

Edward Sun
February 13, 2020

In memory of Donald Lam

QES FA57

1939 - 2020

One day, just before new year, I received a text message from Mandick.

.....Bumped into Robert Ip the other day, and talked about Donald Lam.

.....Seems that he is now in a nursing home somewhere.

.....I like to pay him a visit. Do you know his whereabouts?

I haven't been in touch with Donald for a while.

A couple of years ago, Donald asked me if I'd be interested in taking over his stereo system. His health condition had compelled him to move to a smaller place with better accessibility.

I had always known him to be an audio buff. I was one myself. Indeed, we had many parallels in interests and career paths. We both love music, worked in the audio field early on, and then migrated to digital data technology later. But he was a much smarter engineer with great achievements.

While I do not have his full bio, I believe his first job after getting MSEE from Berkeley was with Ampex, a pioneer in magnetic tape recording, founded by A.M. Poniatoff with technology brought back from the defeated Germany. The technology that allowed Hitler to speak to the masses over all Germany as if he was right there at each place.

Bing Crosby saw the potential and made it popular in the radio broadcasting industry when he started pre-recording his singing on Ampex machines so he did not need to travel to the radio station at scheduled broadcast times. That was high tech in the post-WWII years.

Building on its success, Ampex soon invented the video recorder and dominated the industry.

Anyone working in radio television broadcasting and recording studios those days would know what Ampex stood for - state of the art technology. I know because I worked for a company

in Hong Kong representing Ampex, supplying to RTHK, TVB, Commercial Radio and recording studios.

Donald left Ampex in the seventies and moved to IBM, working on digital memory devices, which were based on magnetic recording technology, his expertise. He must have been really clever, as evidenced by the patents he obtained for IBM in developing hard disks.

.....

I met Donald for the first time, at one of the first QES alumni meetings in the Bay Area 20 years ago. I was sitting next to him at the table.

He was 5 years my senior. A nice, affable fellow, he seemed rather modest.

He told me he was an IBM alum, just retired.

And, poor chap! Bad investment and the dot com bust had cost him his house!

Fortunately, he worked for great companies with good pension and health benefits so he could still lead a reasonably comfortable life, albeit not as rich as it could have been.

But he made the biggest impression on me when he refused to talk Cantonese, claiming that he hadn't spoken it since landing in America.

Well, that's rather odd. For a guy who spent his 18 formative years of his life in Hong Kong.

And, even though QES was an Anglo Chinese school and taught subjects in English language, we did have Chinese Literature lessons which was, and could only be, taught using Cantonese.

I am relating this story not to make fun of, or belittle, him, because I was once like him.....when I migrated to Hong Kong from Shanghai in the early fifties at age 7.

Speaking only Shanghainese, nobody wanted to play with me. They called me Shanghai Boy, teased me and humiliated me in every way.

So I forced myself to acquire Cantonese at full speed. In doing so, I also forced myself to forget my Shanghainese. That language was useless, and only caused me anguish and pain.

I don't know what Donald endured when he came to USA. But I can definitely understand and empathize with him.

.....

In the ensuing years we met many more times at QESAAUSA functions. He was very active in these functions.

He liked dancing and once he hired an instructor with his own money to give us a special session. On another occasion, when we had a live band, he brought his semi-professional audio recording gear. Those were really memorable moments.

He had a group of friends, from college, from work, (and I had the honor of being included even though I didn't belong to either) with whom he often corresponded over email on topics of his passion, ranging from music to China-America relationship to memories of Hong Kong to Japanese atrocities. His dad was a POW who died during the Japanese occupation in Hong Kong.

.....

At Donald's invitation, I went to his home in Palo Alto to check out his stereo.

It was a pretty high end system. A mental estimation told me he could have paid about \$16-18K when new.

He was asking \$1.5K. Even though they were perhaps 15 years old, still very tempting.

His health condition compelled him to move to a smaller place with better accessibility, and therefore had to let go of the bulky system.

Well, not only the equipment themselves were physically large, they also needed a large space to justify their acoustical qualities. Yes, I understood that.

He put on a CD. The sound was very good. I liked the understated British sound from the Bowers & Wilkins 801s. Never exaggerate. Always so civilized. And yet, clear. Ten cents on the dollar? How could I resist?

