A billionaire alumnus gives back to USC

Ming Hsieh's path has taken him from stark privation to vast wealth. He makes a $35-million donation to the school that helped his climb.

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Pasadena businessman Ming Hsieh learned the value of education through some very tough lessons.

As a child in China, he missed school for 10 years during the Cultural Revolution, when his family was sent to a remote village to work on a rice farm. His parents, both college graduates, improvised with scavenged textbooks, teaching Ming and his brother by candlelight in their one-room shanty.

By the time the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, he was able to pass the university entrance exams and enroll in the electrical engineering department of the South China University of Technology, before his transfer to USC in 1980, where he earned bachelor's and master's degrees in electrical engineering.

Hsieh, 50, became a billionaire when Cogent Inc., which makes fingerprint identification systems, went public in 2004. Now that he has become wealthy in a way he could not have imagined as a boy, Hsieh said, he wants to back the hopes of others through his alma mater. Thus his $35-million gift to USC's electrical engineering department, which was announced in a ceremony on campus Monday.

USC "definitely helped me reach the American dream," Hsieh said. "I want to help SC educate others, to let them build their dreams."

The donation is part of a $300-million fundraising campaign by USC's engineering school intended to propel it to the top tier of engineering schools, with such institutions as Caltech, MIT, Stanford and UC Berkeley.

USC President Steven B. Sample, himself an electrical engineer, said Hsieh's gift "adds luster to a department that is already highly distinguished."

Hsieh's interest in things electrical began in the dark days of the Cultural Revolution, when his family lacked electricity. They had enjoyed a relatively comfortable urban life in Guangzhou before they were banished to the farm. Hsieh's father had been an electrical engineer for the power authority and his mother was a high school literature teacher.

Once they overcame the shock of their primitive life in the village, Hsieh's father persuaded authorities to permit him to work on bringing electricity to their village of 100 families.

As an adolescent, Hsieh helped his father erect makeshift utility poles, which he climbed and strung with transmission lines. When they finished, he saw how electric power, which he had taken for granted in the city, transformed the lives of villagers who had never had it. Hsieh began to tinker with simple radios and...
built amplifiers for fun.

With the end of the Cultural Revolution and some easing of China's authoritarian atmosphere in the late 1970s, Hsieh reestablished contact with his uncle, P.Y. Hsieh, who had left China before the 1949 revolution.

In 1980, P.Y. Hsieh visited his family in China. He was a USC alumnus and an engineer at TRW.

With his uncle's encouragement, Ming Hsieh transferred to USC as a junior. A small inheritance from his grandfather in Taiwan helped cover his costs.

Hsieh said he chose USC because it did not require a standardized English test not offered in his part of China.

"I might have applied to Caltech for years and not gotten in," he said. I appreciate SC for the opportunity to come here."

Entering as an undergraduate was fortuitous, because he befriended undergraduates with a wide range of goals instead of just doctoral students headed for research careers. "A lot of the undergraduates wanted to be entrepreneurs," he said. Some of those business-savvy college friends later became Hsieh's partners.

After graduating in 1984, Hsieh worked as an engineer at an El Segundo chip manufacturing firm.

In 1990, he founded Cogent in South Pasadena with Archie Yew, another USC graduate. A USC friend who had gone back to China approached Hsieh with the idea of storing thousands of fingerprints on a computer chip. That discussion inspired him to design a system to quickly read and identify fingerprints.

They won their first contract, from the Los Angeles County Department of Social Services, to create a fingerprint ID system to prevent welfare fraud.

The company has contracts with numerous police departments and federal agencies as well as Venezuelan authorities, who use the system to verify voters' identities at polling places.

Hsieh said Richard Ramirez, the infamous Night Stalker convicted of murdering 13 people in Los Angeles in the mid-1980s, was a strange inspiration for his success. Hsieh said he recalled reading that computerized fingerprint data processed by Japanese equipment helped authorities track Ramirez.

"I wondered why an American company, like Hewlett Packard or IBM, could not do it. I was very, very surprised," he said. That memory helped him decide it was time for an American company to move forward. So he started one.

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