Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, Federal Asian Pacific American Council, 1993 Congressional seminar

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ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH
FEDERAL ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN COUNCIL
1993 CONGRESSIONAL SEMINAR
May 13, 1993

Thank you so much for that gracious introduction, Dan. My special thanks also, Dan, to you and your FAPAC Congressional Seminar Co-chair, Cora Foley, for the kind invitation to share this time with everyone today.

Everybody, Aloha! Aloha!

I have no doubt that you would think me slightly biased -- and you would be correct -- but I believe that there is no more all-encompassing word than Aloha that captures what we should celebrate most about Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month. I say this because the honoring of Asian-Pacific Americans is the honoring of harmony.

I know. I know. As warm and fuzzy and nice as that may sound, many of you probably consider it a strange characterization.

Nonetheless, regardless of any fervent nationalism among the roots of our ancestors, despite any chronic hesistancy by some others about accepting us and ESPECIALLY in light of existing tensions between various sectors of our society -- we, as Asian-Pacific Americans, as a conglomerate whole, have achieved a consonance in diversity that is unmatched in this country.

I stress this point, because I view the significance of this month's commemoration and recognition from a profoundly personal perspective. For those of you who do not know me, perhaps I should explain.

Dramatics are not my style. In my 68 years, I have not broken down castle gates. I have not toppled the columns of prejudice. I have not indignantly seized the scepter of authority from the jealous hands of those who thought OUR KIND OF PEOPLE could not capably hold them.

HOWEVER, I DID become the first Native Hawaiian member of the U.S. House in more than half-a-century. I AM only the second U.S. Senator of Chinese descent. I AM the only currently-sitting Chinese-American in the Congress, and I AM the SOLE Native Hawaiian ever to serve in the United States Senate.

And while I am not the one to grab the reins of the revolution and urge the storming of the ramparts, I am certainly most comfortable just sort of hanging around with you, sharing some stories and, maybe, providing you with some advice you might find useful. I am, I suppose, like a proud and caring uncle.

And for those of you who are saying to yourselves that GRANDFATHER would be more like it -- just hold that thought.

You know, as a youngster growing up in Hawaii, I had a grand dream about what I wanted to do with my life from the time I was very young. By the time I entered elementary school, I had my professional ideals firmly set: When I grew up, I would get a government job at Pearl Harbor, and man, I would be on top of the world!

As a matter of fact, there are people today who say that sticking to my original plan would have been more contributory to society than doing what I am now. But...that's another story.

In any event, the very first time I was elected to office was when I was chosen for the Student Council in the 7th grade. It was not an exhilarating experience. Basically, no one else wanted to do it, and those of you who know we Hawaiians understand that we have a hard time saying No. However, once I got beyond what I thought was the initial lesson to be derived from that -- learning how to say NO -- I discovered some other things far more valuable. I developed a fascinating awareness of group dynamics and a fulfilling sense of contribution and satisfaction. NEVER underestimate the potential of serendipity -- even when it comes in the form of getting stuck with a job that no one else wants.

Well, I never made it to Pearl Harbor Heaven. I graduated from the University of Hawaii with a degree in teaching, whereupon I formulated the second career plan of my life. Someday, I would be Superintendent of the Hawaii Department of Education. I would devote two years each to gaining experience in every school environment there was: Elementary, intermediate, high school, rural, urban, military and private. At the same time, I would get my School Aministration Certificate and my Master's Degree. I would move on to Vice Principal and then, Principal.

And do you know what? It worked perfectly, and I walked directly into the SECOND significant lesson of my life. In my first year as a principal, I was chosen to be a delegate to the National Convention of the Department of Elementary School Principals. Being the new kid on the block, I was honored but overwhelmed. I was so concerned about adequately representing my State and the Aloha Spirit, I took with me what must been a truckload of flower leis, macadamia nuts and the like. I was determined not to be found lacking in spreading goodwill -- and macadamia nuts -- on Hawaii's behalf. Somewhere along the way, there was even a need for some impromptu entertainment to keep the atmosphere moving, and I agreed to help. I ended up singing Blue Hawaii before the convention's 6,000 delegates.

All the time -- well, I'm certain you've guessed it by now -- exposure and recognition were building. Before the convention adjourned, I was approached to run for the National Board of Directors. Seven months later, I had won the first election of my professional life.

Now, there is no question that the exposure and recognition aspects of this story are as fundamental as any in political pursuits -- or LIFE's pursuits, for that matter. However, consider this lesson a two-parter, with the SECOND as precious as any you will come across.

