

Promoting Diversity in the Court System: Yao Chen, May 8, 2020

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, News and Insight from the New York courts. I'm John Caher.

In today's Diversity Dialogue segment, we're joined by Yao Chen, a web developer in the court system's Division of Technology. Yao, who earned a computer engineering degree at Shanghai University of Engineering Science, as well as a master's degree in computer science from Acadia University in Nova Scotia, Canada, has been with the courts since 2001.

Welcome to the program, Yao. Let's start at the beginning. Where were you born?

Yao Chen: I was born in Shanghai, China, a city very similar like New York City.

John Caher: Really? How is it similar to New York City?

Yao Chen: It's like the financial and business center of China, and also it's a big city with a lot of people and diversity as well. We have also the center of culture as well. Also, it's huge like New York City, with different areas, different communities as well.

John Caher: So, you're used to crowds, I guess!

Yao Chen: Yes, yes. I'm used to it.

John Caher: What did your parents do?

Yao Chen: In America, my mother worked in Verizon as a customer special representative. My father ran a convenience store near Forest Hills. When he wanted a change in the scenery, he transitioned to run a laundromat in Glendale in Queens. Now, they're both retired.

John Caher: Who were your early role models or heroes? And why and how did they inspire you?

Yao Chen: I idolize my mother. She showed me to never settle down and always work for a better future. She moved to the United States and studied for her MBA at Saint John University when she was 45 years old.

John Caher: Wow!

Yao Chen: She established a very comfortable life in Shanghai, and could have stayed to retirement in China, where the typical female worker retires between 50 to 55 years old. But instead, to achieve a better future for all of us, she gave up everything to immigrate to New York City. It was tough during the early days. With only \$200 U.S. dollars in her pocket, she lived in the basement of her friend's house. During the day she worked as a supermarket cashier, and later a bookkeeper. During the evening, she helped to cook, clean and then went to studying at night.

Three years later, she graduated as a straight A student at Saint John University. Then she worked at the Prudential and at Verizon. For me, she set a new standard for the woman of this century.

John Caher: That's fantastic. When did she come here?

Yao Chen: In 1990.

John Caher: Why New York City?

Yao Chen: Oh, because she has a friend in New York City, and she sponsored her to study in the U.S.

John Caher: Now, you lived in Canada for a while, correct?

Yao Chen: Yes, yes.

John Caher: What was the immigrant experience in Canada compared to how it is in the United States? Was it any different?

Yao Chen: It was much easier to receive an immigrant status in Canada. I received my permanent resident status after two years, and then my Canadian citizenship within five years. I know it's very hard to get a green card based on my technical category in the U.S., but I was fortunate to receive my green card due to my parents' citizenship status.

John Caher: How did you come to work for the court system?

Yao Chen: My first manager, Eileen Dobb, found my resume on Monster.com when online Job searching was new at that time. So, we hit it off and that began my career journey in 2001 with the state courts.

John Caher: So, what exactly does a web developer do for the court system?

Yao Chen: A web developer designs and develops the UCS websites, their web content, and maintain the content management system where our external website resides. A web developer trains and assists local court personnel to maintain about 160 local sites, and their content. A web developer must keep up with emerging technologies. I keep learning and exploring new technology to give the public a better experience when accessing the court website.

John Caher: I know our web presence is enormous. How many web pages do we have, and how much traffic do we get?

Yao Chen: Our public site, NYCourts.gov, has about 25,000 web pages. Counting all other web components, such as the PDF pages, the number of documents reaches 500,000. For web traffic, we have approximately one million visitors per month.

John Caher: Wow! That's a lot to keep track of.

Yao Chen: Yes.

John Caher: From a technological standpoint, what's the biggest challenge to maintaining such an enormous web presence?

Yao Chen: The biggest challenge we face is the coordination between all the local court personnel requests, and our small but dedicated team. Philip [Yow] and Barbara [Zahler-Gringer] both help to coordinate and prioritize those requests.

