

**MANDY KAO**  
**Mixing Business with Heartfelt Generosity**

by Marian Szczepanski

Never underestimate the power of a turtle. Just ask Titan Management co-owner, community leader and philanthropist Mandy Kao.

Born in Hong Kong, the self-described “mischievous prankster” sneaked out of her parents’ condo to meet friends on the building’s rooftop and started her first business.

“I mixed water, flour and food coloring and created figurines,” she recalls, giving “convincing sales pitches” to sell them.

With her earnings, the six-year-old bought a pet turtle and carried it everywhere in a purse fashioned from a red and gold tin can.

“He represented my first profits, and I was very proud because I bought him myself,” she says. Adding with a laugh, “My mom didn’t know I even took baths with my turtle.” According to Kao, she inherited the best of her parents’ traits.

“Mom taught me about giving back to the community,” she states.

As a youngster, Kao helped her mother with fundraisers and regularly visited senior citizens’ homes. Her mother’s volunteerism continued when the family immigrated to Vancouver, Canada, prior to the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China. She currently runs a soup kitchen for Vancouver’s homeless as a volunteer and continues to visit the homes of the aged on a weekly basis.

Kao inherited the entrepreneur gene from her father, a self-made international businessman. Her mother wasn’t interested in business, so Kao, at nine years old, started accompanying her father to business meetings.

“I remember sitting with my father and five or six men in suits at the Hong Kong Country Club, listening, absorbing and having a great time,” she says.

In short order, the prankster transformed into a poised young woman with good people skills. Kao became her father’s “date” for business luncheons and dinners. When wives or daughters accompanied his visiting out-of-town partners, Kao served as hostess, showing them around.

As a 20-year-old university student in home economics, she got the idea to create and

manufacture figure-enhancing women's undergarments, like SPANX, and tried to talk her father into buying a factory or finding someone with whom she could set up a joint venture. But three car accidents in the year following graduation prompted a change in plans.

She enrolled in a MBA program, focusing on sales and marketing, and the entrepreneur gene surfaced again. With a grad school friend, she set up a real estate investment company.

“At that time, you could buy very inexpensive apartments and get a good rate of return in the United States, compared to Canada,” she points out.

Still living at home in Vancouver, she met William Kao, a real estate developer who, likewise, was looking for additional business opportunities. Thus, a perfect partnership — personal and entrepreneurial — was born.

After their marriage, they formed Titan Management, a privately held real estate investment, management and development firm. Their first property was a Las Vegas apartment complex, a deteriorated foreclosure that occupied a prime location near the Strip. Their new home was both a promising opportunity and a jarring reality check for Kao.

“I'd led a sheltered life, and now I saw a family of seven living in a one-bedroom studio. The father was a drug dealer, and the mother had to work to feed five kids. In the apartment business, you get quick snapshots of all the problems in America — drugs, domestic violence, teenage pregnancies and more,” she says.

From their second-floor unit, Kao would look down into the courtyard, where “drug dealers were like roaches.” One was the complex's maintenance man. To turn things around, Kao worked with local hotels and police. Titan Management donated and renovated a ground-floor unit with Internet access to the police department; hotels provided snacks, magazines and maid service.

“The bike patrol police now had a place right in the heart of the action where they could do reports, grab a drink and a snack. Because it was in an apartment complex, it was safer than going into a gas station,” Kao explains.

Criminal activity in the complex disappeared overnight.

As Titan Management made additional investments, Kao oversaw many of the day-to-day activities, such as leasing, collections and human resources. She also studied each locale's dynamics and developed a plan to improve, not just the apartment complex, but also the residents' and area's quality of life. She's particularly proud of her work managing a Phoenix

apartment complex, which was home to many latchkey kids.

Kao heard about a 13-year-old resident who'd concealed her pregnancy until she went into labor. It was only one year before that Kao caught the little girl stealing candy from the vending machine.

"I didn't have kids then, so I decided I needed to reach out to these girls, especially from ages eight to 12," she says.