I do not have a single doubt that, right now, a particular reaction is roaring angrily through the minds of many of you out there -- that portions of this anecdote are REALLY grating at your sensibilities. Flower leis, you say!? Macadamia nuts!? My goodness, strumming an ukulele and singing Blue Hawaii!? This is truly the stuff of Uncle Koma! -- the Hawaiian translation of Tom!

Lesson Two, Part Two is: NEVER confuse graciousness with bootlicking. NEVER lose sight of the reality that what may be trivial to you may be of consequence to another. And NEVER, EVER forget: IF you are sincere in your OWN intent, AND IF you are intelligent and perceptive enough to see when there is sincerity in the intent of OTHERS, then you are never demeaned -- only enhanced.

Anyway, I went on to serve three years on the National Board. As my term ended, I was encouraged to enter the contest for National Vice President, and I did.

Before the election, however, I withdrew. I had been asked by the Superintendent of Education to move from the schools to the State Office to implement a new program for Compensatory Education. Out of that move came one of the most momentous milestones in my life. Because I also served as education liaison to the Model Cities Program, I worked closely with the Mayor's and Governor's offices. After a time, I was asked by then-Governor Jack Burns to join his staff as Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity.

Many of you probably know little or nothing about this most revered of men, and I seek your idulgence in straying here to recount some incredibly unique history. Montana-born, Hawaii- and Kansas-raised, John Anthony Burns returned to the Islands permanently in the mid-1930s. He eventually became the Honolulu police captain charged with probing the Japanese community for possible espionage and subversion in the event of war with Japan. After the December 7th attack on Pearl Harbor, it fell to Jack to direct the arrests of Japanese for internment.

The book Catch A Wave capsulizes this critical sequence of events this way:

"Looking back, it would be hard to dream up a more unlikely twist: Jack Burns was tapped to play the agent of suspicion, a bit part in what would be a national travesty. By the very nature of the assignment, Burns seemed bound to make enemies throughout the Japanese community, but just the opposite occurred. It was the beginning of a mutual allegiance which, after years of struggle, would change the course of Hawaii's history."

Jack Burns' mandate to investigate the anticipated traitorous behavior of the not-to-be-trusted Japanese evolved into what became his absolute certitude about their patriotism and trustworthiness. Naturally, the firmness of his newfound perspective made him the target of animosity and criticism. Yet, he remained steadfast.

His belief in the Japanese then was as enduring as the soon-mutual relationship would be throughout the rest of his life: As unstoppable as the post-war Burns/AJA coalition that brought about Hawaii's Democratic Revolution of 1954. As unfaltering as the partnership that sent him to the U.S. Congress for two terms and elected him Governor of Hawaii three times. And as everlasting as the impact of his legacy on the lives of ALL minorities who have since called Hawaii home and the part of that legacy which they have carried with them throughout the world.

I apologize for the rather lengthy digression, but Jack Burns is as immense a factor as any in the lives of Hawaii's Asian-Pacific Americans -- unquestionably, in mine.

Anyway...during my time OEO Director, I would occasionally be called to have breakfast with Governor Burns, and we would discuss the widest range of topics. One day, out of nowhere, he said: You know, Danny, the Hawaiians really need leaders. I wholeheartedly agreed. Then he said: Well, what about you? I have never been so taken aback, honored, humbled, anxious or dumbfounded in my life. Calmly, he went on with his pitch. He made it all seem so reasonable and necessary AND RIGHT. He had me convinced.

Then, as breakfast drew to a close, he added one more bit of advice. In his usual down-home, plain-talking way, he threw in a time-worn aphorism. He said: Danny, remember one more thing. Even monkeys fall out of trees. LESSON NUMBER THREE...AND A GOOD ONE IT WAS!

Jack Burns passed away not too long after that, but his soul and the vision he had imparted never did...and never will. With determination, zeal and an unrelenting sense of obligation to The

Old Man, as we called him, I ran for Lieutenant Governor in 1974. I lost.

I climbed back up that tree, though. And in 1976, I became the first Native Hawaiian in the U.S House since Prince Jonah Kuhio Kalanianaole -- and the first of Chinese ancestry, PERIOD.

Have I been lucky? You bet. I consider myself a truly lucky individual indeed. I make no excuses for it, and I have never experienced any self-doubt because of it. Sometimes, good fortune is a major function of opportunity. Just never depend on it. Opportunity (opportunity for ALL people) has a much larger, more critical component -- the human component. A brilliant mind, innate talent, top notch education -- none of these can GUARANTEE success. Even if it is totally and undeniably justified, no one is going to win recognition or advancement just because he or she thinks it is deserved. SOMEONE ELSE has to think so too. And even when you see opportunities defiled by the prejudices of a few of these Someone Elses, believe me, there are always OTHER Someone Elses out there.

