

PENINSULA PEOPLE

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Political volunteer Nancy Comaford
Attorney Thomas Chan
Peninsula native Mimi Frengs
Rare Earth's Peter Hoorelbeke
Women plein-air artists
Homes Tour Extraordinaire

PHOTO BY DAVID FAIRCHILD



The Chan family includes daughter Inez, son Kyle both students at [redacted], Tom and Cindy at their home overlooking the South Bay. Photo by Mary Jane Schoenheider

From hilltop to hilltop

by Richard Foss

When you think of experiences that might be useful to a lawyer, the first thing is likely to be a class in some stuffy university hall. You might not consider herding sheep in Norway, hammering nails on a construction site in Switzerland, or trekking the Himalayas without a guide unless you have talked with Tom Chan. Tom explains that a lawyer can gain valuable insights from unlikely interactions.

"When I was very young my family was really poor, almost living on the street. By the time I was in college, I had almost forgotten about that early life, but wandering around Europe reminded me. I got to work with farmers and poor people of all different nationalities.

"I met Yugoslavians, Italians, and Spaniards on farms all over Europe, because those were the people who did the actual work. In Denmark I worked on the ranch of a lawyer, the first lawyer I ever got to really know. Maybe that started me thinking about a career in law... Now when I practice law and I deal with poor people, working people, I understand them. I've been there; I've lived

with them. It helps me tremendously when I pick jurors."

Tom's odyssey from Hong Kong to Palos Verdes covered all the ground in between - the long way. He remembers that his early prospects were unpromising; though the family business was thriving, he didn't want any part of it.

"My father was an illiterate tailor, but he did well in life. By the time he retired he had 500 tailors working for him. He did not want me to go to school - he wanted me to learn to be a tailor. I took one lesson and told him, 'I'm sorry, I don't want to do this.' My mom was the one who encouraged me to go to school and got me into one of the top high schools in Hong Kong. As it turned out neither I nor any of my brothers and sisters went into his busi-

Attorney Tom Chan made his way to the Peninsula via the Himalayas - and Hong Kong and the American Midwest - in a journey of adventure

ness."

Tom had another reason for not wanting to take over the family business - he wanted to get out of Hong Kong.

"When Mao's cultural revolution hit there was chaos there. People here think it was just an argument about ideas, but it was a true revolution, hundreds of thousands of people killed. We saw the bodies that floated down the Pearl River from China. The unrest didn't stop at the border.

"A neighbor was a famous radio personality, and he was doused with gasoline and burned alive right in our park. I had a folk band then, and the government invited us to play in poor neighborhoods to pacify them.

"We had bombs thrown at us. My father wanted to get us out of Hong Kong. I had this romantic idea of the American plains, I wanted to see cornfields forever, I had never seen snow. All of it made the Midwest seem so romantic, so I applied at Whitewater College in Wisconsin. I was not only accepted, they offered me a scholarship."

Life in a small town in Wisconsin had many delights for Tom Chan - he took up canoeing

and cross-country skiing, hobbies that are impossible in the most crowded city in Asia. Nevertheless, he didn't want to lose touch with his family and traveled home as often as he could. After several trips across the Pacific, he decided he wanted to see a little more of the world.

"I decided I would go back via Europe and do a little sightseeing. It took me two years to get to Hong Kong. I had a couple hundred bucks, a suitcase, and supposedly, a job in Switzerland to earn more money. I got there and the job didn't exist, so I went wandering. I had a one-month rail pass, so I just took overnight trains and slept on them, walked around wherever I happened to be, and then took another overnight train. When the rail pass ran out I hitchhiked."

He found a variety of jobs, including one as a trainee chef at St. Gallen, Switzerland, where he started the town's first labor strike. He worked as a shepherd in Norway and once fell off a cliff while tending his flock; the two-foot pile of sheep droppings at the bottom saved him from injury to anything but his pride.

After working in Sweden, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Greece, he moved on to Israel and spent three months at a kibbutz in the Negev desert. Further adventures followed in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, where he trekked the Khyber Pass without a guide and dealt with bandits who held him at gunpoint to try to force him into a smuggling operation.

By the time he made it back to Hong Kong, he had enough experiences for a book.

"I may even write it some day," he mused. "I'm too busy now, but I keep thinking about it. I learned so much."



