

Rockport's Philanthropic Force

The woman behind the stunning Shalin Liu Performance Center is a philanthropic force with a generous nature.

BY MARY GRAUERHOLZ



PHOTO BY DOUG LEVY

Throughout the bright panorama of her life, Shalin Liu has lived moments both big and small with a level of grace and grit that could be played out on a big screen. Born in Taiwan, she attended the prestigious National Taiwan University in Taipei, where she majored in philosophy. She moved to Indiana for graduate school in Asian philosophy at Indiana University.

After a move to the Boston area, Liu devoted herself to

motherhood and then the working world; this included being a volunteer driver transporting elderly patients to hospitals in the Burlington/Concord area, working as a visiting nurse assistant caring for hospice patients in Lowell, and joining the cataloging staff at Harvard University's Harvard-Yenching Library and Harvard Law School Library. Liu found great meaning and deep enjoyment in the work. She was mesmerized, she says, "to be in the land of Thoreau."

Today, Liu is a philanthropic force, giving transformational gifts to support music, art, and wildlife. Ten years ago, she gave

\$3 million to help establish the Shalin Liu Performance Center, operated by Rockport Music. Designed in beautiful Victorian/Second Empire style, the center has won praise for its atmosphere and acoustics.

But Liu's generous nature began to unfurl much earlier, in childhood. Her acts of kindness can be exemplified in small moments and encounters. In her condo, which overlooks the Charles River with a backdrop of Beacon Hill and the State House, Liu talks about a few of those moments.

A knock on the Door

As a student in Taipei, Liu recalls a classmate in grade school, a boy named Ching Hseu. Poor and often dressed in dirty clothing, he was a quiet, soft-spoken boy, Liu says, "with a golden heart," yet he had few friends. They lost touch until Liu was just out of high school and she read that Ching Hseu—at work delivering milk by bicycle—was hit by a car and had had most of one leg amputated. "I visited him every day," Liu says. "I witnessed his struggle." She wrote a letter to the son of Taiwanese leader Chiang Kai-shek, asking him for help. "[Suddenly,] there's a man at my parents' door," she relates. Ching Hseu got an artificial leg and the rehabilitation he needed. An epiphany hit Liu profoundly: "I realized I can't only love literature, paintings, calligraphy; there has to be more."

From a Photo, a Message about Music

With her father, the late Weichung Liu, working as a literature professor and biographer of poets, Liu grew up around books and art. One day, she saw a magazine cover with a photograph of a young girl striking a graceful ballet pose. Then Liu absorbed the picture's details: One of the girl's hands was deformed, and a breathing tube trailed from her throat to a small machine. Still, the girl had an exquisite energy that transcended her physical body. The photo's message for Liu was life-changing. "This is life; things come and are lost, whether you like it or not," she says. "I knew then how beneficial music is. Nothing can be clearer than that, the power of music."

The experience led Liu—along with her dear friends, the late Nina Fieldsteel of Rockport and Stephanie Woolf, Rockport music director of education—to expand the music program at Rockport Music. "When people are passionate, music is always the core," Liu says. "That thought is forever." She paraphrases the words of John F. Kennedy: "Men will live and die, countries will rise and fall, but ideas will live on!"

Learning What Love Is

When she was 13, Liu went to her father and asked him if he had thoughts about the universe and if the universe might support a common goal, so that humans living in different parts of the world could share the same values and the same life essence. That discussion, and many others with her beloved father, forged Liu's understanding of the world and what she was meant to accomplish. She says, "I found my identity. I wanted to directly touch human life."

As time has passed, Liu has experienced a deep realization of the impact her father had on the person she has become. "Through knowing him," Liu says, "I know what love really means."

Beauty in the Beach

After Liu arrived in the Boston area, she took her young children on a drive to see surrounding towns. She suddenly arrived at a Rockport beach. "Without any good reason, I'm in Rockport," she recalls with laughter. She didn't analyze why; she simply absorbed how happy it made her. "I see the land, see the ocean, touch the ground, feel the breeze." She also learned how much she loves rocky coasts. "I love rocks," she says. "They have their own colors, texture, and shape, and their history is right inside and within them."

Recalling the memory conjures an important connection for her. "When you're young, it's all duty, homework, study, responsibility," Liu says. She gestures around the spacious room. "Now, it's open sky."

