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In Salinas, the Matsui family is known for its orchids and its life-changing generosity

By STEVE LOPEZ AUG 01, 2018 | 3:00 AM | SALINAS, CALIF.



Teresa Matsui at her family orchid farm in Salinas. (Steve Lopez / Los Angeles Times)

In mid-July, the Matsui family wrote another check.

Nobody who lives here, in what is referred to locally as the nation's salad bowl, is surprised when this happens.

I asked Hillary Fish of Natividad about Andy Matsui's legendary giving.

"I can say I really love him," said Fish, who used to work at Matsui Nursery. "I think he feels like he has lived a wonderful life and he has the means to be able to help others, and he wants to do that."

Last September, the Matsui family foundation donated land to Hartnell College in Salinas, to use however the school sees fit.

The gift was valued at more than \$20 million.

And since 2004, the family has given about \$8 million in college scholarships to Salinas-area high school students who might not have been able to afford college otherwise.

"Mr. Matsui is a self-made success story with no formal education, but he believes in education," said Hartnell President Willard Lewallen, who has watched the children of immigrant farmworkers become scholars with a boost from Matsui.

When I called Rolando Perez, a former Matsui scholarship winner, he answered the phone in a laboratory at Stanford University, where he's a PhD candidate in bioengineering. I asked what he was working on.

"I'm just growing some mushrooms," Perez said.

He explained that he was studying the use of mycelium, the vegetative part of fungus colonies, for use in construction and packaging materials. He said a leather-like product may also be developed, and he's interested in using his bioengineering skills to explore practical uses for agricultural waste.

Perez, who moved to the U.S. from Mexico when he was 12, said he lived in a trailer home next to a recycling center growing up in Salinas. He went into the Air Force after high school, then got serious about school in his mid-twenties. Now 34, he said he used a \$25,000 Matsui scholarship to earn a bioengineering degree at UC Santa Cruz before earning his master's at Stanford.

"The financial support from Matsui was a large factor in my success," Perez said. "I wouldn't have been able to focus on my research at Santa Cruz ... if I had side jobs to pay for housing and books. That would have kept me out of the lab."

When I heard about Andy Matsui's giving, I wondered what motivated it. But the answer may never fully be known. Illness forced him to step away from the business he built from scratch nearly 50 years ago after working for other flower growers in California, and he now suffers from Alzheimer's disease and lives with his wife Mary in Pebble Beach.

"It would be conjecture on my part," said daughter Teresa Matsui, who began running the family business about four years ago, when I asked her to explain her father's good deeds.

But as an immigrant farmworker from Japan, she said, her father worked hard to achieve what he did, and he was proud. He may have seen philanthropy both as a measure of his success and a way to give back to families that share the immigrant experience in California. Matsui Nursery has 200 employees, almost all of them Latino, and is one of the nation's largest orchid distributors, with flowers available in supermarkets throughout California and beyond.

For years, Andy Matsui gave scholarships to top students in the Salinas Valley. A few years ago, he shifted his focus and funded a scholarship program in conjunction with Hartnell College and Cal State Monterey Bay.

The idea was to train a workforce for the growing ag-tech industry by offering computer science degrees in just three years. Students get a scholarship of \$25,000 or more and go to school year-round, spending the first half of their degree work at Hartnell, which has built an extensive ag-tech program, and the last half at Cal State.

Seventy-five students have already earned their degrees, and some now work in the San Francisco area, Silicon Valley and the Salinas area. Another 100 or so students are working toward their degrees.

Anita Garcia, a Salinas High grad who was raised by her truck-driver father after her parents divorced, said she worked in high school to help her financially strapped family. In college, she studied business, kinesiology, philosophy and psychology, and couldn't decide on a career. Then she heard about the three-year computer science degree program, applied for a scholarship and got \$30,000.

Today, she's a graduate and works as coordinator of the three-year program at Cal State Monterey Bay.

"My long-term goal is to settle down and contribute here in Salinas, hopefully in ag-tech," said Garcia, who's 26 and just moved into her own place.

Teresa Matsui said the family foundation money set aside by her father has now dwindled with the latest donations.

"The remaining amount will be used to fund scholarships to underserved students on a more lasting basis," she said. Her new focus will be on making Matsui Nursery "a more family-friendly work place" with more opportunities for enrichment through education and training.

When I asked Matsui why her father wasn't the kind of successful businessman who buys yachts and private jets, she said he did buy a home in Pebble Beach and sent all four of his kids to the Ivy League.

"And he did fly airplanes, but there was no Gulfstream," she said.

"The business has given my parents an existence they could never have dreamed of when they were working a two-acre persimmon farm in Japan," Matsui said. "It allowed them to send their four kids to Harvard, we're all successful, and we don't need money to be left to us by our parents. So what we can do as a family is support and contribute to the people who contributed to our success."