

Black family that defied segregation honored by the family they helped

Brothers donate funds from sale of Coronado properties to SDSU



Gus Thompson and his daughter, Edyth, around 1910. In 1939, Thompson and his wife rented a home to a Chinese American family at a time when others would not. Miriam Mathews Collection via NYT

BY AMANDA HOLPUCH

Ron Dong was only 2 years old when his Chinese American parents moved to Coronado, a change that had been possible only because of a Black couple who defied anti-Asian segregation to rent a house to his family.

More than 80 years later, Ron and his younger brother, Lloyd Dong Jr., 81, are carrying on the legacy of that couple, Gus and Emma Thompson, by donating part of the proceeds from the sale of the Coronado house and an apartment complex next door to support Black college students at San Diego State University.

The university said the brothers' donation, which is expected to be \$5 million, would be

“by far” the largest ever made to its Black Resource Center. The center will be renamed to honor the Thompsons.

Ron Dong, 86, said it was “amazing” that the money would be able “to do things that we didn’t ever anticipate our assets be able to do.”

The brothers decided to donate the money to the university’s Black Resource Center after learning more about the Thompsons, who rented their house to the Dong family in 1939.

“It was a real leg up for the Dongs to have that ability to live there,” said Ron’s wife, Janice, 86.

Until the San Diego–Coronado Bridge opened in 1969, Coronado was accessible only by ferry or the 7-mile drive up the Silver Strand peninsula.

In 1939, Lloyd Dong Sr. and his wife, Margaret, were living in San Diego while he worked six days a week as a gardener in Coronado. They had each been born in the United States to Chinese immigrant parents, Lloyd Dong Jr. said.

The family wanted to live in Coronado to shorten Lloyd Dong Sr.’s commute but were confronted by anti-Asian racism.

The Chinese Exclusion Act signed in 1882 blocked Chinese people from immigrating to the United States, although many still entered illegally. The act, which was repealed in 1943 and replaced with a quota system allowing about 105 visas per year, and other laws institutionalized anti-Asian discrimination.

This racism was also baked into housing policy. In the early 1900s, home deeds could include clauses that barred people of certain races and religious groups from buying homes or living in particular neighborhoods. This language was outlawed under the Fair Housing Act in 1968.

Kevin Ashley, a local amateur historian, said the Thompsons had most likely built their house in 1894 or 1895, although property records say it was built in 1901.

“As the Realtors took hold in the ’20s and ’30s, the Black community began to vanish,” said Ashley, who has been researching Black history in Coronado and sharing his findings online and in a Coronado Historical Association exhibit.

Ashley contacted the Dongs in 2022 after learning about their connection to the Thompsons, who had been a prominent couple in business and society. The brothers knew the Thompsons had helped their family, but little else until Ashley filled them in.

Gus Thompson was born into slavery in Cadiz, Ky., sometime between 1859 and 1862, according to Ashley. Years after slavery was abolished, Thompson moved to Coronado and worked for E.S. Babcock, an industrialist who founded the Hotel del Coronado.

He built a livery stable next to their house with an upstairs boardinghouse for Black people who needed a place to sleep in Coronado, such as laborers and chauffeurs who had driven their clients to the island. The Thompsons rented their house to the Dongs after moving to San Diego.

“You had the Thompsons still holding on to their property amidst this heightened period of racial restrictions against African Americans, Chinese, Mexicans and others,” Ashley said.

After the Dongs, who had four children, bought the house from the Thompsons in 1955, they replaced the stable with an eight-bedroom apartment complex, which is also for sale. The brothers eventually moved away to other parts of California, and their two sisters have died, so the family is ready to sell.

Lloyd Dong Jr. said the properties were estimated to be worth \$7 million to \$8 million. He and his brother are donating their portions of the sale proceeds, which he said “would give some deserving people a leg up.”

Janice Dong said that the couple had considered using their portion of the proceeds to fund scholarships, but learned that college students from underrepresented groups often need support beyond financial aid and chose to direct the funds to the Black Resource Center. Ron Dong worked as a high school math and science teacher before he retired and Janice Dong was a special-education teacher at a middle school.

Gus and Emma Thompson’s great-grandson, Ballinger Kemp III, 76, said he was “tickled” by the donation. “It’s a beautiful thing,” he said.

Kemp said his great-grandparents’ decision to help the Dongs fit in with the family ethos of doing good deeds without making a fuss.

“Given what I know of my great-grandparents through my grandmother, I don’t think that it was something that they thought a whole lot about,” Kemp said. “It was just the right thing to do.”

The nature of the Dongs’ donation is all the more special for Kemp because he comes from a family of educators, including his wife, mother and many aunts. He said he did not have the temperament for teaching, but for decades, he represented teachers in private practice and as a staff attorney for a teachers union. His grandmother, Gus and Emma Thompson’s daughter Edyth, had also put three girls through school in Los Angeles, he said.

“We could use more of that — the spirit of the Thompsons and the Dongs — right now,” he said.

Tonika Green, San Diego State’s associate vice president for campus community affairs and a professor, said in a statement that the donation would be used for mentorship and career development programs.

“The Dong family will change lives with this gift,” Green said.

Ashley said the donation was especially important amid efforts to cut diversity and inclusion programs in the U.S. and discussions about reparations.

“Many people want us to forget about tough history, right? It’s easier to forget than it is to remember,” Ashley said. “And the Dongs are saying: ‘We don’t forget.’”

Holpuch writes for The New York Times.