

**Federal Executive Board**

**Ellis Island**

May 14, 2009

Denny Chin

I am delighted to be here today, for two reasons. First, it is an honor to be asked to join you in this celebration of public service, in particular federal public service, and to recognize the accomplishments of some of your colleagues. Second, it is a privilege to be here, in this historic setting, Ellis Island, where millions of immigrants entered this country, for I am an immigrant myself.

For my remarks this afternoon, I thought I would elaborate on both points: federal public service and my background as an immigrant.

So first, federal public service.

My own perspective of federal public service is from within the justice system. I am now approaching 21 years of federal public service, all

within the justice system - two years as a law clerk for Judge Henry Werker in the Southern District of New York in the late 70s; almost four years as an Assistant United States Attorney in the Southern District of New York in the mid 1980s; and almost fifteen years now as a judge in the Southern District.

I've had some time in the private sector over the years, and I enjoyed it. But my years in public service have been by far the more rewarding - not financially, but surely in terms of personal and professional meaning and fulfillment. I certainly have had great fun on the bench, as I've had cases ranging from Megan's Law to the Million Youth March to the Naked Cowboy versus the Blue M&M to the United Nations oil-for-food controversy to, most recently, a case that has received just a little bit of publicity, United States versus Bernard L. Madoff.

Over the years, of course, I have had dealings with many federal agencies. In the law enforcement area: the Department of Justice, the FBI, the Bureau of Prisons, ICE, and others. As an Assistant United States Attorney and as a judge, I had cases involving GSA, the Postal Service, the Veterans Administration, the NLRB, the SEC, the EEOC, the EPA, the State Department, the Social Security Administration, and many others. And in dealing with these cases, I have seen and come to respect and admire the hard work, the dedication, and the courage of federal employees, and to appreciate the importance of their efforts.

Today, we recognize the efforts of a few of you, but in doing so we acknowledge the efforts of all of you.

In looking over the information on the honorees, I was just amazed by their accomplishments. They ranged from:

the heroic: Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth McDonald, of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, who led 400 missions in Iraq;

to the brilliant: Dr. John Eng, who discovered a hormone in the Gila monster - the giant lizard - that is helping in the treatment of diabetes;

to the ingenious: Joseph Graffagnino, of GSA, who, after his son, a firefighter, died in the Deutsche Bank fire, developed the use of radio chips that can be sewn into clothing to help keep track of firefighters;

to the creative: Bonnie Bellow, of the Environmental Protection Agency, who recognized the importance of digital media and was instrumental in helping her region use podcasts and Twitter;

to the persistent and productive: Jack Campanella, of the FBI, who initiated an operation that has resulted in more than 330 convictions;

to the humanitarian: Daniel Umlauf, of the Veterans Administration, who is working with spinal-cord injured veterans to help them become productive workers;

to the hard-working and efficient: Michelle Johnson, who has worked diligently as a legal assistant in the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York for more than 23 years.

There are many others as well, and their wonderful deeds are described in the program.

To all the honorees, congratulations.

And to all of you - and all of your colleagues as well - thank you, for all that you do, day in and day out.

Let me turn to the second reason why I am privileged to be here, and that is, this setting, Ellis Island, where millions of immigrants were first welcomed to this country.

One of the best things I do as a judge is preside over the naturalization ceremony by which immigrants become American citizens. I've performed that ceremony many times now, and each time there are more than 200 immigrants from 50 or more countries. Each time that I've performed the naturalization ceremony, I've told the new citizens about my grandfather.

My grandfather died, at the age of 81, when I was still in law school. He was born in China in 1896 and came to the United States in 1916. I don't believe he came through Ellis Island; I checked the on-line registry, and could not find his name.

In the 1930's my grandfather returned to China briefly and my father was born. My grandfather then came back to New York, leaving his family behind in China. My parents eventually moved to Hong Kong, where I was born in 1954.

My grandfather worked as a waiter for many years in Chinese restaurants in New York City. He lived in a railroad apartment in Chinatown with other Chinese men who also were without their families. Each month my grandfather would buy a money order at the Post Office and send it home to his family in China.

In 1947, my grandfather became a U.S. citizen -- in the Southern District of New York. I have his naturalization certificate, issued on June 9, 1947, hanging on the wall in my Chambers at the Courthouse. By becoming a citizen, he was able eventually to bring his family, including me, to this country.

We joined my grandfather in New York. My mother worked as a seamstress in garment factories in Chinatown. For many years my father was a cook in Chinese restaurants. They spoke virtually no English and worked hard to raise their children in difficult circumstances.

In 1967, my parents were naturalized, and thus I became a citizen as well.

So each time that I perform the naturalization ceremony, I tell the new American citizens about my grandfather. I show them my grandfather's naturalization certificate, which I take off the wall, frame and all.

And when I show it to them, I think of my grandfather, of how hard he worked for so many years waiting on tables, of how he became a citizen in 1947, of how he brought my parents into the country, of how they became citizens, and how I, the son of a seamstress and Chinese cook, the grandson of a Chinese waiter, became a federal judge.

All of you have someone like my grandfather in your pasts, in your family histories. Whether you are Asian-American, or Irish-American, or African-American, or something else -- all of you have someone in your pasts like my grandfather and my parents.

I know that I would not be here today if my grandfather and my parents and others like them, folks like your parents and your grandparents, had not led the way for me, for all of us, had they not overcome the many barriers they faced.

And I know that they would not have overcome those barriers without the efforts and hard work of many men and women like all of you, federal public employees, who worked hard and did their jobs, who helped strangers to this country assimilate, who enforced the civil rights laws, who kept our streets safe, who developed and implemented programs to help those in need.

When I was younger and my grandfather was still alive, I surely did not think of him as a "hero" or a "trailblazer" -- after all, I thought, he was just a Chinese waiter. It was only later that I came to appreciate all that he did for me and the rest of my family, and it was only later that I came to understand how he was very much a hero and a

trailblazer in his own way, as he worked hard, day in and day out, to build a better life for his family.

And all of you are heroes and trailblazers as well, as you continue to work hard, day in and day out, to build better lives not just for your families, but for all of us.

Carry on your good work.

Thank you very much.