

CONVERGENCE, COLLABORATION & COMMUNITY BUILDING AT UCLA



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By Jeri Okamoto Floyd

You never know how one email can trigger a chain of events that will eventually transform hundreds of lives in a positive way.

I received such an email in 2003 from a friend, Jeff, about a relatively new organization called China Care. Jeff and I served together on the board of a community nonprofit, and he knew that I was the adoptive mother of two daughters from China and directed the Southern California chapter of Families with Children from China (FCC-SoCal). FCC-SoCal is an organization that provides educational, cultural and peer support programs and services for adopted children and their families.

At that time, one of our highest priorities was to create new nurturing, yet empowering opportunities for our large group of elementary school-age children so that they could continue developing positive self-esteem and racial identity while also staying connected to their adopted peers.

During the summer of 2005, China Care was in the air and our aspirations were about to converge. UCLA student Stephanie Lo travelled to China and upon returning home, started a China Care Club on campus to help the children she knew were left behind. My dear friend Susan Robinson - a fellow adoptive mom and FCC-SoCal's Vice President and Program Director - and I connected with Stephanie and discussed how we could work together to create a meaningful program for our children and their college club members. We agreed that a "Buddy Program" would empower the students and help the children develop a positive identify by spending time with their mentors. In turn, the youth would be equipped to "pay it forward," become mentors and role models to further represent China Care.





The first year, in 2005-2006, eighteen FCC children and several China Care student volunteers gathered in a room on campus to play board games, act out skits and create cultural crafts. Starting in 2006, China Care Bruins recruited Big Buddies to be paired with Little Buddies and the program has grown each year. Now, China Care Bruins offers both Little Buddy (ages 5 to 10) & Youth Buddy (ages 11 and older) Programs. In 2010-

2011, more than 50 children and youth are participating, along with dozens of China Care Bruins mentors, leaders and other volunteers. The Buddies have enjoyed campus scavenger hunts, dorm tours & dining, a "Project Runway" newspaper costume competition, a talent show, Chinese folktale skits, a dumpling party, gingerbread house construction and lessons in hip hop, Chinese dance, martial arts and much more.

We encourage the Big Buddies to just be themselves, sharing their common experiences with the kids (e.g., handling teasing situations, celebrating different holidays, enjoying sports, music, favorite movies and books, etc). The children benefit from their buddy relationship by being a part of the positive group dynamic and China Care community. Our children see that there isn't just one version of an "American" or "Chinese" or "Asian" youth. The diversity of appearances, interests and personalities within China Care Bruins' volunteer base has been enlightening for the children. They experience being comfortable in an environment that is predominantly Asian American and sense that they "belong" to a welcoming community and are not conspicuous outsiders or imposters trying to fit in.



The China Care Bruins Youth Mentorship Program has far exceeded our hopes and has provided a wonderful enrichment and empowerment opportunity for dozens of FCC kids and their parents. Starting with the initiative of Stephanie Lo and succeeding through Club Presidents Amanda Yen, Brian Chiu, LiAnn Ishizuka and Fiona Poon, this amazing program has continued to evolve and flourish under the direction of its cohesive and dedicated students that seamlessly transition from year to year, graduation to graduation. I personally delight in witnessing how the students themselves mentor each other, training their successors and inspiring new generations of students to get involved each year. Their energy and enthusiasm is infectious.



As grateful parents, we wanted to give something back to the students. Starting in 2007, we began the Mentoring the Mentors program providing workshops, panels and discussion groups led by parents and community leaders representing a variety of career fields. The programs vary each year, reflecting the interests of the students - career panels, resume & interview skills, internship opportunities and more.

Looking back over the past several years, I can now fully appreciate the significance and value of the China Care Bruins club for my family and others. We fantasized about a “dream program” for our kids and China Care Bruins made it happen. My daughters are two of the original Little Buddies - starting when they were just 5 and 9 years old. They are now 11 and 14 and still enjoy their China Care Bruins Sundays.



On behalf of all of the China Care Bruins families, we extend our heartfelt appreciation to the China Care Foundation for its ongoing support of China Care Bruins, the adoptive community, and of course to the precious children they work to save.