

Growing the Good: Vancouver Chinatown Foundation Helps a Vulnerable Community Get the Aid It Needs

DAVE CASPER: Welcome to growing the good. I'm Dave Casper, head of BMO's North American commercial banking business. We're working with our customers to help them through this incredibly volatile time. They're stepping up in so many ways, helping to keep commerce moving, and keep people safe. I have the pleasure of speaking with a number of CEOs running businesses in a variety of industries, hearing their personal stories about the challenges they're facing, and some of the very innovative ways they've adapted in these uncertain times. Today, I have the pleasure of speaking with Carol Lee, chair of the Vancouver Chinatown Foundation, and the CEO of Lena care, cosmic therapy. Welcome, Carol, thanks so much for joining us today.

CAROL LEE: Thank you so much for reaching out, I'm really happy to be on your podcast.

DAVE CASPER: Well, the pleasure is all mine, I'm so glad it would be good for everyone to understand Vancouver's Chinatown a little bit better. It's the largest in Canada, it's a great community. And what you've established over this period of time would be really good for people to understand a little bit more about the Vancouver Chinatown Foundation, and its mission.

CAROL LEE: So just to give you a little bit of background, Chinatown was founded around 1885, which coincided with the completion of the Trans Canada railroad. So after the last spike, most of the rail road workers wanted to return to China, but for many reasons, they weren't able to do that. They were very unwanted in Canada, they're, you know, there's head tax or the Exclusion Act. So they were actually fortress two settled in a swampy area that is now known as Chinatown here in Vancouver. And I guess, from me, you know, there's a lot of personal history. So my grandfather was considered one of the early pioneers. And our families had a presence there since 1921. So I moved away. I went to school in Boston, and I lived in the US and Hong Kong after I graduate, graduated from HBS. And when I came back in 2004, I was really dismayed because the neighborhood had really deteriorated. So I decided that, you know, if we didn't do something about trying to revitalize Chinatown, it would basically disappear. So we formed the foundation in 2012. Our mission is to revitalize the neighborhood while preserving its irreplaceable cultural heritage. And there's three pillars to our strategy. There's the physical revitalization, economic revitalization, and cultural revitalization.

DAVE CASPER: That is a great story and the family connection and how you came back. That's, that's great. Well, switching gears a little bit. I want to talk a little bit about COVID. Not only health crisis,

but it's also created huge uncertainty in the economy. Can you speak to what you've done and what's the Vancouver Chinatown Foundation has done to support the residents, particularly particularly the meals for the Mei Hua program.

CAROL LEE: So one of the projects that we own and manage it's 100 room, SRO, which stands for single room occupancy hotel, and it's called the Mei Hua, and it's a very historic building is one of the oldest in Chinatown and originally served as a rooming house. Now it houses low-income residents, many of whom are seniors and on welfare. So when we were faced with a health challenge, challenges presented by COVID. And we were sort of advised to have people stay in place. We wanted to make sure that the vulnerable population that lives in the Mahlon had access to food. So we came up with a program called meals for the Mei Hua, but in addition to supplying food to our residents, the program had another purpose. And it was to support the local restaurants that were also badly impacted by the Coronavirus. So the program was a huge success for both residents and local businesses.

DAVE CASPER: So COVID on both sides of the border, has put so many small businesses in a spot where they then may not even survive. And both the US and Canada have a number of programs, bank programs, government programs. They're all well impended. Some of them have had some challenges. And what I've heard that what the foundation did was kind of unique in terms of explaining to businesses how these work.

CAROLE LEE: We were really grateful for the government and bank support programs that were made by the federal government early on, but sometimes it's about how do you get to people in that last mile. And in our case, we were worried that many of the local businesses that really needed the support might not be able to supply be able to apply, even if they weren't aware of the programs, or there were language or technology barriers. So as a start, we work with KPMG and Baker Tilly to translate the programs into Chinese. And we distributed these through email to our local VA Business Improvement Association, as well as we created pamphlets and drop those off door to door. And then we work with the banks. And they provided customer service reps that could speak Cantonese and Mandarin and help guide the business owners through the application process. It gave us direct contact with the local businesses. And it gave us an idea of what other kinds of support that you were going to need in the months ahead. Because sometimes it's not about the program that they set out. It's like how well is it distributed to the people who actually need it. And so I think that we were quite cognizant of the fact that it would be hard for many businesses, but particularly in our neighborhood, it was going to be difficult. At the heart of what we do at the foundation is community building. And I think that is more important now than ever really need to help each other.

DAVE CASPER: I would be remiss if I didn't ask you, as I've asked others, what's your outlook? What's your outlook for the future? What advice do you have? When do you think things are going to get back to normal?

CAROLE LEE: Well, from my perch here in Vancouver, I think that it's going to be particularly for small businesses, I think there's going to be challenging times ahead, I think for at least the next year. And I think mentally we're going to need to be prepared. And I know me personally and and for the foundation, just trying to preserve cash. So I think you know, maybe for the small business owners out there, you know, doing a cash flow with help from your accountant so that you can anticipate what resources you're going to need to make it through this challenging period. And the best thing is not to be surprised.

DAVE CASPER: Carol, thanks again for taking the time to share your story with me and all the people listening today. The way the Vancouver Chinatown foundation is helping support the Chinatown residents and business community is really inspiring. Thank you and look forward to seeing you in person sometime very soon. Thanks for listening to growing the good. I hope you'll join me again for another conversation. Until then, stay safe.