Even in a society where exclusion may be all-too-common, while it is your obligation to watch each other's flanks, don't circle the wagons. You can defend yourself without becoming defensive.

I don't care whether you're cruising a Smithsonian folk festival looking for lumpia or kim chee, or attending a PTA meeting, or partying in a karaoke bar, or networking with other government professionals -- OR PASSING OUT MACADAMIA NUTS AT A CONVENTION. Always be open to what might be out there. That great philosopher of our era, Wayne Gretzky, once said: **You miss 100% of the shots you never take.**

If you start losing faith in your fellow human beings, you stop reaching out...and people stop reaching back. You become a barrier to yourself.

No, I will not fill you with boring talk about keeping your nose to the grindstone, your shoulder to the wheel, your eye on the ball and your ear to the ground. In fact, someone said that it was really tough trying climb the ladder of success while maintaining all those different positions at the same time. What I WILL tell you, however, is that no one can convince me that this is not still THE land of opportunity.

Again, I know that some of you are thinking: Boy, more old fuddy-duddy, the-world-is-your-oyster stuff! Well, let me make this very clear. Just because my remarks have been sparse in their mention of discrimination or indignation or hardship, it does not mean that I have skipped through life along the gentle

path.

The largest part of my 68 years spanned a period of our Nation's history when there was racial and ethnic prejudice of a degree most of you could not imagine.

And, while I have lived my life in a place called the Melting Pot of the Pacific, where the perception of that ideal is based on the fact that no group is a majority, the harshest of realities is that Native Hawaiians have been at the very absolute bottom of the socio-economic ladder from before I was born till this very day.

Though it pains me to admit it, I have known what it is like to be a young child, growing up in Pauoa Valley, ashamed because my family was so poor; ashamed because we lived amidst the taro patches; ashamed because, even when we had invited guests, we had nothing to offer but poi.

With fearful thoughts about the welfare of my wife and children churning in my mind (not to mention the memories of that taro-patch valley), I have resigned from a position of great comfort and security in professional, philosophical AND racial outrage -- because it was right.

I have gone into debt and mortgaged my family home, because that is what it took to pursue my goal of public service -- particularly on behalf of those whose voices are least heard.

I joined the redress battle the moment I stepped foot on Capitol Hill. I have spent the past 16 years involved in everything from Native Hawaiian, Guamanian, Vietnamese, American Samoan, Filipino and Chinese matters to EEOC overhaul. From the establishment of a Pacific Area PTSD Center and the AJA Landmark Theme Study to the battle over Bruce Yamashita's incredible treatment at the hands of the U.S. Marine Corps. From mandating the naming of an Assistant Secretary for Minority Veterans Affairs to legislation addressing sexual harrassment of women in the military.

In other words, I am neither an Annointed Fortunate Son nor am I someone who feels he has now earned his claim to comfort and the privilege of watching others fight the fight.

What I am is a true believer in the inherent goodness of humankind and the fundamental soundness of our country -- despite its shortcomings. Thankfully, I have come a long way from those days in Pauoa Valley when I was mortified, as only a child can be, because, despite what I saw as our pitiful position in life, my mother would beckon from the doorway to friends and neighbors passing by: Hele mai e ai! Come and eat!

She was able to teach me the truth she knew so well: **Recognize the dignity and worth that is within every, single one of us; understand that they cannot be taken away by others, unless we allow it; and realize, then, that you are never disadvantaged.**

You may think me utterly naive. But here I am -- brown and yellow and Senator -- and as you can see, I possess no magic wand.

As an Asian-Pacific American, I find sustenance and support in our heritage. I take immeasurable pride in the enormity of our accomplishments. I have unshakable confidence in our ability to achieve those visions that are as-yet unrealized. And because of fine people like you and wonderfully dedicated groups such as FAPAC, it has been proven time and again that, when I have placed that kind of faith in someone or something, I have seldom been in error.

You are more than examples of Asian-Pacific American success, you are our strength. You are more than the end results of a long struggle for equity, you are the catalysts for bringing reality to even greater hopes. Your skills and commitment provide the tools we need to change what is wrong today and build what is right for tomorrow. You hold the keys to power...the most meaningful kind of power there is...the power to help. And the power to help is the power to achieve harmony. Never let anger and fear and hurt displace the pureness of your hearts as the force that drives your search for that power or your use of it.

Aloha!