Each Sunday, she opened the office and offered homework tutorials. The students were also encouraged to stop in after school if they had homework questions. Kao also created a reward system: A's equaled points; points added up to new clothes. On Friday evenings, she and her husband treated students with good grades to movies at a drive-in theater or to baseball games.

"The parents were so happy. Our renewal rate, as you can imagine, was very high," she recalls.

When Titan Management acquired another Phoenix complex with just 50 percent occupancy, Kao learned that the church next door offered a resettlement program for Bosnian and Vietnamese refugees. Kao contributed by offering free and reduced rent, waiving all deposits and converting maintenance shops into libraries. She contacted several other churches, whose volunteers taught English classes, and helped set up a neighborhood association. Kao brought in speakers to discuss financial management, tenant responsibilities and finding jobs. Nearly 90 percent of her refugee tenants bought homes after one year.

"People told me it was not financially sound, as a landlord, to help tenants buy houses and leave. But, I believe, if I do what's best for my tenants, I'm going to be okay. Local churches started sending all their refugees to me. We eventually sold the complex at a very good price. Whatever loss we took in the short term, we got back. I don't consider myself to be just a landlord. I feel I can offer more by adding value to the community in which I do business," she says.

Her big-picture approach to property management has proven to be a formula for success. Over the past 10 years, Titan Management has expanded its investments to include shopping centers and office buildings, as well as diversified into ventures unrelated to real estate. Since the Kao's three young sons have started school, the company now operates primarily in Houston.

Despite the economic downturn, Titan Management's occupancy rate has remained steady, largely due to Kao's reputation for community service. She has assisted the refugee resettlement programs of Catholic Charities, YMCA, Interfaith Ministries and Alliance for Multicultural Services, as well as SEARCH Homeless Services' clients. In addition, she's been an active

member of such boards as Asian American Family Services and Asian American Business Council and helped found the Asian American Giving Circle to encourage Asian professionals to invest in their community through a shared philanthropy model.

She recently created the Mandy Kao Foundation — both to serve the local community and teach her sons they can make a difference. She's particularly interested in assisting refugees and the homeless, as well as providing scholarships for at-risk kids.

The Mandy Kao Foundation is poised to award matching grants to several new refugee projects, including a venture to support refugee women artisans in developing a micro enterprise to support their families and a workforce literacy initiative that will enable refugees a greater chance at succeeding in the workplace. As an early investor, the Mandy Kao Foundation's modest grants will have a great impact on the success of these projects by increasing the chances of attracting larger grants and more supporters.

"I want to give a helping hand, not a hand-out," she stresses, adding that she'll work with local service organizations to target other worthy grant recipients.

A recent award went to Skills For Living, which provides financial literacy programs for at-risk high school students and low-income adults.

The family foundation's assistance isn't limited to people. "My oldest son, who is nine, loves pandas. He's very concerned they're becoming extinct. I told him, 'You're on my board. Maybe we could donate some money,'" she recalls with a smile.

She encouraged him to do online research, which led to his decision to donate to the World Wildlife Fund.

Her sons' support is key to the foundation's success. Money that would go toward Christmas gifts will also be put in the fund.

"I told them we're going to use the money for something better, and they like the idea," she says. "I really want to make an effort to show my kids what the real world is like. And sometimes, we need to make sacrifices to help others. And doing your best and making a difference, whether big or small, is the key to true happiness."

In addition to growing the foundation (and taking a family vacation to China to see pandas), Kao hopes to buy another property and provide nonprofits with free satellite office space, a free donation center for the needy, as well as free space for community churches to do local outreach.

Kao is also working with large employers to offer free financial benefits program to their employees. Some of the perks include free financial wellness training, free prescription discount cards and emergency line of credit.

As if that is not enough for Kao, she also plans to open up “modern, efficient and affordable” executive offices in Katy, TX.

“A lot of people think business and nonprofits don’t mix,” she observes. “Some people operate strictly on the bottom line alone; I like to do business with my heart. Some people may not agree with this approach. But if you really have the spirit of service and do what’s best for the customer, you win your customer’s heart. And you know what? The numbers speak for themselves.”