

Dr Alexandre Chao Kwang-Howe (17 July 1965 – 22 April 2003)

A Farewell Epistle to Alex

Dear Alex,

It is with heavy hearts and a laden spirit that we write this farewell note to you.

Today, truly a star of immense intensity has been eclipsed on earth, but somewhere in heaven, a new beacon of light has begun to shine forth for all eternity. Alex, your light, your sparkle and your brilliance has no horizon.

There are many things in life that we can never fully understand, and we guess we never will. Now is such an occasion. God has taken you away while you were still a flower of your youth. God has truly broken our hearts when He proves to us that He takes away the best, sometimes in such unforeseen circumstances. Someday, God will tell us why.

You know, Alex, we remember you said at your father's final journey, "I'll never be able to walk in my father's shoes."

But, Alex, "Your dad does not expect you to walk in his shoes. But he expects you to follow in his footsteps: in his total commitment to his profession, in his absolute dedication to the nation and the society he serves, his loyalty and generosity towards his friends and colleagues, and a big heart for all who know him." You have certainly lived up to his and our expectations, and more.

We have known you a long, long time, ever since you were in medical school in the 1980's. We watched you as a brilliant student, cruising through the MBBS in 1989. We admired you as you sailed through smoothly during the FRCS exam in 1993, and with excellence. By 1998, you had entered the doors of our Academy of Medicine to become one of her youngest outstanding fellows.

Through these years of brilliant academic achievements, you astounded every one of us with more than 60 publications and international presentations, winning 8 regional and international prizes, many of which were for world recognised research efforts.

Your professional excellence, memberships of distinguished organisations, and overseas visiting appointments are too numerous for us to enumerate.

In your brief moment here on earth, you have attained your status as a recognised authority in vascular surgery. One of the finest we know, both locally and internationally, you are respected and sought after. The Departments of Surgery of SGH and TTSH, and all doctors, are truly proud of you.

But, Alex, it is you as a person that we'll remember most.

We will never forget your broad smile, your ever friendly laughter, your genuine good friendship and fellowship, your generous heart, your total dedication to your work, and humanity. All these will forever be imprinted on our memories.

To Mrs Chao, your dear mother, to Woon Puay, Beatrice and Berenice, no words, no consolation, and no tears from us, can hope to lessen the grief and sadness that they are experiencing now. But through their moments of grief, we want them to know: our aching hearts and our sincerest thoughts are with them all.

Alex, we want to wish you a very smooth and peaceful journey into the comforting arms of God; as you begin to light up the heaven for all time.....

We will miss you, and we will miss you tremendously. We will miss your friendly smile. We will miss you at our dining tables. We will miss you on our consultation rounds. And we will miss a companion to share the joys of life here on earth. But we will remember you, recall you, and always hold you up as a model for the generations of doctors to come.

Someday, on the distant shore in that faraway place, we shall all meet up again. Till then, it's goodbye Alex, "Fare thee well" – and adios, our friend. ■

From: Soo Khee Chee, Chia Sing Joo, Low Cheng Hock, Tan Ser Kiat, Chew Chin Hin, Chee Yam Cheng & Staff of General Surgery, SGH & TTSH

New Year Blessings to You... from the Chao Family

Note:

Since we were married in 1996, every year during Christmas, Alex and I would write a family newsletter for our friends to share our blessings in the past year and our hopes for the coming. Last Christmas, with me in US, we had no time to send out a single Christmas card. Yet Alex wanted very much to write a family letter, especially because he felt that 2002 was special because Berenice was born. Hence, on 1 January 2003, Alex stayed up all night to finish this letter, writing every word and selecting the two pictures. However, while Alex wanted urgently to write this letter, he never seemed to see the urgency to send it out after completing it.

Looking back, it seemed sufficient for him to have written it for the family. We only managed to email this to a few friends in the end. Today, I am proud to share with you Alex's last letter, written by him for the family he had loved so much, and to his friends he had cherished.

Woon Puay

Three hundred and sixty five days have come and gone in a twinkling of an eye. Yet so much has transpired in our lives that we could not simply move on without counting our blessings and sharing them with you. We ended last year's letter with how Alex's 90-year-old maternal granny found her peace in the Lord Jesus, and 2002 began with her being called to her heavenly home one minute past midnight of the 2 January, thus ending her fight with bowel cancer. Her pronouncement of God's blessing on our second daughter, then still gestating, was overwhelming for us. We decided to name her Berenice, which means "bringer of victory".

We thank God for the safe arrival of Berenice, born 4 March, a bouncy 3.4 kg girl, who thenceforth seemed



to grow by leaps and bounds. By the end of the year, at nine months, she was already a whopping 12 kg, finding her first steps and clapping along to her favourite tunes.

It is amazing how even now she manifests a cool temperament quite distinct from her vivacious elder sister.

Since November, Woon Puay has been away in Los Angeles doing a 6-month postdoctoral fellowship in cancer research at the University of Southern California. Alex gets to look after the two girls back in Singapore. This gave him the full responsibilities of parenting, something he never had much time to experience throughout the busy year.

Beatrice, who turned three, got her first taste of Disneyland and Sea World when she visited her mother in December. The long flight was no impediment for her. Indeed it proved to be a heart-warming one, particularly for Alex, for the bonding between father and daughter was sealed as Beatrice slept on his lap during the second leg of the journey out of Tokyo. There is simply no substitute for

developing a strong relationship with your children other than investing time in them. Likewise, the truth dawned on Alex how much our Heavenly Father longs for the time when we His children fellowship with Him. That moment in eternity was priceless.

The year 2003 will bring more change and challenge for our family. Come January, Alex starts his new job as a vascular surgeon at the Singapore General Hospital, after working for the past 13 years at the Tan Tock Seng Hospital. Woon Puay will complete her post-doctoral training in May and return to Singapore to continue her research on cancer epidemiology at the university.

All of us will enter the new year facing economic and global political uncertainty. As we stand at the threshold of year 2003, let us be reminded that a new page in the history of mankind began two thousand and three years ago, when the birth of a tiny baby brought new hope, peace and a new relationship between God and man. For unto us was indeed given a "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6) As we all enter into this new year together, our wish and prayer for you is to experience and enjoy this precious gift and divine blessing which will see us through the most challenging times of our lives. ■



From left to right: Berenice, Alex, Woon Puay & Beatrice Chao.