

Gastronomic giving

Passion for food feeds philanthropic goals for Liz Lee and friends | by RICHARD FOSS

Moments from childhood can reverberate through the rest of one's life. Liz Lee vividly remembers time spent with her grandfather, a titan of industry in his native Korea, who spent the second half of his life giving away the fortune he had amassed.

"I remember when I was a child he was always sitting in his favorite chair and I sat on the floor, and I watched him and talked with him I could see that his socks had holes and had been worn down so you could see the threads. That's how thrifty he was, even while he gave to everybody else. He was interested in giving people opportunity and hope, and that's how he spent his life."

Liz's father now runs a foundation in Korea, providing college educations to students who otherwise couldn't afford them. Palos Verdes resident Liz has continued the tradition by founding her own charity, the Lee Oneness Foundation, which is dedicated to providing food and clean water to some of the most needy children in the world. In places as far-flung as Peru, Kenya and Cambodia, the foundation runs projects that dig wells, deliver emergency food, and seeks to diversify the diet of people who desperately need help. In researching these projects, Liz has spent arduous days of travel to arrive at places that are almost unbelievably nightmarish.

"The first place we put in a water well was in Samburu, Kenya, at a home for handicapped and HIV positive orphans. Getting there was very difficult – the roads are just dirt, and when it rains everything turns into an ocean of mud. It had rained for three days straight when I got to Nairobi, and the trip was that was supposed to take six hours took 18. I wasn't prepared – I brought one bottle of water and a small sandwich. After nine hours, as the sun was going down, we came to a place where there was an unbridged river, we didn't know how deep. We talked about going forward or going back, and decided to try it. The water came to just below my window, and I really wondered if I was going to get out alive. Later the driver asked me if I was sorry I had gone to Samburu, and I said no. My path had taken me there, I was doing exactly what I wanted to do, and if I had not made it out of there, I would have been doing the best thing I could do at that moment.

The path was long, in both the spiritual and physical world. Liz came to the U.S. with her parents when she was 11 years old and they spent a year in San Francisco before moving to Palos Verdes. High school, college, a degree in graphic design, marriage and two children followed, and Liz seemed on the way to a life centered around her family, career, and community. She had no idea that things were about to take a very different turn.

"I went through a difficult time six years ago, a painful divorce, and during that time I started meditating. I spent a lot of time by myself, and those times of solitude helped me hear my subconscious voice, find my own path."

The call to help others was loud and clear, and Liz quickly realized that she also had a method of using skills from her favorite hobby – appreciating food and wine.

"I grew my own vegetable garden and threw a lot of parties, cooking a lot of dishes, and my passion for food and wine developed. I also started a little lunch group in L.A., and we would go to different restaurants. We had a different theme each month, and I created the menu and did all the planning. It started very casual, just a bunch of friends, but it became a more serious monthly dining group. Running this club was taking a huge amount of my time, but I needed a purpose in life, a goal.

"At about that time my daughter and I started volunteering at a handicapped kids' home in San Pedro, and I realized that I had found my calling. The Earth could fall down and I could care less, I was totally in tune with those kids. I realized that my grandfather had planted the seed of philanthropy when I was a child.

"I went to a meditation retreat just after that, with 20 or 30 questions in my head. I came out with no questions, and I knew what

I needed to do. I took about eight months working on a business model that would support my nonprofit. My business provides luxurious experiences involving food and wine here in Los Angeles, and it brings food and water to children on the other side of the world. I am helping in the same sector that I am passionate about."

That new dining group is the Sage Society, a gathering of gourmets who enjoy the work of culinary artists while sipping wines Liz selects from all over the world. Attendees at these dinners have joined in to support Liz's charity, as well as networking among themselves.

"Most of our events are for 20 people or less, with exquisite foods and wines. These small events bring people together, they become inspired – amazing things happen over these dinners I have created."

These small events have spawned a huge one - a gala dinner Oct. 24 featuring chefs Walter Manzke, Celestino Drago, Alain Giraud, Carolyn Nugent and Alen Ramos. It's extraordinary for celebrity chefs of this caliber to personally collaborate, but Liz Lee found all of them eager to participate as soon as they heard about the event.

"I know most of them through the winemaker dinners I run through Sage Society, and they have seen me over the years – they know my passion for food and for this charity. We have a relationship of mutual respect, and I just asked them. They all said yes.... They're devoting their time unpaid, they're helping me raise funds, they care about this cause too."

Asked about how it is that people who specialize in luxury would have so much compassion for those who have nothing, Liz becomes philosophical, even a bit mystical.

"I feel like there is a shift in philanthropy within the last five years. People are thinking, we are a small speck in the universe, a minuscule dot, and while we are here, are we going to live our lives for ourselves? If we are doing well as individuals, are we going to just hold on to every bit? I have a strong sense that people are changing their attitudes, thinking more about what they can do for humanity."

The five-chef dinner is planned as the first of many events in which people will dine very well and in doing so make it possible for others to have even a little food. Liz says that her parents, who still run a foundation in Korea, have no experience with this type of event but are interested.

"The foundation in Korea was established using private funds – in Asia it's still foreign to raise money for a nonprofit. My parents think projects like this dinner are wonderful, and they're watching and learning from what I do. It's not going to work in the same way in Korea, but they understand what I'm doing and they're adapting it to the culture there."

Meanwhile, Liz keeps traveling, looking for the next project that is a fit for the Lee Oneness Foundation and the organizations with whom they partner.

"I continue to visit orphanages in third-world countries to see for myself what they need, to make sure their projects are sustainable. We look for ways to find ongoing projects – when we provide water, we may help them with the tools to grow vegetables. We give them food and the tools to grow food. We are teaching the lifestyle of self-sufficiency to children who have been dependent, and that is a critical part of what we do."

Is Liz ever intimidated by the sheer scale of the problems in the world, the depth of poverty to be alleviated? Here answer is straightforward rather than mystical.

"I never think that way. I think about it like a problem in graphic design – when you change a life a little bit, even one per cent, it makes a difference.

Lee Oneness Foundation is at leenessfoundation.com. Details of the Five Chef dinner are at foodcelebrationdinner.com.

Liz Lee is dedicating her life to helping children in need. She hopes her Lee Oneness Foundation will make a lasting impact on children all over the world.

