$4.8m dispute: Widow wants to move on

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Mavis Toh

It has been more than four years since her husband and son died in a tragic fashion, but thinking about them still brings tears to her eyes.

"It's like stabbing a knife in my heart each time I talk and think about what happened," Madam Chen Tsui Yu, 56, said in Mandarin yesterday.

She was in the news last week when the Court of Appeal published a judgment to affirm that $4.8 million in proceeds from the sale of a Margate Road property should go to her.

The house off Mountbatten Road, registered under the name of her late Singaporean husband Charles Loo Chay Loo, was sold off by his elder brother, Mr Loo Chay Sit, in 2006.

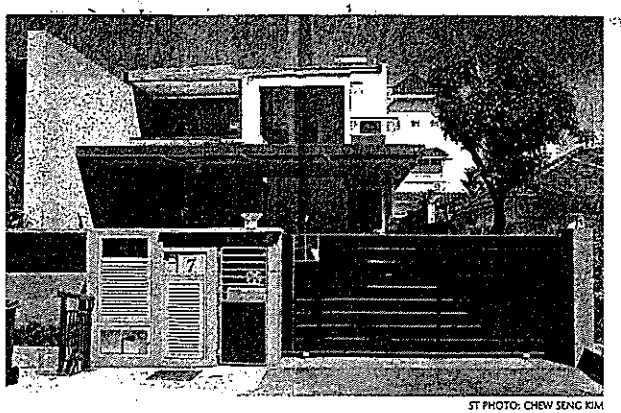
Speaking over the phone from her home in San Mateo, California, the Taiwanese-born Madam Chen said that the court's decision showed justice had been done.

She described the last four years as "a terrible, terrible journey" and broke down several times during the half-hour interview.

On Sept 18, 2004, Mr Charles Loo allegedly killed their adopted son Benson, then 17, near their home in California. He then tried to kill himself but did not succeed.

While in jail awaiting trial, he committed suicide and died in May 2005 at the age of 51.

In 2006, Mr Loo Chay Sit secured a court declaration that his late brother had held the Margate Road property in trust for him, but that he had paid for it.



ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

The property at the centre of the tussle has since been demolished and rebuilt (above).

ST FILE PHOTO

Madam Chén (left) and her late husband's elder brother had been involved in a court dispute over a $4.8 million property.

But the Court of Appeal threw out his ownership claim as he could not prove he had paid for the house with his own money.

Madam Chen argued that the property belonged to her husband's estate since he held the title deed. The couple had lived in the house since their marriage in 1980 up until they left for the United States in 1993.

Madam Chen said a relative introduced her to Mr Loo in 1977 when he went to Taiwan for a holiday.

They started dating in 1978 and Mr Loo proposed to her in 1980.

Madam Chen, who was helping her father in his business as a property developer, then moved to Singapore and into 7 Margate Road.

She helped out in a travel agency where her husband was a majority shareholder, and in 1986 became a director.

In 1987, the couple, who were still childless after seven years of marriage, adopted Benson, the baby of an unwed mother, at the urging of Mr Loo's mother.

They later found out that Benson had learning difficulties. He was diagnosed as "mildly retarded" in a doctor's report. They decided to move to the US where the education system was flexible enough to accommodate his learning difficulties, said Madam Chen.

Around that time, she also found out she was pregnant and later gave birth to a boy, Jackson. In 1993, the family moved to the US where four of Madam Chen's siblings were living.

Her story, however, differs from what Mr Loo Chay Sit told the media and the police in 2005, shortly after his brother's death.

He said he suspected the couple left Singapore because they were linked to a case involving signatures being forged for sums "amounting to millions". He added that the family was puzzled about the couple's decision to emigrate.

In media reports, the Loo family also said that the couple had marital problems as they often quarrelled over Benson. They also claimed that Mr Charles Loo was depressed and lonely in a foreign land.

Asked about those claims yesterday, Madam Chen said: "Our family has always been happy with no fights."

She said that they went to church together every Sunday and that she and her husband took studio shots on their 20th wedding anniversary in 2000.

In court documents, she had submitted photos of the family, all of them smiling widely, in the US. "If we were unhappy, would we look like that?" she said yesterday.

In San Francisco, Mr Charles Loo set up a noodle manufacturing business and later sold it for a profit. He also owned two homes in the luxurious Hillsborough area.

Then came the murder of Benson in 2004.

Mr Charles Loo was found in the bushes of Montara State Beach carpark, about 30 minutes from the couple's home, lying face down with slash wounds on his wrists.

Benson was found dead nearby, with several stab wounds in his chest.

When asked about that tragic day, Madam Chen wept and said that she, too, had no idea how or why it happened.

She said the family had lunch together that day, as they always did, after Benson's classes. Mr Loo was then supposed to drive the boy to the library where he usually did his homework.

"I even told them to borrow a few simple English books for me," said Madam Chen. "There were no fights or quarrels, but they never came back."

Her husband pleaded not guilty to murder charges. He was awaiting trial in jail when he was found unconscious in his cell. He was hanging from a noose made from plastic trash bags. He suffered severe brain damage and fell into a coma in hospital.

Asked whether Mr Loo was unhappy in the US, Madam Chen cried and was reluctant to say more, other than that her husband had insomnia.

She added that they kept in close contact with his family even after they had emigrated.

"We would call home a couple of times a month and I always made sure the kids wrote cards to their grandparents on special occasions," she said.

In April 2005, while Mr Charles Loo was still in a coma, his elder brother started court action to stake his claim on the Margate Road house.

In March 2006, he secured a court declaration that the house was held in trust for him. He transferred the property to his name and sold it within six months for $4.8 million.

In February this year, the court threw out his claim and ruled in favour of his brother's estate and Madam Chen.

The house has since been demolished and rebuilt into a new unit.

The Sunday Times could not contact Mr Loo Chay Sit, whose address was listed as a shop unit in an Ang Mo Kio housing block.

Madam Chen said she and Jackson are now living with her sister in San Mateo. She works part-time as an administrator.

Asked what she would do with the $4.8 million, she said she doubts she will get the money back. In court documents filed last year, Mr Loo Chay Sit had said that he had only $500,000 in cash left from the sale proceeds.

"At least I managed to protect my husband's assets; this is the least I could do," she said.

"I just want to move on and have a peaceful life now."

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