

Foundation for a Culture of Excellence & Achievement--Chinatown's PS 23 & PS 1

Upon reflection of my grade school years in New York City's Chinatown, many of my PS 23 classmates and neighborhood friends who attended PS 1 and I are still close friends. We continue to stay in contact with one another even though we are now living in different parts of the country. Our PS 23 classmates' separation process began when we went to PS 130 for 7th & 8th grades in Little Italy where they had five separate 7th & 8th grade classes and we were now a minority in numbers. High school continued the separation process since many of us went to different schools in the city. In turn, college was where we were all over the country as we pursued our different studies in preparation for our professional careers in adult life. But the one compelling commonality among all of us was we needed money for tuition & expenses for our college education. This is our PS 23 & PS 1 group story of determination to succeed.

Job Hunting as a Teenager:

Since a bachelor degree was perceived to be necessary for a good job, we all realized in high school that college was part of our future and the path to financial security in a chosen profession. Many of us knew that our family finances were limited and working & saving money was the only means of securing a good college education.

There were only a few job options for us to work and save enough money during high school and college to help with family finances. After looking at the limited possibilities, it was clear that working as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant on weekends and during the Holidays & Summer vacations was the best option. At this point in our lives, where can you work on the weekend and get a free meal plus tips, which can be substantial if you were fast & efficient in a restaurant located in a good neighborhood or an upscale shopping area. During the Summer vacations, if you were working at a restaurant outside of the city in the suburbs, most restaurants would either supply transportation to and from work or a bed to sleep in a company owned house for the workers. When you think about it, there was no place or time to spend your money since you were always working and your meals were at the restaurant coupled with a place to sleep at a nearby house. You basically got one day off during the week to visit family & friends and catch up on other social commitments. While working as a waiter for 2- 3 months in the Summer, you can accumulate a decent amount of money for expenses & tuition back in the 50's. In today's economic environment, one will not be able to cover even one semester of college.

Developing Life Skills:

My approach and thought process while working as a waiter was to make as much money as possible in the short time available even if I had to work 3 shifts when the senior waiters wanted to go to the race track and paid me to take over their shift. It became interesting when I started to think of a restaurant business as a possible learning environment for developing different life skills since we were dealing with people day in and day out with all different types of personalities and mannerisms.

A waiter's life was not easy but one can learn and develop, consciously or subconsciously, a lot of life skills like: being responsible for & meeting your commitments; multitasking & prioritizing task orders; handling & managing money; patience; tolerance & temper control; thinking in two languages; memory techniques; thinking on your feet; teamwork; and sharpening your observation & assessment of human behavior traits like anticipating and predicting whether a customer is friendly or hostile: a BS artist; a grandstander; have respect or no respect for others; a good/bad tipper type of individual etc..etc.. Just thinking about the restaurant's human relations side of working with people and using the learning experiences made the work day interesting and time would pass by quickly, while working at the same time and still earning & saving money for college. Physically, one will stay in good shape since you were

always walking and carrying a heavy tray of dishes and on the go. For me mentally, it was psychologically a win-win situation at that stage of my life.

Little did I realize at the time, how the restaurant/waiter experience would introduce me to the world of business and how the human factor's side of these important life skills would play a major role in my professional career in engineering and management years later. These life skills and the ability to work successfully with people were emphasized continuously during my MBA studies and practiced in real time working on the Apollo Space Program at the Grumman Aerospace Corp. on Long Island.

"Thinking on your feet" was especially helpful when I was an adjunct professor teaching mathematics courses at Long Island University & New Jersey Institute of Technology. During this time, at the request of the Dean of Engineering, I developed a two days seminar "**Engineer in Transition to Management**". The seminars were conducted at hotel conference centers and government facilities and were extremely interactive where engineers, who were on a fast track for promotion to management positions within their respective organizations, would engage & challenge you with extensive Q & A's and comments.

Lessons Learned:

The time I spent as a waiter in Chinese restaurants on weekends and during the Summers in high school and college were an education in itself. Many of the waiters that I worked with were college graduates from the late 30's & 40's who had difficulty getting a job because of racial discrimination. To make a living and support a family, they went to work in Chinese restaurants where after a few years it was almost impossible to get a job in their academic specialty with your only work experience being "a waiter in a Chinese restaurant". However, the positive outcome was many of these waiters did go on to start their own successful restaurants and different types of related businesses over the years.