Tempting as it was, I decided to stay with my own system, which was, if anything, equally good, in its own way. Indeed, no system is truly perfect. Each is perfect in its own way. And each has faults in its own way.

Besides, if I did take his system, what would I do with my own? I could do without that trouble.

He had hundreds of vinyl LPs, old and new. His tastes were wide and varied, running from renaissance to classical to jazz to pop/rock.

I looked at a few.

Miles Davies, Keith Jarrett, great jazz albums!

And Mahler!

Take them, they are free. He said.

I took a few. I was selective. And my tastes did not include pop/rock, nor renaissance.

I insisted on paying for what I took. Finally, he accepted \$1 a piece. That's about what record stores were charging for the cheapest old LPs.

On leaving, I promised Donald I would sound out a few of my audio enthusiast friends if any would be interested in buying his system.

No success. One guy was out of town. Others for one reason or another were not motivated.

A few days later, I put his LPs on my turntable and listened to them one by one. They were pristine! Vintage LPs of this quality were hard to come by! He took good care of his stuff.

I called Donald and told him of my lack of success in promoting his system. He said not to worry, he already made consignment agreement with a second hand audio dealer in Pacifica.

Yes, that would be a good way to dispose of them. I should bear that in mind, as time will eventually come for me to face the music too.

To my disappointment, he had let the dealer take all the LPs as well, dashing my hopes of a scoring some more.

A few months later, he told me the dealer had sold everything and netted him \$3.5K after expenses and commission. Not too shabby!

.....

After Mandick's text message, I went about finding out what happened to Donald.

I called his landline. It was disconnected. That confirmed his possible move.....to nursing home?

I called his mobile number.....and was picked up!

Yes, that was his voice. But he spoke with a slur that made it difficult for me to make out what he was saying!

I must first confess that, with tinnitus that started a few years ago, my hearing was not in great condition. And it's worse on the phone.

After many minutes and much effort, I could only discern a couple of words: Belmont, six, corner room.

Belmont is where I live! Could he have moved to Belmont?

There are many senior care facilities in Belmont. Which one did he move to?

Six? Could it be Sixth Avenue?

There was indeed a senior home on that street in Belmont, I know.

I called that facility and asked if they had a resident called Donald Lam. It was Sunday evening and the person answering the phone was a temp and asked me to call the next day.

I called Monday morning and indeed, Donald was there.

I texted Mandick to go visit together that evening.

Donald looked good. A little plump. His hand was warm when we shook hands.

He had a pretty spacious one bedroom suite, and had a personal nurse, a very nice young lady.

Computer, monitor, printer, scanner, and other devices dominated his two desks. He sat in the office chair with rollers and offered us some folding chairs.

He had quite obvious mobility issues, exhibiting difficulty trying to reach a glass of water 2 feet in front him from his office chair.

He showed us his feet, which appeared to be typical of those suffering from diabetes. So he could only walk with the help of a walker.

And his speech were slurred and unclear, just like on the phone. Being there face to face with him helped my hearing a little bit.

Even then, his first words were shocking. At least for what I seemed to be hearing.

“There’s this process.....

You stop ingesting.....

After one week.....

Unconscious.....

point of no return.....

Starting next Friday.....”

I could not believe my ears! Was I hearing it right?

I looked at Mandick, my young friend with better hearing, for confirmation. He had a puzzled look as well.

Donald showed us a bunch of doctor’s reports. I thought they were medical test results, but no.

Finally, I surmised that these were doctors’ evaluations of his health and mental state. A necessary step towards the “process”.

He told us he had early signs of Parkinson’s which might develop into Alzheimer’s, according to his doctors.

In the end, it became clear what he was going to do.

The procedure will start next Friday, he said, as we walked out.

Shall I tell Louisa? Asked Mandick.

Louisa had been a good friend of Donald. Louisa's good friends to everyone.

If you don't want her to be mad at you! I said.

.....

I paid Donald one more visit.

Louisa told me you have changed your mind, I said.

No.

We chatted some more, about other stuff. Of life.

Do you have any relatives here? I asked.

No. All his relatives lived in Hong Kong.

Should we get in touch of, and notify them?

No.

So, who would be taking care of your estate?

He had appointed a fiduciary.

I asked no more.

On my way out, I noticed the row of framed certificates on the hallway wall, honoring his achievements and patents.

What a great guy! He certainly knew what to do with his life!

