

U. of T. Libraries Tribute

Nov. 1, 2012

Good afternoon friends, welcome.

I would first like to thank Larry Alford for holding this reception for me, which, by the way, is most unexpected. I am being thanked for something I believe should be made available to researchers anyway.

It is customary for parliamentarians to destroy all documents when they leave office. So people like me are in the minority. I remember what Ian Wilson, the former Archivist of Library and Archives, Canada, said in his speech, at the annual conference of the Ontario Genealogical Society this June in Kingston. He said that when

parliamentarians have a bonfire when they leave office, Canada is left with no record of our past. Librarians and archivists and I like to keep everything.

Despite what I just said, we did have to shred documents that have personal information, especially immigration cases I worked on as a Senator.

You may wonder about senators working on immigration cases? Yes, I did quite a few over the years when the Liberals were in government. Constituents appealed to me for help when all other avenues were closed to them. I have been successful in some cases but not in all. I take these cases very much to heart, knowing what people were going through when they were left in limbo. I never hesitated to make myself a nuisance by

cornering ministers in national caucus in order to press the cases of those in need. By always going to the top, I had the best chance of success. So, these were the files that had to be destroyed because of privacy issues.

Having said that, as Dr. Jack Leong can attest, there were many boxes left that came to the library – most consisted of correspondence, and some were my research material that was collected by Carol Reichert, my Policy Advisor, for my many speeches. That is, of course, besides my own collection, that's in my Toronto office, attached to my original speeches, which were filed by Peggy Ku, who's here this afternoon.

As a researcher, I value original documents, and really appreciate perusing people's correspondence because that's how I get the true

feeling of a person's character I am researching. For that reason, I tend to keep everything that's written. I'm not one who's attached to material things, but only to the written word. What people say reflects the times in which they live.

I came across a question very recently about a person saying that her brother owned a false hair business in the 1960s. Someone from the younger generation asked what that was all about. You see, women of my generation would know that that kind of business existed, because many of us wore hairpieces during the 60s!

Besides the endless boxes that were sent to the Library, I am also being recognized as a retired senator this afternoon. This certainly marks a new chapter for me and I am still getting used to it.

The first thing I noticed was that I didn't have to get ready to return to Ottawa after Labour Day!

Believe it or not, Senators have a very strict schedule, which, to me, is like being in school. We get our summer break and winter break. The most crucial months are December and June, which are like exam times when I was in school in Hong Kong. And, as I mentioned, after Labour Day, we get ready to return to Ottawa. In the senate chamber, attendance is taken – that again is like school in Hong Kong! I'm not even sure that this is even done in Canadian schools today.

All my friends know that, when I mentioned retirement, as far back as a year ago, it only meant retirement from the Senate of Canada, and not from life! My 14 years as a senator have been amazingly enriching, and I was faced with a very

steep learning curve, just the kind of challenge I like. In the Senate, I had the amazing opportunity to get to know Canadians from every corner of the country.

After accepting the Senate appointment in Sept. 1998, I had to learn how to survive in Ottawa because I did not come from a political background. I used to describe myself as a freshwater fish thrown into an ocean. I lost a lot of weight in the first year, and it took me a while to get my bearing, and focus on what I did best – which was and still is, working with the community and reaching out to Canadians.

As the first Canadian of Asian descent to be appointed to the Senate of Canada, I felt the burden of Asians who had suffered severe discrimination in Canadian history. And, even

though institutional discrimination is a thing of the past, acceptance by some in Canadian society is still a work in progress. In my role as a senator, I have had a number of appeals for help.

I know that there are many senators who are very political, and there are those who focus on other issues that concern Canadians. Since I was appointed from a community background, I continued to do what I did best, and expanded my reach across Canada – from Victoria to PEI. I was able to do that because I was welcomed and literally adopted by many communities and groups. In the meantime, I have made many friends.

What do I miss the most having retired from the Senate? It's the people – the amazing Canadians I have met from coast to coast to coast.

However, I do have the pleasure of knowing that many have become personal friends, and we will continue to stay in touch.

My last day in the Senate was Sept. 17, and I was scheduled early that morning on the Matt Galloway CBC Metro Morning show. I was amazed that there was interest about my retirement!

I haven't stopped going a mile a minute since then! Besides our complicated recent move from Ottawa, I continue to work very hard, completing the finishing touches on my upcoming book by MQUP. The next thing I have to work on is the Inaugural Lecture of the Asian Canadian Lecture Series at UC, scheduled for the end of November. When December comes around, I'll pick up and continue writing the book about the Poys in

Australia. Will I ever have the chance to get bored?

So what's retirement like? I do feel the recent change of pace. Besides being able to spend a lot more time at home, I now actually manage to get 7 to 8 hours sleep each night, which never happened before. At my age, that is a nice change.

From now on, I can focus my energy on writing, spending more time with my family and friends, and travel the world with my husband Neville. There are still so many places we haven't seen and so many things we haven't done or experienced. We want to do these things now while we still can.

I want to thank my friends and family who are here this afternoon to help me celebrate the

next stage of my life. And, again, thank you Larry and Jack for holding this very special event in my honour.