

Cynthia Yee

Age: 64

Occupation: Should be retiring but too active to do so. Coordinator for the annual Chinatown Moon Festival, owner of SF Chinatown Ghost Tours and provides entertainment for corporate events.

Education: St. Mary's Chinese School, Galileo High School, special education course with the Gemological Institute of America

Marital Status: Divorced, mother of Jecina Ng, grandmother of Collin & Brandon Ng

Residence: San Francisco, CA



Who are the “Grant Avenue Follies?”

About six years ago, four former nightclub dancers from the 50’s & 60’s got together and came out of retirement to perform for the needy and inbound in nursing homes and veteran’s hospitals. Since then the group, now comprised of 14 members, has helped Chinatown and Bay Area charities raise over two million dollars to support their causes.

Where do you perform?

We have performed throughout the Bay Area as well as AARP’s 50th anniversary convention in Washington D.C. For the past six years, we’ve donated our performances to bring cheer to the veterans including northern California’s largest veteran facility in Yountville.

In association with Linking Rings, a non-profit I started with my partner in magic, we now produce our own show at the

War Memorial Herbst Theatre.

Veteran and senior facilities bring busloads of participants to see our show. I showcase many veteran performers to participate in this as they themselves were part of the USO show circuit.

We’ve had a very busy year and just finished a performance at Kaiser Permanente’s pulmonary department and at the Golden Heritage senior living community for asians in San Jose.

What are the ages of the performers?

They range in age from 56 to 86. We have five retired schoolteachers, a pharmacist, real estate broker, dress designer and even a retired dentist.

How did you get started in show business?

I started ballet lessons at the age of nine. My family lived in an apartment building in Chinatown. My neighbor upstairs was Dorothy Toy, the first Asian American

dancer to be part of the vaudeville circuit and to perform at the London Palladium.

When I played in the lobby, I would see Dorothy with her costumes running up and down the stairs going to work. She invited me to one of her performances in the Forbidden City nightclub in San Francisco and from that day on, I was hooked.

She convinced my mom to let me take dance lessons and at the age of 17, I joined Dorothy’s road show and traveled with her show for seven years living out of a suitcase before I got off the road to get married and have a family.

Our neighbor on the third floor of the apartment building was Ah Hing, the magician, and I first saw his performance at Dorothy’s daughter’s birthday party. I was intrigued and always loved magic.

I had my first opportunity to get into magic when I did a lot of fundraisers for the Chinatown community and I had a magic



Grant Avenue Follies. Top row left to right: Betty Louie, 74, Gloria Gee, 66, Pat Chin, 74, Lani Owyong, 56, Cynthia Yee, 64, Emily Chin, 71, Avis See-Tho, 67, Alice Chan, 76. Sitting Marleen Luke, 62, Ivy Tam, 74

illusion built for me. The act was so much fun to do that I wanted to add magic to my dancing.

How did you get the stage name "The Empress?"

I teamed up with magician, Tamaka, who was already a professional magician, about 18 years ago. I knew that I was too old to be the "Princess" so I dubbed myself, "The Empress," who is the mother of the princess. Tamaka & The Empress have traveled throughout the United States, England, Hong Kong and China.

How did you win the Jefferson Award?

I won the Jefferson Award in 2005 for my commitment to the community and forming the Grant Avenue Follies. It was wonderful having Barbara Rogers interview me and having all of the cameras taping the Follies at On Lok senior center while we were performing. To be recognized by this national organization was a real honor.

What are the key issues facing older Chinese Americans?

Keeping the language and culture of my ancestors is very important to me. I attended Chinese school but I learned most of my Chinese language and traditions from my mother who always stressed that we must remember our heritage and customs.

"My mother inspires me. At 91, she lives alone and stays active by helping others."

Hopefully, my grandchildren will have the opportunity to learn Chinese too. Their babysitter is from China and doesn't speak English so that is a good thing.

On the weekends, I conduct haunted tours of Chinatown. It's amazing how much I learned from researching the stories and history of Chinatown.

How do you stay active?

I donate a lot of time to the many Chinatown organizations that I'm involved with. I have served as president of the Chinatown Opti-Ms Club, Chinese hospital auxiliary and on January 30, I begin my term as the President of Friends of On Lok. All of the organizations fundraise for the Chinatown community. The Opti-Ms Club visits patients at the Laguna Honda hospital and brings food from Chinatown to the patients during the Moon Festival and Chinese New Year. Of course, I dance and magish for them too.

In my free time, I take 8 hours of tap dance lessons from my teacher, Jean Bruschera. I rehearse an additional 3 to 4 hours per week with the Grant Avenue Follies when I'm not performing.

Who inspires you?

My mother who is 91 years old stays active by helping others. She founded one of the Taoist temples in Chinatown and of course, the members do not speak English so she is always helping others with application forms and translations. My mom still lives independently in Chinatown so that she can be with her friends and has lunch with them all the time.

What are you most passionate about?

I guess I would have to say my magic and dancing. I met my present tap teacher about three years ago and she has taught me that if I try and work hard enough at something, I will be able to get it, even at my age when it's not easy to learn something overnight.

Cynthia Yee and the Grant Avenue Follies can be reached at 415.793.1183. www.chinatownmagic.com.