MAKING AN IMPACT

By Stacia Momburg

Since he was very young, James Chen has wanted to make a difference in his world. Listening to the senior Cal Poly nose tackle and would-be surgeon, you find his desire for a career in medicine and his love of football easily define his resilient and altruistic nature.

Chen simply wants to help people. “I know it sounds cliché but it’s true,” he said. “I love a challenge. I love being hands-on and having the largest possible impact possible on everything I do.”

At 6-foot-2-inch and 270 pounds, his impact is almost immediate. The Irvine native is just big. Knowing his career goals, one immediately wants to look at his hands to see what damage playing football has had on his plans for a career in surgery. “I’ve broken my fingers a lot, but my hands have remained surprisingly dexterous,” he said, laughing.

Chen said he was inspired to go into medicine by his uncle, a family practitioner in Southern California. “He works closely with the Thai community in his area, donating services and consistently giving back to his community,” Chen said. “I’ve seen him help a lot of people. He’s really amazing and I want to be able to do what he does.”

Chen’s mother and grandmother are both registered nurses. “I guess being surrounded by medical professionals really influenced me. I don’t think I ever thought of doing anything else,” he said.

His other love, football, also speaks to his character. A nose tackle since his sophomore year of high school, he said, “I like that the position allows me to be both extremely physical and completely selfless at the same time.”

The team sport also provides him with a sense of family – something he struggled with early in his life.

Chen’s parents divorced when he was 11 and tensions in his family grew when his mother remarried and two families attempted to blend. He has four brothers, two sisters and two step sisters.

“Without going into a lot of detail, it was just a really big clash of personalities,” he said. “When I turned 16 I realized emancipation was my only option.”

Chen slept a couple of nights on the street but wound up taking refuge with his high school counselor’s family. “Not having to worry about a roof over my head or food in my stomach took a lot of pressure off me,” he said. “Those were outside stresses a kid shouldn’t have to deal with.”

He remained with his counselor’s family. In 2006, former Cal Poly football coach Rich Ellerson recruited Chen and provided him with a full scholarship. He says he took the offer most importantly because of Cal Poly’s focus on academics; he knew he could begin his journey to a medical career at Cal Poly.

This proved to be wise insight, given the rigors of his sport.

Chen was a traveling red shirt his freshman year and managed a 3.2 GPA. During his first season with the Mustangs, though, he tore the anterior cruciate and lateral collateral ligaments in his left knee during the first game of his first year.

“That’s when I realized my football career wouldn’t be exactly what I expected and I started buckling down academically,” Chen said. “I needed better grades to get into med school.”

He began employing time-management skills he learned in high school and started tackling academics as hard as he tackles centers and guards. As he enters his fourth year at Cal Poly, Chen’s GPA is 3.65 overall and 3.75 in...
Chen shows no love for his opponent on the field. (Photo Courtesy Cal Poly Athletics)

Balancing his love for sports and his love for science, Chen keeps a grueling schedule. A typical fall includes taking 12 units, working a few hours a week for the Environmental Biotechnology Institute in the biology department, and practicing for two hours a day, lifting weights for an hour and watching at least an hours worth of football films. His weekends are consumed with games and studying, though he always makes time for a girlfriend and numerous campus friends.

He also makes time for work, be it painting houses, serving as a security guard or tutoring other students in science.

Phil Bailey, dean of Cal Poly’s College of Science and Mathematics, said he’s encountered few students in his career as remarkable as Chen.

“James overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles in his path the college and has excelled in athletics, academics, and in scientific research – an unusual and amazing combination,” Bailey said. “He also has a sincere and dedicated focus on the welfare of those around him and in his community and intends to carry this into his future.”

Always focused on his next goal, Chen said he’s looking forward to eight more years of schooling. “I absolutely love the sciences. Medicine is what I want to do,” he said.

He knows it will keep him busy. But, his thoughts as always on others, he wants his actions to serve as a model for his younger brothers and sisters.

“I always tell them they can do anything they want if they put in the work,” he said. “If you work hard, you can achieve anything you can imagine. If you give a lot of yourself, it makes you a richer person.”

Chen and fellow students in Cal Poly’s Environmental Biotechnology Institute lab. (Photo by Aaron Lambert)