John Caher: What's your proudest professional achievement to date?

Yao Chen: Back in 2005, I started the e-court system within DoT [Department of Technology]. I built the WebCriminal, formerly WebCrims, and the WebFamily systems from scratch all within a year.

John Caher: Wow!

Yao Chen: The WebCriminal and WebFamily are free case information services. You can find the future appearance information for cases that are in Criminal and Family Court. I had to transfer and convert the database data from the legacy system mainframe into the latest Oracle database. I used the J2EE platform, which consists of a set of services, APIs and the protocols that provide the functionality for developing multi-tiered web-based application. It was a labor of love and happy circumstances.

In order to deliver the project before the birth of my daughter, I worked until midnight almost all the time. I feel the education I received in Canada, and my former experience, gave me the requested knowledge and the skill. For my

Master thesis project, I built an online e-trading system using mobile agents. I've also gained a lot of skills from the E-Business Group at Nortel. Of course, the DoT [Department of Technology] managers provided me the valuable guidance too.

John Caher: Didn't NYCourts.gov win an award as the Top 10 Court Website at one point?

Yao Chen: Yes. The Forum on the Advancement of Court Technology, FACT, announced the winner for the Top 10 Court Websites Award during the NACM conference in San Antonio, Texas on July 17, 2013. NACM stands for National Association for Court Management. It provides court management professionals the opportunity to increase their proficiency while working with colleagues to improve the administration of justice. I'm so proud of our team's achievement!

John Caher: I bet the team is proud of you as well. In your experience, which is now going back quite a ways, does a court system nurture a welcoming environment for people of different backgrounds?

Yao Chen: Oh, yes. I truly believe there's a welcoming environment at the court.

John Caher: How do you think an inclusive workforce improves the quality of the service that we provide to the public?

Yao Chen: To help us better serve the public, we must possess a deeper understanding of the experiences and the culture of the community we serve. Otherwise, we will miss the mark and the important information, and our customers' needs, will be lost.

John Caher: New York, of course, is an astoundingly diverse state with people from all over the world.

Yao Chen: Yes.

John Caher: You've been with the court 20 years. Has it always been friendly and supportive, or has it changed over the years?

Yao Chen: Working in the different technical groups at the courts, I have always felt as I was a part of a much larger team. When I was working on the court's security camera systems, the WAN group, the LAN group and local court technician all worked as a part of a big happy team. When I worked on the e-court system, Mary Conroy, my manager, along with other managers in Albany, gave me a lot of court-related and technical support and guidance.

While I was working on the FileMaker projects, I worked with a lot of our internal users who gave me appropriate and useful requirements and feedback. Our web

team is very small, just four of us. In order to maintain our sites, we receive support from DoT [Department of Technology] and all the local court personnel.

John Caher: Would you encourage people of any and every background to consider a career in the courts?

Yao Chen: Oh, yes, absolutely. The courts have a variety of needs, and we need good people with a diverse background to put their personal touches to enhance the courts.

John Caher: As we've discussed, you've been with the court since 2001. What do you know now that you wish you'd know then when you were starting?

Yao Chen: There are all kinds of opportunities in the courts. We don't have to limit ourselves to a difficult career path, or the path provided by our first job. There are many opportunities to learn new skills, or to gain an advanced degree. So, with these tools, I can challenge myself to achieve in a different career path or role in the court.

John Caher: Do you have a family?

Yao Chen: Yes. I fortunately have my parents, my brother and extended family living nearby.

John Caher: Yao, thank you so much for your time today, and for your long and distinguished service to the court system.

John Caher: Thanks for listening to Amici. You'll find all of our recent podcasts on the court system's website at www.NYCourts.gov, and most are also the iTunes podcast library. If you have a suggestion for an Amici podcast, please let me know. I'm John Caher, and I can be reached at 518-453-8669 or jcaher@nycourts.go. In the meantime, stay tuned.