

Volunteer extraordinaire poured heart into community

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Lennie Wong was a volunteer phenomenon in this city, a spark plug, a worker bee and a creative dynamo when it came to arranging anything from flowers to people and special events.

The 68-year-old died suddenly in February of an aneurysm.

Wong was a second-generation Victorian, whose grandparents came from China. She went to Victoria High School and studied to be an X-ray technician, but married her husband the day after she graduated.

She never "officially" worked after marrying the ear, nose and throat specialist John Wong of Vancouver, but she rarely sat still, either. To start, she had five children in six years, and soon after became addicted to night courses at Camosun College, studying everything from ceramics and calligraphy to flower arranging. She shared those talents with her community for the rest of her life.

"Mum was really busy and had a huge circle of friends," recalled daughter Madeleine Quon, a speech pathologist in Vancouver. "I don't think any of us quite comprehend her death yet. It was so sudden.

"What we miss most is her spirit and enthusiasm. Her love of people, life and organizing things, like receptions at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria or flowers at Government House.

"She was the most organized person I ever knew. When we were kids she always had our school lunches done the night before. If we were visiting relatives up-Island she always put us in pyjamas for the drive home, so we'd be ready for bed. She had a great sense of humour, but she took things very seriously and excelled. She was Martha Stewart before Martha Stewart."

How did she accomplish so much? "Once we were in bed, she would start working, at about 11 p.m.," said Quon, adding her father was very devoted to his practice and worked late, too.

"It seems like Lennie was around and volunteering forever," said gallery Asian art curator Barry Till. "She was always there in the background with a big smile on her face, always gracious, friendly, willing and doing those extra little things behind the scenes. She was never one to take the glory for anything, or seek the limelight. She just did it and was a fabulous person.

"I can't say enough about her and was so shocked to hear of her sudden death."

Dr. John Stewart, an old classmate of her husband (who predeceased Wong by 11 years) and longtime friend, gave the eulogy at her service. "She was a very special person, always in demand because of her skill and expertise, because she had an eye for what is beautiful and for her leadership."

"I don't think she had a symptom in her life before the aneurysm. A great way to go," he commented.

Longtime friend Wilma Rowley said, "Lennie always had things for me to do -- night school, flower-arranging courses, things for me to join. She always said it would be lots of fun. Next thing I knew, we were making hundreds of sandwiches. I'd say, this isn't much fun, and she'd say, 'Well it's more fun than what you normally have.' "

Another time she arranged for them to take coats at Government House and she dubbed them the Coat Check Chicks. "Someone once asked me: What music do you sing? and I explained. No, no, we hang up coats," said Rowley with a chuckle.

"Lennie always had a joke. I miss her terribly."

She had a big house, a big, beautiful garden, and a big heart, said friends who worked with her in everything from the Asian Arts Society and Victoria Flower Arrangers' Guild, to the Commonwealth Games. She was also an honorary governor of the Victoria Foundation, a life member of the Victoria Chinatown Care Society, a board member of the Asian Arts Society and honorary life member of the gallery.

Wong is survived by Quon, Sandra McComb, Patrick Wong and Jennifer Isobelle who all live on the Mainland -- and youngest son Ian, who lives here and is a senior manager in the Ministry of Economic Development.

"She was just Mum to us," he recalled this week. "Around for us all the time, very available, very loving, youthful and active. I think flower-arranging kept her young."

Island Lives is a weekly series celebrating the lives of Island people who have died recently. The series focuses not on the famous, but on our neighbours who have led interesting lives or made a difference in their communities. If you know of someone whose life should be celebrated, let us know by e-mail at features@tc.canwest.com or by mail.