

A First Trip to the Doctor

Category: Immigrants

written by Sara Ann Conkling | May 4, 2025

For one year in the mid-1980s, I was the concert manager in a music department at a major university. A friend of mine who taught there had called me in a panic when their concert manager quit in the middle of the school year. The university had 10 performing ensembles and about 15 different concert venues spread all over the metropolitan area of the city.

The job was impossible, and it came with zero support staff. Out of desperation, I talked the department chair into assigning me a couple of graduate assistants. Chi Shing and Li Ching showed up right on time the next Monday, speaking almost no English. They were gifted composers and very willing workers.

Li Ching had an amazing talent for calligraphy, so I assigned him the task of creating flyers for our concerts. The flyers would sometimes disappear after we printed and posted them; they were so beautiful that people would steal them. I assigned phone answering to Chi Shing; subsequently, I began to receive phone messages that were quite simple: "Someone called." During the week, we often moved equipment between venues, sometimes even rolling tympani and bass drums down city streets.

One day, Chi Shing came in to work looking ill. I brought him some water and put my hand on his forehead. It was burning up. "Chi Shing," I asked, "have you been to the doctor?" It turned out he was terrified of doing so; he had no experience with Western medicine, he didn't know the language, and he had very little money.

I took his hand and said, "We will go together." I locked the door to the office, and we set out for the student health service. I promised him that I'd pay any charges. I sat with him while the doctor examined him and prescribed some medicine. I watched him take the first dose, then took him home.

After that, I began enforcing a break that we all took at about 4:00 p.m. each afternoon. I turned off the phones and turned on the teapot. I asked them what was happening in their lives. We drank tea and ate snacks. I cared for them better than I had before.

When the term was over, and it was time for them to go, we all cried.

*Sara Ann Conkling
Cocoa, Florida*