

When most people think about the fire department, images of a woman and an Asian don't typically come to mind. Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. My name is Helen Jo, and I'm helping change that.

I was born in Korea and my family immigrated to the United States in 1971, when I was only four years old. And yes, I am currently a Deputy Chief of the Los Angeles County Fire Department. In fact, I am not only the first woman to be appointed to this executive position in the 85-year history of the department, but I am also the first Asian civilian Deputy Chief as well, meaning that I'm not on the front line fighting fires, but behind the scenes to ensure that our fire fighters, lifeguards and other emergency personnel are well trained and have the necessary tools and equipment to provide the best fire protection, rescue and emergency medical services to the citizens of Los Angeles County.

The Fire Department has over 4,300 employees with a \$922 million budget, which I oversee. To give you an idea of the level of my position that I hold, there is the Fire Chief, 2 Chief Deputies and 6 Deputy Chiefs that make up the executive leadership team. I am one of the 6 Deputy Chiefs, responsible for the business operations of the department, including hiring, training and development, payroll, budgetary and fiscal oversight, and procurement of all emergency vehicles, equipment and supplies and services.

However, I could not have accomplished this and be where I am today, without the vision that my parents had in the "American Dream", and the sacrifices they made for both my sister and myself to realize it and give us the chance to become whoever we chose and follow our dreams. This is a common theme among the past, current and future immigrants to the United States, and probably to a lot of you here today.

My parents gave up a comfortable life that they worked very hard in accomplishing after escaping from the north during the Korean War. They sold their business and home to come to America, a foreign land and language, with no family and friends to welcome them, and not knowing exactly what to expect for themselves but, knowing in their hearts that they are providing opportunities to their two daughters that they did not have. They've allowed my sister and me to concentrate on our studies and

get the education that was not available to them, for which I will be forever grateful.

For them to start all over again with basically nothing; holding 2-3 jobs at once so that they can financially support the family and yet at the same time being able to instill strong work ethics and moral values, such as integrity, loyalty, commitment, caring, courage, and a sense of community, which are all exemplified daily among the Asian Pacific American communities and here by the County employees. And, more importantly these values have shaped me to who I am today.

Growing up in Korea town, among other Koreans was not as easy as one would think. I didn't have a chance to grow with the other kids in our neighborhood because I was bused to the valley for over 8 years, as part of the school integration program, where minorities could be integrated to "all-white" schools. Having to endure the name-calling and feeling of segregation instead of integration was not a deterrent to me as it was to some other minorities.

I didn't let the Asian/pacific islander "stereotype" persona and gender be a barrier, nor did I let it hold me back in achieving the goals in life that I've set for myself. This is one of the many lessons my parents taught me.

Instead, I took that energy and effort required to not be defeated by ignorance and assumptions, but let it inspire me to further succeed. I graduated with honors from both middle and high schools, and from USC with a business administration degree, accepting my first full-time job with the County as an internal auditor... advancing from there to become the budget officer, then the chief financial officer and now the Deputy Chief of the Fire Department.

Unfortunately, my mother wasn't here to witness these milestones in my life as she past away 18 years ago with kidney disease. But I know she's watching over me and is saying "it was worth the sacrifice and I am very proud of you!"

I too am proud, to be an American citizen and given the opportunity to live out my dreams; but also very proud that I have kept my connection to my

Korean heritage, including speaking the language which my parents insisted upon. With this heritage not only do I bring diversity to the County workforce and its leadership, I am able to assist other Koreans and Asians in assimilating into the American society.

Especially my work with the Korean youth to help inspire and mentor them provides me great sense of accomplishment, like others before me and my parents, through their amazing work and contribution to the community, has been my inspiration. We should all remember to acknowledge our Asian Pacific Island heritage. That is why I am also thankful and have always felt at home working for the County of Los Angeles for the last 21 years because it embraces diversity and allows us to perform as valued participants, working together for a common good in the community.

In addition, I have realized over the last two years since my promotion that I have achieved something very special by being the first Asian women Deputy Chief, that I have the ability to help others by being an example to what can be done through hard work, perseverance and dedication. That my accomplishment and of those other Asian Pacific Americans have given our communities voice in a place few have managed to even visit. And, that through talent, commitment and strength of character, anything is possible.

It is my hope that others will follow in my footsteps and excel beyond all that I have or will achieve during my lifetime.

If there is anything that I can say to help is this: Choose your path in life, do not let others deter you from achieving your goals, and know that stereotypes do not dictate our profession. Remember, you are only limited by your own desires and visions.

Thank you all very much for allowing me to share my experiences and to celebrate our Asian Pacific American Heritage Day with you here today!