, but also be grateful for the great karmic conditions that allow us to be in the Tzu Chi family and give rise to great aspirations to help sentient beings around the world. This is an even greater blessing.

We must be role models, always speaking good words and doing good deeds, guiding everyone to give rise to good thoughts and make good vows, and creating blessings together. With our good thoughts aligned and harmony prevailing among people, the world will naturally stay in balance; this, truly, is the greatest blessing of our lives.

The Buddha's one great cause for coming to this world was to go among people to teach the Bodhisattva Path, teaching everyone to awaken their Bodhisattva aspirations and give to those who are suffering. Everyone inherently possesses Buddha nature, but lifetime after lifetime, layer upon layer of the dust of ignorance has covered our pure intrinsic nature. Finding that Buddha nature within our minds is the goal of our spiritual practice.

When a single ignorant thought arises, we deviate from the principles. A slight deviation can lead us far off course, so we must take good care of our minds. If we feel hurt by others' words or attitudes, and the mirror of our minds becomes fogged, we should use the Dharma to wipe it clean, transforming ignorance and afflictions into wisdom and creating positive affinities with others.

Wherever I attend year-end blessings, Tzu Chi volunteers gather with me early each morning. The life stories they all share are like sutras, adding to my knowledge and wisdom. I also listen to how everyone gives to this world. Are their hearts unified? Are people harmonious? In the course of their work, disagreements may arise and create unhappiness. When they bring these issues to me, I help mediate and align their direction. As long as two rails are laid properly, no matter how many cars a train needs to pull, the train will always be stable. This is the Bodhisattva Path in this world.

Every day, I am so grateful that our generation has come together in Tzu Chi, giving to what we feel is worthwhile, gathering daily with good people, and working with hearts full of joy. Seeing everyone in neat uniforms, entering and leaving in an orderly

manner, each diligently at their post, practicing unity, harmony, mutual love, and concerted effort – achieving these four values in daily life makes me very content.

I often tell Tzu Chi volunteers to take inventory of the value of their lives. I take stock of my own life daily and feel very blessed. Having accumulated good causes and positive affinities over countless lifetimes, in this life I have shouldered the Tathagata's mission, and I have so many Living Bodhisattvas supporting me and helping so many suffering people in this world. I often hear volunteers share about their community visits and care work, how they have supported care recipients' children as they grow into independent adults. Whole Tzu Chi families across multiple generations have come to speak with me. When I see how harmonious their families are, these truly are great offerings. This is why I practice among people.

Tzu Chi volunteers go among people and form positive affinities. Because of the image and actions they present, people immediately recognize Tzu Chi, giving rise to love and respect, affirming the character and etiquette of Tzu Chi volunteers. So, we must take inventory of ourselves even more, understand the value and duty of being Tzu Chi volunteers, and cherish ourselves. If one of us behaves inappropriately, using an improper tone or manner, we should gently approach that person and say something. This is also a form of mutual love.

Each time I go out and see you all, I feel how quickly people age. As time passes, natural laws are inevitable; illness and aging are difficult. When others describe the difficulties they face, I can sympathize, as I have had the same experiences. Only when we are old do we truly know what aging is like.

The families that Tzu Chi volunteers care for are lonely elderly people with illnesses and pain who need support. When their home environment is cleaned by volunteers or when they receive reconditioned assistive devices, we can imagine how deeply grateful they feel. While being loved is a blessing, no one wants to be served without giving back, so those who give love must also be attentive – they must not hurt people's hearts or make them feel looked down upon or rejected. When Living Bodhisattvas approach with sincere hearts and bless them, they will feel it even more deeply.

