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Fostering the Nucleus of Community:

Tammy Tai '98

By Imani Fonfield

The phone usually rings around 3pm. She'll verify: will she be in town for the next 48 hours? Will her husband? Is the family schedule manageably clear? If yes, Tammy Tai will pick up the phone with a routine response.

"Yes, we're set up to foster tonight."

A child's arrival at Tai's doorstep can come with a luggage packed with uprooted uncertainty. Undaunted, Tai's seasoned background as a national non-profit consultant, youth mentor, and teacher brings a paradoxical ease when greeting a child for their emergency stay.

Tai doesn't "have any intentions to change the system," when she fosters. "If a child is in my home, it means that there is nowhere else for them to be." She fosters because there is a need, and her family is a resource. It's her life's work, embodied.

A multidimensional investment in the whole child is imperative to the layers of Tai's career. For over two decades, she has led and enabled large-scale youth development initiatives at the Hyams Foundation, MENTOR, Peace First, and several other organizations.

Her keen and can-do motivation was recognizable during her days in Harvard Yard as well. Eric Dawson ('96) remembers immediately encountering Tai's vivid energy in the first week of her Harvard College orientation week. Pleasantly surprised on the Phillips Brooks House Association van to Mission Hill, Dawson exclaimed "You should come and teach Peace Games."

In addition to leading the Mission Hill Summer Program throughout her time at Harvard, Tai led violence prevention work alongside Dawson, her now husband and partner of twenty years. He co-founded Peace First – originally Peace Games – in 1992 as an undergraduate.

"Some people we're attracted to because they help us feel good about something within ourselves. Then there's those people who invite us to be the best versions of ourselves," he continued.

Tai's three children would underscore this sentiment.

"Her work definitely comes up in discussions," shared Xochitl, Tai's middle daughter, after a day of work at Massachusetts Peace Action.

Jivan agreed, taking a seat on his soccer ball in a Dorchester field. He is a junior camp counselor at PBHA's Boston Refugee Youth Enrichment (BRYE) in Boston.

Veronica nodded, pensively. Tai "was a prominent leader and director of the Mission Hill Summer Program in the 90's," she began. Veronica now works in the same role her mother had 20 years earlier. Taking after her mother, the undergraduate senior at Ohio Wesleyan University pays diligent attention to the "fifty families I look after, fifty mouths to feed... Fifty ways to give back to the community," in the Mission Hill program's nearly fifty-year history.

Tai's family and their public service are closely intertwined. But "the difficulty becomes how you draw the circle bigger around all the needs, joys, and challenges while not losing sight of the nucleus," Dawson remarked.

Tammy Tai is that nucleus. Even in work that is largely unseen.

By 6pm, the doorbell rings, their family member for a night or two arrives.

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