Recreational & Social Activities:

On a catering assignment for the restaurant to a lovely home in Cold Spring Harbor LI, I spent the afternoon serving food & drinks to the guests. My attention was also focused on the boats in the harbor and the life style of the host family. My thoughts were: this life style is cool and that one day I will own a boat. After graduation with a Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical Engineering, I went to work for Grumman Aerospace Corp. on the Apollo Space Program. Within a year, I had a power boat moored at the Throgs Neck Mariner and a shared apartment at the Le Havre Complex by the water in Beechurst, Queens. My friends and dates would enjoy the day on Long Island Sound and we would cap the day with a delicious dinner at the Ripple's Supper Club, by the water with a beautiful night view of the bridge.

A series of other social activities involving my grade school friends was inviting them to a unique yacht party on a Chinese Junk docked at the World's Fair Mariner in 1965 while they were still single. It was a good mix of guys and gals from Grumman's social party circles; college & graduate school friends; and a social set of airline stewardesses, nurses, and school teachers from Manhattan's various party circles. During the Summers and Winters, we rented beach houses in Westhampton Beach, Long Island and ski chalets in Stowe, Vermont where many of my friends would visit for a little recreation & relaxation. A fun time for all to participate in the seasonal sport's activities and change in scenery from NYC.

Summary & Appreciation:

Every so often, I would compare notes with my classmates from grade school and share our collective experiences working as waiters to help pay for our way through school. A few of us were fortunate to have our graduate degrees paid for by means of an assistantship or fellowship, as a teaching assistance while studying for a PhD at the university level. Others had their master degree paid for by the company they were working for at the time. In my particular experience, I'm grateful to Grumman Aerospace and

Lockheed Electronics for sponsoring my engineering master, MBA, and Professional Engineer's License. I also had the privilege of being selected to attend the Corporate Lockheed Management Institute and Executive Institute Programs which were very rewarding career-wise and meeting other high potential candidates from throughout the Lockheed Corporation to form a network of influential contacts.

But we all agreed that the opportunity to work in a Chinese restaurant where you were able to work hard and save a large portion of the money for school & expenses was responsible for the driving force that allowed many of us to be able to secure the initial bachelor degree to get a job in Corporate America at the time. All in all, the money earned for college as a waiter was paid back in multiple dividends where we were all gainfully employed after graduation with decent salaries and graduate school was now paid for by the companies we worked for. It has been a long journey from that grade school in Chinatown where we faced the realities of life at a young age by looking for part time work to help out with family finances. Many of us worked for the Chinese newspaper and magazine companies for \$5.00-\$6.00 a week before we were old enough to work in the restaurant. We were not thrilled at the idea of being a waiter but that all changed when we heard how much money you can make in one day. The bottom line was when we were old enough, we took the opportunity to learn how to be a waiter and worked hard and long hours with many sacrifices to earn the money needed for college. At that young age, it was difficult at times to lose your weekends and Summer vacations but the sacrifice was worth it in the long run as we look back and count our blessings and success we enjoyed over our adult years. A **"Big note of Appreciation"** to the Chinese restaurants who provided these opportunities.

The Culture of Excellence and Achievement & Success may be best exemplified by my classmates and friends at PS 23 & PS 1 respectively, where we all worked hard and made many sacrifices to be the best that we can be since there wasn't much time to do anything between school, part time work, sports, and family matters which consumed the whole day. However, our Chinese family values coupled with our church groups' teachings reinforced our behaviors and attitudes toward educational excellence and subsequent success in the professional and social world. Whenever there was a problem, you didn't have much time to think about it...forcing most of us to be decisive and take action to resolve the problem. Mistakes were made along the way but that is precisely how we learned from life's lessons.

There are many...many similar stories and narratives in Dr. Jean Chin's two recent books entitled: **"Who are the Cantonese Chinese? New York City Chinatown during the 1940s—1960s"** and **"New York City Chinatown Chinese—Narratives of a Village and Community"** to complement this write up on being a waiter to help finance a college education on the path to a successful & rewarding professional career.

"Many Thanks" to Jean & her team and especially, Jean for her leadership on the **Oral History Project**. Additional information may be found on <http://ceoservices.wixsite.com/nychinatownoralhist>
"Mahalo" to the Big Kahuna Jimmy Yuen who manages the **Chinatown NYC Memories Web site** from his lovely outpost in the Paradise of the Pacific-Hawaii. Join him at <http://chinatown.aditl.com> Enjoy.

A Big Shout Out & Thank You from NYC to Las Vegas for Richard Chu and his team for planning, organizing, and coordinating the **2018 Chinatown Reunion--"Thanks" again for...2014..2016..**

Do enjoy the 2018 Reunion and Stay Sharp & be in Good Health...our most precious asset.

Daniel (Danny) Lee, Nashua, NH

February 16, 2018

Happy Chinese New Year 4716," Year of the Dog"