Spring is approaching, and that is when all things begin to flourish. I hope that through everyone's practice, Tzu Chi can also flourish. I offer blessings that all your New Year's aspirations will be fulfilled. Do not forget to pray for people around the world. When we gather this reverence and give the energy of love, the world will be peaceful and without disasters or difficulties – that is our great blessing! 🙏

*\* Compiled from Dharma Master Cheng Yen's teachings from January 6 to 18, 2026*

State	Tzu Chi USA Offices	Address	Tel / Fax	State	Tzu Chi USA Offices	Address	Tel / Fax	
AZ	Phoenix Service Center	2145 W. Elliot Rd. Chandler, AZ 85224	480-838-6556 F: 480-777-7665	MD	Montgomery County Service Center	10853 Outpost Dr. North Potomac, MD 20878	703-707-8606 F: 301-339-8872	
S. CA	Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, US Headquarters Area	1100 S. Valley Center Ave. San Dimas, CA 91773	909-447-7799 F: 909-447-7948 909-447-7799 x 6569	MA	Boston Service Center	15 Summer St. Newton, MA 02464	617-762-0569 617-431-4844 F: 617-431-4484	
	Tzu Chi Academy, San Dimas		909-447-7799 x 6551 F: 909-447-7944	MA	Boston Outreach Office	65 Harrison Avenue, 7th Boston, MA 02111	781-285-8499	
	Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation	1000 S. Garfield Ave. Alhambra, CA 91801	626-427-9598 F: 626-788-2321	MI	Cambridge Outreach Center	620 Massachusetts Avenue #6 Cambridge, MA 02139	617-800-9567	
	Tzu Chi Health Center - Alhambra		626-281-3383 F: 855-710-5853	MI	Lansing Office	3511 West Hiawatha Dr., Okemos, MI 48864	517-505-3388	
	Tzu Chi Health Center - South El Monte	10414 Vacco St. South El Monte, CA 91733	626-281-3383 F: 855-710-5853	MN	Detroit Service Center	2207 Dryden Rd. Troy, MI 48085	586-795-3491 F: 586-795-3491	
	Buddhist Tzu Chi Education Foundation	1920 S. Brea Canyon Cutoff Rd. Walnut, CA 91789	909-895-2125 F: 909-345-7025	MN	Minneapolis Office	1485 Arden View Dr. Arden Hills, MN 55112	617-939-6965	
	Tzu Chi Great Love Preschool & Kindergarten, Walnut		909-895-2126 F: 909-927-8336	MO	St. Louis Service Center	8515 Olive Blvd. St. Louis, MO 63132	314-994-1999 F: 314-994-1999	
	Tzu Chi Elementary, Walnut		909-895-2125 x 3200 F: 909-345-7025	NV	Reno Office	903 West Moana Lane Reno, NV 89509	775-827-6333 F: 775-770-1148	
	Tzu Chi Academy, Walnut		909-895-2280	NV	Las Vegas Service Center/Academy	2590 Lindell Rd. Las Vegas, NV 89146	702-880-5552 F: 702-880-5552	
	Tzu Chi Great Love Preschool & Kindergarten, Monrovia	206 E. Palm Ave. Monrovia, CA 91016	626-305-1188 F: 626-599-8098	NJ	New Jersey Chapter/Jing Si Books & Café	150 Commerce Rd. Cedar Grove, NJ 07009	973-857-8666 F: 973-857-9555	
	Tzu Chi Academy, Monrovia	220 E. Palm Ave. Monrovia, CA 91016	626-775-3675 F: 626-359-8199	NY	Tzu Chi Academy, Northern New Jersey			
	Northwest Los Angeles Service Center	11701 Wilshire Blvd. #15A Los Angeles, CA 90025	310-473-5188 F: 310-477-9518	NY	Tzu Chi Academy, Central New Jersey	50 Woodrow Wilson Dr., Edison, NJ 08820	973-857-8666	
	Torrance Service Center	1355 Broad Ave. Wilmington, CA 90744	310-684-4465 F: 310-684-4460	NY	New York Chapter/Academy	137-77 Northern Blvd. Flushing, NY 11354	718-888-0866 F: 718-460-2068	
	Tzu Chi Health Center - Wilmington		626-281-3383 F: 855-710-5853	NY	Jing Si Books & Café, New York			
