

Promoting Diversity in the Court System: Lt. Henry C. Chen, 5/18/21

John Caher: Welcome to Diversity Dialogues, a program of the Amici podcast series, sponsored by the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. I'm John Caher, Senior Advisor for Strategic and Tactical Communications and your host of Amici.

In honor of Asian and Pacific Islander month, we're proud to feature Lieutenant Henry C. Chen, a court officer in the New York City Civil Court. We will be chatting with Lieutenant Chen about his background, Asian Americans in the court system, and a new fraternal organization that he helped start, the New York State Courts Asian Jade Society.

Lieutenant, thank you for coming on the program.

Now, you're the product of a Chinese father and a Puerto Rican mother. How did they happen to meet? Those countries are not very close to each other!

Henry C. Chen: That's for sure! My father came here, I believe, in the '50s. I think he came through Baltimore and then he took the train to New York. My mother came here in the '40s, as a child. So, they were both in New York and met through a family friend who was also a Puerto Rican woman who had married another Asian man. She introduced my mother to my father because she was my mother's friend and my father was her husband's friend. So they met that way. And oddly enough, my mother, she had two other sisters, and they also married Chinese gentleman! So, all my cousins are the same, Chinese and Puerto Rican, the same way.

John Caher: Now, why did your parents want to leave their homeland and come to the United States in the first place?

Lt. Chen: My father had an older brother that passed away; I think he had hepatitis or something like that. They were born in Ningpo, Shanghai, China. He said they didn't have a lot of money. His older brother was supporting the family, and when he passed away, they had nothing. My father needed to go to work, and they told him, "Listen. Go to America. You can work there and send money back to China." And that's what he did. He jumped on a boat and worked on that boat for, I think, a year or so, and then he finally decided to get off in Baltimore.

John Caher: And what about your mother?

Lt. Chen: My mother, she came over with her family. My grandfather brought the whole family over. She worked in factories as she was growing up. Both my mother and my father were always working to support our greater family.

John Caher: Sounds like a very, very American melting pot story.

Lt. Chen: Yeah. it's like the typical immigrant story of them coming over, going to work, making money to send back home to their families in their original countries.

John Caher: Now, what did your parents do?

Lt. Chen: My father, he had learned to cook on the ship that he came over on. When he came over, he started out as a waiter. He waited tables for years. He worked in different restaurants. He ended up buying a restaurant of his own. He started his own business. But he had issues with his partners and after a few years, he ended up leaving it because they couldn't agree on things. So he ended up driving a cab. He was with that same cab company from 1977 to 2014, when he passed away. And when he passed, all the bosses came and said, "Your father was our longest employee. He was a great, great person."

My mother worked as a seamstress in some kind of factory. I don't even know where. Even now she has her own industrial-type sewing machine in the house. And she'll always say something like, "Oh, I'll do the curtains for you." "I can make a dress for you, for your daughter, if you need this or that." And then she became a school lunch lady in the '80s. She was a school lunch lady in the Bronx.

John Caher: Good for her! Now, the Chinese and the Puerto Rican cultures are quite a bit different. So how did your family, how did you, balance various views and traditions and holidays and that sort of thing, or did you?

Lt. Chen: My father was always working. That was his thing. He worked six days a week. So he wasn't in the house all the time. Only on Saturdays, he would devote his time to us. So as we grew up, he let my mother handle everything.

I went to Catholic grammar school downtown. I also went to a Catholic high school. We were pretty much raised just as Catholics in a predominantly Spanish neighborhood. We grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Alphabet City now. So we really didn't learn too much

of the Chinese culture when we were young. As I grew up, I regretted that.

But Dad would take us to Chinatown on the Chinese New Year and celebrate and stuff. With him being the only one that came over from China in his family, that made it difficult too because we didn't have any other Chinese relatives to bond with, to gain some Chinese culture with. My cousins were all Chinese and Puerto Rican and they were being raised almost the same way we were, like with a Catholic and Spanish upbringing, sort of.

John Caher: Now, who are your early role models, especially cultural role models?

Lt. Chen: Talking about role models, I guess I'd have to say there's two. One was my father, because of the way he worked. You don't realize when you're a kid, but as I got older I realized my father was working six days a week. But on Saturdays, he took off. Saturdays was for us. It was the one day he was off. He would take me and my brother and my sister to the movies every Saturday. We would go to Chinatown. There's a movie theater underneath the Manhattan Bridge. We'd see Kung Fu movies there. If not there, he'd actually take us to 42nd Street and see if they had Kung Fu movies in those little theaters on 42nd Street. At the end of the day, he'd come home and he'd cook up a whole traditional Chinese meal for all of us, with four or five different dishes. And that's what I remember.

