

## Percy and Alice Chang: Their Enduring Legacy

Percy and Alice Chang made their enduring mark on Jamaica and its commerce when they opened the first self-service supermarket in Jamaica in December 1951. An immigrant and a daughter of immigrants, they transformed grocery shopping in Jamaica from the small grocery to the well-stocked supermarket. They had 15 children, raising 13 to adulthood, of whom eleven earned University degrees. Their legacy lives on in their children, in the hundreds of Jamaicans whose lives they touched, in their generous helping of others, and in their support of the Roman Catholic Church in Jamaica.

Percy Chang (Chang Wai Been) was born on September 2, 1908, in the village of Tam Shui, Hui Yang County, Kwantung Province, China. Orphaned at a young age, Percy left the farming village at the age of 14 and came to Jamaica in 1921 to work in the business of his uncle, Albert Chang, at Community Store, King Street.

Lacking a formal education, he learned English while attending the Alpha School for Boys and continued to educate himself throughout his life. He believed that through his own efforts and hard work he could succeed in anything he put his mind to. After a few years working for his uncle and with very little money, he left to start his own grocery business, obtaining credit from the suppliers who had high regard for his hard work and honesty. His business anchored him in Half-way Tree, first at 90 Half-way Tree Road, at The Oriental Grocery Store and Ice Cream Parlour, and then at 86 Half-way Tree Road, where on August 15, 1947, he opened Chang's Emporium, the precursor to the supermarket, Chang's Self-service Emporium. Percy, who had a keen interest in world affairs, was proud that this was the same day as India's Independence.

A visionary and a risk taker, he and his wife, Alice, opened Jamaica's first — indeed the English-speaking Caribbean's first—self-service supermarket, Chang's Emporium, at 86 Half-way Tree Road. He opened in time for Christmas 1951, despite Hurricane Charlie that hit Jamaica hard on August 17, 1951.

In his wife, Alice Hyness Chang (née Chin Loy), Percy found his soulmate who shared his vision and his challenge. Alice and Percy were married on April 12, 1931, by the beloved Fr. Leo Butler, S. J., who ministered to the Chinese Jamaican Roman Catholic community.

Alice Hyness Chang (Chin Yun Jiao) was born on September 8, 1914, in Sandy Gut, in the Parish of St. Catherine, Jamaica. Child of Margaret and John Chin Loy, she was a much-loved daughter. She completed her primary education at Half-way Tree Public School under the tutelage of Mr. Robert Augustus Sutherland. She wanted to be a teacher, an ambition considered inappropriate for a Chinese girl, for whom marriage was deemed the only suitable future. Her father died in her mid-teens, and she married Percy at age 16. Her parents, immigrants from China, had a small haberdashery, also in Half-way Tree.

No one could have guessed that Alice's education ended after primary school. She was always an inquisitive self-educator who read constantly, instilling in her children a love for reading and learning. She was the one who would read the fine print on contracts to make sure her husband understood what he was signing. She often told her children, "Get your education. No one can take that away from you." Indeed, nine of their children earned graduate and professional degrees.

A self-service supermarket was a radical idea for Jamaicans who were used to being served from behind a counter. Putting the goods on a series of shelves separated by aisles where customers could help themselves was revolutionary for Jamaicans who were not used to such a large degree of trust. People warned Percy and Alice they would be robbed blind if the goods were not kept behind the counter. But they confounded the naysayers and together they built Chang's Emporium into a successful supermarket.

As entrepreneurs, whenever they saw the need, they filled it. In 1952, Chang's Emporium was the first to sell Canadian Christmas trees. They sold imported foods – different varieties of cheese, chocolates, figs, dates, and fresh fruit –contributing to Jamaicans' sophisticated tastes in food. Percy designed and built the "push carts" for the customers to serve themselves.

Well before the many books now written on the subject, Percy and Alice knew the importance of personal touch. To their children's chagrin, the customer was always right. Together, they put in long hours in the shop; they were open from seven in the morning until ten at night, Mondays through Thursdays, until eleven on Friday nights, and midnight on Saturday; and they were open again for part of the day on Sundays. Indeed, they closed on only two days of the year – Good Friday and Chinese New Year. They advertised in the newspapers and on the radio. Many will remember the ditty that ended with "Chang's leads others follow."

The Catholic Church was the cornerstone of their family life. Originally an Anglican, Alice converted to Catholicism at the urging of Percy who, because of his Alpha Boys School days, was impressed with the Catholic Church and its emphasis on family. Percy was himself baptized much later in his life. They contributed generously to the building of Holy Cross Church where, except for her last years, Alice attended daily Mass. The Church also played a significant role in the success of their business. When Chang's Emporium opened as Jamaica's first self-service supermarket in 1951, the priest who ministered to the Chinese community, Fr. Thomas Glavin, S.J., with a twinkle in his eye, insisted on blessing the cash registers and, whenever a significant event was happening that could affect the business, Percy would tell Alice, "Ma, go pray." And she did.

Even in their family life, Percy and Alice did things on a grand scale. They had 15 children, nine boys and six girls: Anthony (Toronto)(deceased); Alsaita ("G") (Toronto) (deceased), Albert (deceased), Annette (Boston) (deceased), Astor (deceased), Fay (Florida), Glen (deceased), Patrick (Toronto), Gail (Minnesota), Elizabeth (Florida), Jennifer (deceased), Victor (Jamaica) (deceased), Egerton ("Paulie") (Jamaica)

(deceased), Xavier (New York), and Nicholas (Jamaica). They involved their children in all aspects of running a supermarket - including bagging sugar, flour, salt and the like, and packing them on the shelves for customers to help themselves. They relied heavily on their two oldest children, Anthony and Alsalita, who were the most seasoned in the business.

Percy died on October 5, 1973, and Alice on June 18, 2001. At Alice's funeral on June 29, 2001, many who attended her funeral, remarked, "It is the end of an era." And so it is; but the legacy of Percy and Alice Chang endures.

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### The Percy and Alice Chang Education Foundation

To carry on their legacy, the children of Percy and Alice Chang established The Percy and Alice Chang Education Foundation in 2003. Alice and Percy strongly believed that through hard work and education, one could improve one's lot in life and in doing so, help others to do the same. As of November 2024, the Foundation has given scholarships to 78 Catholic Jamaican students in need of financial help to study in tertiary institutions in Jamaica.

It is the hope of the Chang family that those who are the beneficiaries of the Percy and Alice Chang Education Foundation will in turn give back to the community and help others. And so, as the cycle of giving back to the community and helping others is repeated and continue, the memory of Percy and Alice Chang will live on in future generations of Jamaicans.

### To apply

The Percy and Alice Chang Education Foundation invites applications from Catholic Jamaican residents in financial need for scholarships to pursue full-time studies at local tertiary institutions, e.g., Teachers' Colleges, Nursing Schools, University of the West Indies (U.W.I.), University of Technology, Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts, G.C. Foster College of Physical Education and Sports, and Theological Schools.

Applications with instructions are available each year in mid-April through Catholic Churches and Catholic High Schools in Jamaica.

Criteria: Applicants must be Catholic Jamaican residents;  
Show financial need; and  
Plan to study or studying at a Jamaican tertiary institution.

Deadlines for applications are in the application packet.