	Orange County Service Center	22911 Mill Creek Dr. Laguna Hills, CA 92653	949-916-4488 F: 949-916-5933	NY	Brooklyn Office	513 57th Street Brooklyn, NY 11220	917-909-0682	
	Tzu Chi Academy, Irvine	4321 Walnut Ave., Irvine, CA 92604	714-624-3026 F: 949-916-5933	NY	Tzu Chi Academy, Brooklyn	270 59th Street, Brooklyn NY 11220	718-888-0866	
	Cerritos Service Center	14618&14620 Carmenita Rd. Norwalk, CA 90650	562-926-6609 F: 562-926-1603	NY	Long Island Branch/Academy	60 E Williston Ave. East Williston, NY 11596	516-873-6888 F: 516-746-0626	
	Northwest Service Center	8963 Reseda Blvd. Northridge, CA 91324	818-727-7689 F: 818-727-9272	NY	Manhattan Family Service Center	63 Canal Street New York, NY 10002	212-965-1151 F: 212-965-1152	
San Gabriel Valley Service Center	9620 Flair Dr. El Monte, CA 91731	626-416-4527 Warehouse: 626-416-4529	NY	East Long Island Office	4 Milburn Rd. S. Setauket, NY 11720	631-964-3393		
Jing Si Books & Café, El Monte		626-448-1362	NY	Tzu Chi Center for Compassionate Relief	229 E. 60th St. New York, NY 10022	212-660-9229 F: 646-864-0086		
San Diego Service Center	5754 Pacific Center Blvd. #202 San Diego, CA 92121	858-546-0578 F: 858-546-0573	NC	Raleigh Service Center	1274 Horsham Way Apex, NC 27502	919-322-8389		
N. CA	Northern California Chapter	2355 Oakland Rd. San Jose, CA 95131	408-457-6969 F: 408-943-8420	NC	Charlotte Office	4527 Dwight Evans Rd. Charlotte, NC 28217	704-281-8060 F: 704-943-1031	
	Tzu Chi Academy, Tri-Valley		925-785-7413	OH	Cincinnati Office	11228 Brookbridge Dr. Cincinnati, OH 45249	513-469-2161 F: 513-469-2161	
	Jing Si Books & Café, San Jose		408-457-6981	OH	Columbus Service Center	2200 Henderson Rd. Columbus, OH 43220	614-457-9215 F: 614-457-9217	
	San Francisco Branch	2901 Irving St. San Francisco, CA 94122	415-682-0566 F: 415-682-0567	OH	Dayton Office	1459 E Dorothy Lane Dayton, OH 45429	937-701-7111	
	Tzu Chi Academy, San Mateo	2675 Ralston Ave., Belmont, CA 94002	650-888-1582	OH	Cleveland Service Center	1076 Ford Rd. Highland Heights, OH 44143	440-646-9292 F: 440-646-9292	
	Tzu Chi Academy, San Francisco	350 Girard St. San Francisco, CA 94134	415-680-5225 F: 415-682-0567	OK	Oklahoma Office	2831 Misty Eidge Dr, Norman, OK 73071	405-701-3927	
	Modesto Service Center	1100 Carver Rd. #J Modesto, CA 95350	209-529-2625 F: 209-529-2625	OR	Portland Service Center	3800 SW Cedar Hills Blvd #194 Beaverton, OR 97005	503-643-2130 F: 503-643-2130	
	Tzu Chi Academy, Cupertino	1280 Johnson Ave San Jose, CA 95129	408-823-8799	OR	Tzu Chi Academy, Portland	3500 SW 104th Ave. Beaverton, OR 97005	503-643-2130	
	Santa Rosa Office	2435 Professional Drive, Suite D Santa Rosa, CA 95403	707-546-1945	PA	Philadelphia Service Center	107 North 9th Street Philadelphia, PA 19107	215-627-1915 F: 215-627-1916	
	Sacramento Service Center	1820 Tribute Rd. # J Sacramento, CA 95815	916-568-5800	PA	Pittsburgh Service Center/Academy	1333 Banksville Rd. #201 Pittsburgh, PA 15216	412-531-8343 F: 412-531-8341	
	Ukiah Office	527 S State St. #B Ukiah, CA 95482	707-462-2911	TX	Texas Chapter/Academy	6200 Corporate Dr. Houston, TX 77036	713-270-9988 F: 713-981-9008	
	Oakland Service Center	620 International Blvd. Oakland, CA 94606	510-879-0971 F: 510-879-0971	TX	Jing Si Books & Café, Houston		713-981-8966	
	Tzu Chi Academy, San Jose	625 Educational Park Dr. San Jose, CA 95133	408-457-6970	TX	Tzu Chi Great Love Preschool & Kindergarten, Houston		713-395-0303 F: 713-395-0305	
