

The Southern District of West Virginia Celebrates Asian Pacific American Heritage

In 1977 Congress proclaimed the first ten days of May as Asian-Pacific Heritage week to commemorate the immigration of the first Japanese person to America on May 5, 1843. In addition, they wanted to mark the anniversary of the completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869. A majority of those workers were of Chinese descent. In 1990, President George H.W. Bush signed a bill extending the celebration week to a month.

Since then, during the month of May, Americans observe Asian American and Pacific Islander contributions, cultures and histories. The inaugural celebration for the Southern District of West Virginia took place on Thursday, May 19, 2016, spearheaded by court employees Sophia Tran and Debbie Reynolds.

In celebration, different Asian country flags adorned the walls, combined with a brief summary of interesting facts about each country. The countries highlighted were Vietnam, China, India, Philippines, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Laos. Mentioned were the Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia Islands of the Pacific.



Terry Deppner, Clerk of Court, gave the welcoming remarks, thanking those in attendance and introducing Sophia Tran and Debbie Reynolds. Sophia took center stage, and in her Vietnamese native tongue said, “Welcome, everyone. My name is Sophia Tran, and this is Debbie Reynolds. We are here today to celebrate Asian American and Pacific Islander month. We hope that you enjoy this event. Thank you!” Sophia then translated her Vietnamese message of welcome to English. [Click here to listen to Sophia’s Vietnamese greeting.](#)

Many immigrants come into America every single day, and Sophia recounted how her parents migrated to the United States many years ago. “My mom and dad came to the United States for two different circumstances and years apart. My mom’s story started when the Vietnam War ended. My grandmother and an American soldier were in love. However, when the war was over, the American soldiers were

pulled back to the United States. After my grandfather left, my grandmother found out that she was pregnant. It was too late, though. My grandfather never knew about my mom's existence. When my mom was ten years old, the government filed papers for her to go to the U.S. because she was of American descent. My family helped to file the paperwork for her to come to the U.S. But on the day they were supposed to leave, the paperwork had been lost somewhere by the government in Vietnam. It took some time in order to get the files filled out again. By the time the government processed the paperwork again, my mom was able to leave in December 1989. She was eighteen years old at the time. My mom ultimately ended up in West Virginia because she was sponsored by the U.S. immigration office here and backed by the Catholic Church in New York."

"My dad was fifteen years old when he left his house in Vietnam. The country was in a huge downturn after the war, so the Vietnamese army tried to force him to enlist. He refused. He left Vietnam three years after the war ended. My dad, along with a few others, escaped the country by a very small boat, one slightly larger than a canoe. They landed in Malaysia where he remained for three years. During this time, the U.S. immigration office, along with a church on the East End of Charleston, WV, sponsored him to come to America. He arrived in 1980. About ten years later, my mom arrived in Charleston, WV. They met here and started a life together. My dad went on to work as a master tailor for two established men's high-end clothing stores in Charleston for over twenty years. After he was done with that chapter of his life, my parents opened up their own nail salon, a business that has been thriving for sixteen years. My parents have worked very hard to get to where they are together today, and this rings true for many other immigrants who have come to the U.S. The goal of immigrants is always to create a better life for themselves and their children. It is important to understand how immigration works and why it is necessary."

After Sophia spoke about her parents, she handed the floor over to Debbie Reynolds. Debbie shared the following story: "I am an adoptive mother of two beautiful daughters that had been born in China. I had adopted them in 2000 and 2004 at the ages of 9 months and 11 months of age. Today they are 16 and 13 years old. Due to the One Child Policy in China, hundreds of thousands of babies were available for adoption. Because of a preference for a family to keep a baby boy, Chinese couples often abandoned their girls in the hope that they would find a new home. I was able to adopt my daughters due to that

policy, and I'm happy to say that the policy has now been changed to allow TWO children per family."



Sophia and Debbie had also brought personal Asian Pacific items from home. Sophia displayed some Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese money, Chinese playing cards, a Vietnamese rice paddy hat, handmade Vietnamese handbags, traditional bowls and silverware for Asian households, and a statue of the

deity Shiva, his wife Parvati and son Ganesha. Debbie shared items that she had purchased for her daughters during her two adoption trips to China. In the international adoption circles, Gotcha Day or Family Day is the day when the children are united with their adoptive parents. In Debbie's home, Gotcha Day is used because it symbolizes the day she got her daughters and they got her. To commemorate the Chinese heritage of her daughters, Debbie had purchased items from their town, province, and country of birth to gift each daughter annually on their birthdays.

District employees also took a small quiz to test their knowledge on the country origins of some words. The winner received a "cultural" present of a Japanese fighting fish called a Beta. One of Debbie's daughter had given the fish a Japanese name, Ai no ko, meaning Child of Love.



Finally, all participants enjoyed the catered Chinese food prepared by a local small business which included fried rice, lo mein, Hawaiian chicken, spicy chicken, beef and broccoli, steamed vegetables and General Tso's chicken as well as homemade Vietnamese spring rolls prepared by Kim Huynh (Sophia's mom).



All staff in attendance received traditional red envelopes from Asian cultures filled with different Chinese proverbs and a set of chopsticks as tokens of the District's first Asian Pacific American Heritage celebration.

Sophia Tran and Debbie Reynolds were assisted by other staff members, Hollis Lewis, Tammy Moore, Tamara Roach, and Melissa Stevens.