This year as we celebrate the 21st AGM of ACAS, we would like to take pause and pay tribute to one of our founding pioneers, Dr. Kirby Hsu, who passed away 20 years ago in 1995.

Dr. Kirby Hsu, along with many Asian PHA activists, Tony Chung, Alex Wong, Lloyd Wong, Neil Ramas, Jose Olicia, and Dr. Steven Woo, were trailblazers who gave faces and voices to the highly stigmatized epidemic in the Asian Canadian communities in the early years and led the fight in building a caring community that has become the ACAS we know today. In this historic year when ACAS supported the founding of the Ontario Positive Asians network, it is most timely for us to commemorate the legacy of Kirby and our early PHA pioneers.

Kirby was born in Hong Kong in 1953 and grew up in the suburbs of Toronto. He worked as a psychiatrist. He was also a very versatile and multi-talented artist: poet, writer, photographer, installation artist and video artist. His works have appeared in many publications anthologies, film festivals and exhibitions. But today I want to focus on one aspect of Kirby’s legacy that has impacted my life the most, his legacy in the formation of ACAS.

In sharing the story of Kirby’s connection with ACAS, I need to start by sharing the history of GAAP, the Gay Asian AIDS Project, the predecessor agency to ACAS.

GAAP was the only AIDS service agency in the history of Canada that had the name “Gay” in its organizational name, and that was not because of our community’s extraordinary militant political correctness or even courage. Before the AIDS epidemic, most groups in the LGBT communities did not have the experience of accessing public funding to run their programs, so when AIDS hit our communities, except for the “mainstream gay community response” that’s the AIDS Committee of Toronto, all the funding in the early days went to traditional health and social service organizations. For the Asian Canadian communities, the funding went to various Chinatown service organizations. We went through a whole year of really trying to work with the existing groups, trying to sensitize, educate and partner with them to serve our communities’ needs but was not getting any where; but the majority of the PHAs affected were gay Asian men; so, only by calling ourselves Gay Asian AIDS project we could highlight the unmet needs and service gaps to the government and got the needed resources to develop our programs and services.

It was in 1990, the second year after GAAP was formed that I really got to know Kirby. Before then, I have known Kirby for many years as at social events, but we were not very close. In those early days, the PHA support group meetings were held at my apartment. I invited Kirby to join GAAP and helped co-facilitate the support group because he was a psychiatrist. To my surprise, that evening Kirby showed up at my apartment and disclosed to us that he too was HIV positive. He told us that he was inspired by the courage shown by another member of the group, Tony Chung, who had gone onto Chinese TV (Channel 47) and spoke about his experience of living with HIV; and this motivated him to want to come out to help the community. In the 5 years that followed, Kirby facilitated support groups and contributed to cultural and social activities that helped mobilize and build our communities. He chaired the support program and then later become a co-chair of the Gay Asians AIDS Project.
By the end of 1993, GAAP was providing all the support services to Asians living with HIV, the other groups who had public funds to work on HIV issues in the Asian communities were all struggling with dwindling resources and difficulty connecting the HIV agenda to their agencies’ core mandate. I was actually chairing 3 of the 4 East Asian HIV projects at the same time, and I felt that it made a lot of sense for the groups to join forces to form one agency dedicated to working with HIV, as other ethno-racial communities have done by that point in time. So in January 1994, I drafted a proposal to the GAAP advisory to merge with two other Asian projects under SEAS Centre and Toronto Chinese Health Committee to form a new coalition agency. I thought it was the most logical thing that should happen and expect the GAAP advisory to automatically support the proposal.

While there was a general sense of support to the idea, Kirby was cautious against an automatic mandate for change. He insisted we first needed to do a thorough survey with our PHAs and get a majority endorsement before further talks of merger can proceed. After we had done that, he further insisted that we brought together the Gay Asian

Toronto board, GAAP advisory, staff and client representatives together to go through a visioning process that included a detailed risk and option analysis to come up with a preferred structure that would protect the core values of GAAP and ensured a safe space for LGBT and PHAs. I remember at that time, as a much younger and hot-tempered activist who’s confident I was doing the right thing and feeling that there were so many urgent work that needs to be done, I was feeling quite frustrated and impatient about this long drawn out experience. But Kirby was very persistent. We ended up spending most of 1994 having many intense and often difficult discussions, and finally we came up with a discussion paper that guided the founding structure of ACAS. I wanted to read you part of the paper that Kirby co-wrote and championed, I believe it still resonates with us today:

“With the formation of ACAS, the presumed sense of safety of Asian PHAs for self-affirming space is lost. Mainstream Asian community agencies have traditionally not served the interests of lesbian and gay Asian communities. The doubts and fear brought on by such organizational change will make recruiting PHA to take visible leadership more difficult.

As a result, it is extremely important that ACAS not only has clearly stated values and principles that communicate an affirming and supportive commitment to Asian PHAs, but also have protective systemic measures and structures built-in that will ensure their effective and meaningful participation in the organization decision making process. As such, although the overall commitment of the board and all levels of the organization to the principle of PHA empowerment and leadership is key, specific measures are still needed to ensure PHA voices are heard and that ACAS has structured channels to support/ensure meaningful and effective PHA participation.

To achieve this, we are proposing:
- PHA support group exists as a caucus in ACAS’ core structure
- An extra position on ACAS board for a PHA representative
- that the PHA rep has specific powers in the decision making of the board related to support programs.”

I have always been proud that ACAS has been a leader amongst ASOs in upholding and advancing the principles of GIPA/MIPA. Many people credited much of ACAS’s legacy to my leadership as its founding president. But in actual fact, it was really Kirby’s leadership and determination that truly shaped the vision and mission of ACAS.

Kirby taught me a great deal in those early years. He taught me not to take things for granted, he taught me what it means to really respect lived experiences, he taught me what it means to be accountable to the communities we serve; and he taught me the importance of building progressive social policies to advance social justice. Having had the opportunity to work with and learning from Kirby has been truly a great gift and privilege.

This year ACAS plays a key role in the founding of Ontario Positive Asians (OPA+), and we are in the era when GIPA/MIPA have become a buzz word and a widely regarded principle, I think we can appreciate even more the passion, wisdom and commitment behind the advocacy and leadership that Kirby took in advancing the same principle before it had its popularized name more than 20 years ago.

On behalf of myself and the many generations of community members who have benefitted from their connections to ACAS, I offer my most heartfelt thanks to Kirby.