And one of the things he told me about, when I started a family, when I had my first child, he said, "Listen, I worked a lot. I wasn't always there for you. But what I did is what you need to do." He said, "Always work hard to feed your family and provide for them." And that's what I remember. And I think about it nowadays. And I said, "You know what? That was the role model that I always looked for." And I try to be like that, always provide for my family.

And in terms of a mainstream type of a cultural role model, believe it or not, growing up it was Bruce Lee. As a kid, he's the most famous Chinese person that I know of. In my eyes, as a kid, he was the greatest karate expert in the world. And he was Chinese. And I said, "And I'm Chinese too." So that was something as a kid, he grew up as my cultural idol.

John Caher: That's great.

Now, how and why did you end up in law enforcement? And why in the subspecialty, I guess, of law enforcement as a court officer?

Lt. Chen: The high school I went to was a military high school, it had ROTC in it. And I was in the ROTC unit. And you get that sense of being in a paramilitary organization where discipline to them is everything. And I liked that. I was ready to join the service out of high school. But I wanted to fly. And they said, "Oh, no. If you wear..." I wore glasses. They told me, "If you wear glasses, you're not going to be able to fly in the military." So I said, "All right." So I took a step back.

And then, my brother ended up joining the NYPD. So, I said, "Okay. I can do that." After a few years, my brother said, "No. You don't want to do the NYPD." He says, "You're not going to like it." He says, "And I'm going to tell mom not to let you do it." So I said, "All right."

But then, very shortly after, a family friend mentioned, "Oh, there's a court officer test coming up." And my brother said he sees the court officers, he goes to court all the time because he's NYPD. He says, "That's a good job." And I looked at it and I asked him all about it. And I actually went and looked at the courts a couple of times before I even got called in. And I thought I'd like this. It's a stable job and it's law enforcement. And you're protecting the judge. At that time, in my eyes, the judges, were like a super important guy. And you're protecting him all the time.

So, I ended up taking that test. And I got hired in '97. I've been on for 24 years now. I've been around here for a while.

John Caher: Now, let's talk about the New York Court's Asian Jade Society, if we could. First of all, why "jade?"

Lt. Chen: A couple of people have asked me that. They said, "What is the significance of jade?" I said, "Well, I know my dad had lots of jade jewelry he would always give to my mother. In the Asian culture, jade is a very precious thing. It means prosperity, it means wisdom, it means strength. And in all different cultures in the Asian society, whether it's Vietnamese, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, it means good luck to all those different Asian cultures. It means good luck mainly. There's an actual saying that's common also in the Asian culture, it says, "Gold is valuable but jade is priceless."

One day I said to my brother, who was in the NYPD, "Well, where you heading out today?" He says, "Oh, there's an Asian Jade Society event." I was like, "Well, what is that?" He says, "Oh, that's a society specifically for Chinese and Asian people." I was like, "Well, what do they do?" He said, "Basically, it's a bunch of Asian guys that stick together and they help each other out." I said, "Well, I like that. I definitely would like to join

something like that, one day." I remember asking him, "Can I join?" He says, "No. It's only for officers." And that was before I came on the job for the courts.

And then, it turns out, when we wanted to start this one... I started the job in '97. In 2000, I was in Bronx Criminal Court and I was invited by the Corrections Department to march with them because they had an Asian Jade Society also. "Oh, that's great, but we don't have one." I said, and they asked us, "Well, you can join us in our parade in Chinatown, on Chinese New Year and the Lunar New Year." That was in 2000. And I said, "Ok, that's great."

So I ended up joining and marching with them. But they only had like about six people marching. And I brought four people from the Bronx with me. So we had 10 people total, just marching in the Chinese parade. I was like, "That's really not a lot of people."

So I went back the next week, and I called the Academy because there was a Captain Sammy Lam in the Academy. He's a Chinese Captain. I said, "Captain Lam, do we have an Asian Jade Society? If not, why don't we?" And he actually told me, "Listen. I work in the Academy. "I see who comes through, all the officers that come through the courts." He said, "There are not enough Asian people in the courts to put in one room. That's why we don't have an Asian Jade Society." That was in 2000.

In 2019, Captain Lam was ready to retire. He was retiring as a major. He called me up in 2019 and said, "Chen! Do you remember when you came to me and asked about the Asian Jade Society?" He said, "At that time, it wasn't right. Now, the time is right." And I remember asking, "Major Lam that was 20 years ago! You remember that?" He said, "Yeah! Of course I remember that. Now's the time." He says he's seen a bigger influx of Asian people coming into the system. He says, "Now's the time to start the society." "Now maybe is the time we should get something going."

John Caher:

What do you hope that the organization achieves?