	Fresno Service Center	3097 Willow Ave. Suite 6 Clovis, CA 93612	559-298-4894 F: 559-298-4894	TX	Austin Service Center	7221 Northeast Dr. Austin, TX 78723	512-491-0358 F: 512-926-1373	
	Chico Recovery Center	1001 Willow St, Suite C Chico, CA 95928	530-801-6335	TX	San Antonio Office	19179 Blanco Rd. #109-2 San Antonio, TX 78258	909-576-2387 F: 210-566-3970	
	Orlando Service Center	5062 W. Colonial Dr. Unit 140, Orlando FL 32808	407-292-1146 F: 407-479-3662	TX	Dallas Chapter/Academy/Jing Si Books & Café	534 W. Belt Line Rd. Richardson, TX 75080	972-680-8869 F: 972-680-7732	
	FL	Miami Service Center	8070 Pasadena Blvd. Pembroke Pines, FL 33024	954-538-1172 F: 317-645-9907	TX	Tzu Chi Great Love Preschool & Kindergarten, Dallas		214-446-1776 F: 214-446-1772
	GA	Atlanta Branch/Tzu Chi Academy, Atlanta	3120 Medlock Bridge Rd. Building E Peachtree Corners, GA 30071	770-458-1000	TX	Arlington Service Center	534 W. Belt Line Rd, Richardson, TX 75080	972-680-8869
HI	Hawaii Chapter/Academy	1238 Wilhelmina Rise Honolulu, HI 96816	808-737-8885	VA	Washington D.C. Chapter/Academy	1516 Moorings Dr. Reston, VA 20190	703-707-8606 F: 703-707-8607	
IL	Chicago Chapter/Academy/Jing Si Books & Café	1430 Plainfield Rd. Darien, IL 60561	630-963-6601 F: 630-960-9360	VA	Richmond Service Center	421 Crofton Village Ter Midlothian, Virginia 23114	804-245-2628 F: 804-378-3520	
	Chicago Outreach Center	215 W 23rd St., Chicago, IL 60616	872-326-8138	WA	Seattle Branch/Academy	15800 SE Newport Way Bellevue WA 98006	425-643-9104	
IN	Indianapolis Service Center	2929 E. 96th St. #E Indianapolis, IN 46240	317-580-0979	WI	Milwaukee Office	5356 W. Silverleaf Ln, Brown Deer, WI 53223	414-378-4022	
KS	Kansas Office	9508 Shannon Way Circle Wichita, KS 67206	316-323-5798	WI	Madison Office	1019 Starlight Ln, Cottage Grove, WI 53527	608-960-1962	



## Your Love Truly Makes a Difference

The Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation is a volunteer-based international non-governmental organization established by Dharma Master Cheng Yen in 1966. While it began with 30 female followers donating 50 NT cents (around two US cents) daily from their grocery money to help those in need, Tzu Chi's humanitarian aid footprint has now reached 139 countries and regions to relieve suffering and create a better world for all through compassion, love, and hope. Its activities encompass community and social services, national and international disaster relief,

medical and charitable assistance, education, environmental protection, and the promotion of humanistic values and community volunteerism. **And yet, there's so much more we can do together. Your recurring donation can help strengthen our efforts for years to come.**

**Donate Now** ▶  
[donate.tzuchi.us](https://donate.tzuchi.us)





**Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation**

1100 S. Valley Center Ave.  
San Dimas, CA 91773  
Tel: 909.447.7799  
Fax: 909.447.7948

NonProfit Org.  
U.S. POSTAGE

**PAID**

San Dimas, CA  
Permit No.36



On August 10, 2024, Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region volunteers provide disaster relief assistance to survivors of the 2024 Park Fire, and learn their stories. *Photo/Andy Chiang*

Tzu Chi Found