

Still Separate and Unequal:

A Public Hearing on the State of Fair Housing in America

Testimony by:

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“Son, you ain’t got a Chinaman’s Chance.” This phrase from some cowboy movie which title I have long forgotten, has stuck with me for over 45 years. At first hearing, I did not think much about it. After all, I was a child, and since the statement was coming from the big screen, I just assumed that there was such a thing as a “Chinaman’s Chance,” and learned subliminally that, this kind of chance was not as good as other kinds of chances.

Growing up in the 50s and 60s as the eldest son of Chinese immigrant parents in San Francisco’s Chinatown reinforced this “distinction in opportunities.” My father worked the 6:00pm to 4:00am shift as a waiter in a Jackson Street restaurant that catered to the “late night snack after the bars close” crowd. He knew that the tips would be better on this late night shift and made the decision to trade off earning a bit more money with his being asleep while his family lived their lives during the day. My mother worked as a seamstress and balanced cooking for the kids, making sure we were dressed for school, while sewing thousands of pieces of dresses which would be sold in stores where she would never shop. These stores were situated in downtown San Francisco, separated from Chinatown by only the short 4 block long “Stockton Tunnel,” but which to the residents of Chinatown was a land that they were not part of.

Why did my parents work this hard in this finite world within a broad world in which they did not really belong? My sisters and I have asked my parents this question

and they have always answered their kid's "Why" with "we want you kids to have the chance to go to a good school and we want our family to be able to live in our own home." They worked hard because they were seeking the American Dream.

For my parent's generation, hard work was not necessarily enough to achieve this dream. There was a time; a time within memory, when Chinese were not allowed to own homes in many parts of San Francisco. I am a Past President of the Chinese Real Estate Association of America. In an article written by Corrie Anders, at the time, the real estate editor for the San Francisco Examiner Newspaper, for the CREAA's 25th Anniversary Commemorative Booklet, he writes:

"The eyes of Charlie Lum have seen a lot since he was a fledgling real estate agent in 1971. That was a time when he found racism as tough as making a sale. Lum worked for a non-Chinese real estate firm and one of his rookie duties was to answer the office telephone when potential clients called. Far too often, white callers would hang up as soon as he uttered his name.

Another obstacle often confronted Lum, who is now semi-retired but maintains his real estate license. Asian families were reluctant to search for housing outside of Chinatown because of racial discrimination ... many whites refused to sell to Asians. That slowly started to change in the 1970's, however, thanks to stricter application of civil rights laws and as Asian buyers began using sympathetic whites to make purchases for them."

Stricter application of civil rights laws is one important reason that my parents are now homeowners. Mr. Anders points to one other important factor: "using sympathetic whites to make purchases for them." I interpret this to mean folks who understood the

value of living in diverse communities. Americans who knew in their hearts that communities are richer and more fun to live in and when there are lots of difference kinds of folks living in it.

I also know that a viable Fair Housing strategy must involve actions on both these fronts. First, and in my opinion the most critical is generating opportunities for the understanding to emerge that within the framework of maintaining the richness of ethnic identity, there is a far greater value return on living in communities that have access to the experiences of a broad spectrum of people. The most bang for the buck in Fair Housing will come when communities want it. Second, there must be strict enforcement for violators of the laws that includes requirements for experiential learning. There is great efficacy to having the experience of being in a diverse setting when compared to hearing someone just talk about it.

I am and have been a working Realtor for over 27 years. I take the experience of living through my parent's quest for homeownership into every relationship I have ever had with my clients. Each transaction is business, but each transaction is also very personal. I, and other real estate professionals like me, do not say that homeownership is an absolute entitlement. What we feel to our core is that which is core is the "absolute right to compete fairly and equally for the opportunity to own one's home.

I have also been active in the National Association of Realtors for over 20 years and am the Founding Chairman of the Asian Real Estate Association of America. I understand the critical role that Realtors play in making Fair Housing a reality. We are on the front line interacting with communities and use Fair Housing Regulations and

training as tools to educate consumers about the value to them of being in diverse communities. Realtors provide a vehicle for experiencing diversity.

There is an additional perspective we should not ignore. The “Chinaman’s Chance” phrase has evolved in some areas to mean “too good of a chance.” For many, the Asian Pacific American community is perceived as one with endless dollars that materialize spontaneously in suitcases hidden under magic beds.

This “model minority” myth masks the great number of newer immigrants from Southeast Asia, South Asia, and other countries who encounter the same challenges faced by my parents.

The work of Realtors working together with non-profit agencies, and government regulators to get rid of the “Un” in the “Unequal” continues. And for all of us in this sector, it is “Always Personal.”

Its business and it’s all personal.