
Adding it all up

By Jacque Crouse



Accountant from Hong Kong keeps strong ties to Texas State

You could say Brian Wong took a leap of faith when he left Canada straight out of high school and, on the advice of a friend of a friend, chose to enroll at Texas State without so much as a glimpse of the university. But this much is certain: Wong, now a successful Hong Kong accountant, has never regretted the decision. In fact, unlike some of his friends who attended Ivy League schools and other high-profile universities, Wong has maintained a connection to his alma mater that transcends space and time. “I kept in touch with a few teachers and other students when I moved back to Hong Kong after graduation, but in the days of no Internet, maintaining connections was more difficult,” he recalls. Just finding a university to attend in the United States in the 1980s was something of a challenge before the digital age, he remembers. Wong moved to Canada to attend high school, and always knew he wanted a college education in the States. One of four sons, including his twin, he is the only one in his family to attend college. His family supported his decision to come to the United States for a college education. “I did not believe my grades were good enough for the really big-name schools, or that my family could afford to send me to a private university in the U.S.,” Wong says.

ARMED WITH A DEGREE FROM TEXAS STATE IN 1987, WONG RETURNED TO HONG KONG AND FOR SEVERAL YEARS WORKED AMONG THE BIG FOUR ACCOUNTING FIRMS, BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL CAREER. THEN HE OPENED HIS OWN FIRM, SOUTHWEST TAX & FINANCIAL PLANNING LTD. THE COMPANY NAME IS A NOD TO HIS ALMA MATER, AS IS THE FIRM'S "SWT" EMBLEM IN GOLD AND MAROON.

He was told a state university would be good, and a schoolmate from Hong Kong told him one of his friends was attending Texas State (then known as Southwest Texas State University). He applied, and soon the young man who grew up in the cosmopolitan rush of Hong Kong found himself in laid-back San Marcos. "I would say that despite the huge difference in terms of size, a small town like San Marcos is just like a district in Hong Kong," he says. "I think being at Texas State helped me because I had fewer distractions and really was able to take advantage of the education." Part of that, he adds, was having instructors who were really top notch. His accounting professor, Cecyl Stott, made basic tax accounting so interesting that Wong went on to take an advanced course. Dr. James Yearly, then department chair, was always available to answer questions and was an inspiration to Wong, who communicated with him by mail even after returning to Hong Kong to work. Speech communication and business communication courses were invaluable to his development and profession, Wong says. "All in all, the education I received at Texas State definitely prepared me well for my accounting career." Armed with a degree from Texas State in 1987, Wong returned to Hong Kong and for several years worked among the Big Four accounting firms, building a successful career. Then he opened his own firm, Southwest Tax & Financial Planning Ltd. The company name is a nod to his alma mater, as is the firm's "SWT" emblem in gold and maroon. His clients include top executives with U.S. businesses, such as Citigroup, Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, and Merrill Lynch, and Chinese-American entrepreneurs living in Hong Kong. Wong frequently advises students not to be afraid to look far and wide for job opportunities. "I recently met a young economics graduate from an Ivy League school with a 3.88 GPA who could not find a decent job at the banks in Hong Kong," he says. "The reason was because he came from a working-class family without any connections in the financial industry. In order to win at the starting line, I encourage students to become involved in student organizations that are related to their majors as early as possible." Wong met his wife, Winnie, at an American Chamber of Commerce mixer in Hong Kong. She also attended schools in the United States, earning her bachelor's degree from Portland State University and an M.B.A. from George Washington University. But Wong says his wife rarely talks about her alma mater. He notes that a cousin who graduated from Mississippi State and lives in Washington, D.C., doesn't feel compelled to return to his alma mater. "For certain people, I believe that not visiting their alma mater can be compared to not visiting their ancestors' graves. They probably feel that after they graduated, they won't know anyone on campus anymore, so visiting the alma mater makes no difference to anybody. If these people are results oriented, they may not want to visit their ancestors' graves because nothing will result from the visit. However, if your alma mater and/or your ancestors have a place in your heart, you should make an effort to show your respect to them with action, regardless of the result, if any," he says. In September 2013, after 26 years away, Wong visited the campus again, and was touched by the warm welcome he received. While shopping at the San Marcos Premium Outlets, Wong spoke with a biology major working there. The young man offered him a familiar phrase: "Once a Bobcat, always a Bobcat." "The people I met, including faculty, staff, and students, all made me feel like it was a homecoming," says Wong, who has started a scholarship for accounting majors at Texas State. He plans other business scholarships in the future, as well as an estate gift.