Lt. Chen:

Well, we want to support all the other Asians in the court system. Right now, it's for only court employees, but it's open to ALL court employees to join. We want to be a voice for the Asian people. We want to be there to help each other succeed. We want to help people move up the ranks. To encourage continued education for the Asian community within the court system. We want to help with job advancement, to see if we can offer training eventually for our members so that they can continue bettering themselves and moving up in the system, not just stagnating.

We want everybody to be their best selves. And at the same time, we want to highlight people who have achieved a higher status.

John Caher: On your Facebook page, you say the organization seeks to "be the voice within the court system for those who have no say." What do you mean by that?

Lt. Chen: We want to make sure that there are no Asian people that are being discriminated upon in the court system and feel like they're afraid to come forward. So, if you don't want to go to Administration with your concerns, come to us and we will be an intermediary for you. We will help you. We will back you up so that you're not by yourself and you don't feel that you're by yourself." We want to make sure we support the Asian community in the system so that they don't feel like they can't do something by themselves. We want to be there like a big brother.

John Caher: Well, that gets back to the way you defined Jade a few minutes ago as promoting prosperity, wisdom, and strength, right?

Lt. Chen: Right. And that's how we see it. "You don't have to be by yourself. There's strength in numbers. Let us stand with you."

John Caher: Let's talk about those numbers. According to the Census Bureau, roughly 9% of the people in New York State and about 14% in New York City identify as Asian and less than 1% identify as Pacific Islander or Hawaiian. Are those numbers reflective in the court system? Or is there work to be done there?

Lt. Chen: No. I think the numbers in the court system are much lower. I had spoken with Judge Lillian Wan. She's the President of the Asian American Judge's Association. And she gave me some numbers about how there's only 2.3% of Asians in the court system in terms of security titles.

And in terms of attorney titles, there's only 4%. And she specifically mentioned that there are 1,300 judges in the state and only 39 of them are Asian. So, I think those numbers are very low. And that's one of the things also that we want to do as an organization. We want to promote recruitment. We don't want to just be working in the courts. We want to step out a little bit into the community and say, "Hey! There are jobs here for the Asian community." And bring more into the court system to have a better reflection of the statistics of the city.

John Caher: You alluded a few minutes ago in passing to some violence. I want to probe that a little bit. During the pandemic, there was concern about an

apparent uptick in Asian hate crimes as some politicians were blaming China for the Coronavirus outbreak.

Lt. Chen: Yeah. Right.

John Caher: Were you concerned for your own safety or that of your family or community?

Lt. Chen: For myself, no. I don't think I would be seen as an easy victim. And I think that seems to be what's happening; they look for an easy victim. I can handle myself. But I know that, in the general community, the elderly are ones that I fear for. Because it seems like those are the ones that are the easy victims. And those are the ones that they're ready to attack, because they know they're not going to get hit back by these people. And that's a shame, because police can't be everywhere.

But I think there should be more policing in, say, the areas, like Chinatown, Flushing, in Queens, has a heavy Asian population. But like I said, police can't be everywhere. But there should be more visibility, more policing, in the actual areas where there's a higher population of Asians.

And not just that. Maybe there could be more outreach in the local communities, just to educate people. I mean, the elderly Asians living around here, the ones that are mainly the victims, we need to educate people and say, "Hey! It's not like the people here created this virus," right? A lot of violence is stemming from resentment about the Coronavirus. But it's not like the Asian people here created it. So I mean, maybe we can go out and educate people and tell them, "What's the purpose? This is not the way."

John Caher: Now was that uptick in violence, in any way, a motivation for starting the Jade Society?

Lt. Chen: Yes. Yes, absolutely. That's one of the things; we had actually tried to speak to one of the community organizations recently to see if we can help out. And they actually told us, "Oh, you know what? We're actually going to have a community event." And they already hired like a private martial arts studio to come and give self-defense classes to the local community members. I said, "Well, that's great. That's exactly what I was thinking of." Because some of our members are Academy instructors and they can teach things like that. So that was one of the things, yes. We want to be there for people. And I wish we could have offered the self-defense classes as well.

But that was definitely one of our motivations. There's a lot of violence going on. I want to step up and show, "Hey, we have a great influx of Asian officers in this society. And we're all together. We're one group. And we're stronger as a voice, stronger as a people." And hopefully, maybe the community would see that. We want to get more involved with community too, for them to see that, so that they wouldn't be afraid to say, "Hey, we can address this violence somehow together."

John Caher:

That's a great and noble goal. And Lieutenant, I want to wish you prosperity, wisdom, and strength, the characteristics of jade, this month and every month. And thank you so much for coming on the program.

Lt. Chen:

Thank you, John.