Tom Chan wearing an antique Chinese silk garment typically worn by a successful small business owner more than a hundred years ago in the Ching Dynasty gave a Tai Chi performance at the South Bay Chinese American Chamber of Commerce annual banquet that he presided over as the current president.

Besides his chance meeting with the Danish lawyer who shaped his career, he had also gained valuable confidence.

"I never would approach a stranger before, I was shy. In Europe there was nothing but strangers, so I learned how to talk to people very quickly. It was the best possible situation for me."

When he finally got back to Wisconsin, Tom was ready to apply himself to his studies, and he graduated from the state's top law school and interned at the Supreme Court. A brilliant career seemed to be destined, but prejudice made the path forward difficult.

"An Asian-American was an oddity in the Midwest. Nobody knew what to do with me - my friends all got jobs and I didn't. When I left law school, I wanted to work for Ralph Nader, but he turned me down. I wanted to work for justice but justice didn't want me, so I decided to work for money.

"That summer I got an offer at Wausau Insurance, and they were terrific. They gave me tremendous training, and I'm indebted to them, even though I don't personally like insurance companies much.

Unlikely as it may seem, the job at Wausau Insurance might have been the best place in the world for a lawyer who was interested in technology and liked to think about how it might change the world. Wausau was the first company in the industry

to recognize that computers might help with the massive job of calculating life expectancies and health management costs.

"The second year I was there, in 1980, they decided they wanted to try using computers to calculate how to control health care costs, and they bought a computer company. They were trying to invent managed care...

Anyway, they discovered that most doctors were horrible managers. They were great at healing people, but typically they had their wives manage the offices, whether or not their wives had a business background.

"Wausau found a software company that sold management systems to health care companies, and they decided they wanted to buy it. I ended up with the job because nobody else wanted it - they didn't understand what the company was buying.

"I did the whole deal myself, and to me it was no big deal. In the middle of the negotiation, the opposing counsel had to call a time out, he was so stressed out. He couldn't control his facial tic. He didn't understand what was going on, couldn't understand the risk for his client. We were talking about source code and object code, and he didn't understand any of it, so he couldn't do his job properly.

"I was also involved in may have been the very first legal case about whether copyright would protect software. There was no law on the subject. For many of the lawyers I worked with this was very stressful, but for me it was exciting."

The word got around about the young Asian lawyer who understood technology, and suddenly the job offers started coming in. Though Wausau had treated Tom well, he was itching to move somewhere more lively than central Wisconsin. After a stint with a software company that was the largest publicly quoted company in Minnesota, he was offered a job with Ashton-Tate, then a high-flying company based in Culver City. Tom remembers that at first it wasn't a pleasant experience.

"I lived on Guadalupe Avenue in Redondo Beach, and I didn't like it at first. I didn't know anybody, I didn't like LA, and I was miserable. It was too hot, too smoggy, and there were no good Chinese restaurants in the area. In time I got to know people, and now this is my favorite city in the world."

Tom Chan eventually opened his own law practice and dealt with some groundbreaking cases, including a major case against Microsoft.

"I was the first person to sue Microsoft for antitrust," he recalled. "I do respect Microsoft... I sued them on Wednesday, and on Thursday their General Counsel called me. They flew down from Seattle and we settled the lawsuit in one hour. Find me a company that settles anything that fast. Most companies in America would have still been scheduling meetings to talk about it."

With his skills, couldn't he have gone to work for his opponent? Tom laughs at the thought.

"I wouldn't have derived any pleasure from working for Microsoft - why should I help an elephant to kill an ant? I could have gotten a lot of money, sure. I've never become rich despite being involved with so many start-ups - I either joined too early or left too late, and I never sold my stock options at the right time. Still, compared to those days traveling around Europe, I'm very rich."

These days Tom spends time with his wife and children, as well as being active in a number of charitable and professional groups. These include the South Bay Chinese-American Chamber of Commerce, Asian-American Bar Association of Los Angeles, the Torrance Memorial Medical Center Foundation Board and various activities in support of local schools.

These have deepened his community involvement as well as introduced him to a new hobby. Tom Chan is well known for his Tai Chi demonstrations, a martial art he learned not in Hong Kong, but Palos Verdes.

"I took my first lesson from the South Bay Chinese School at Palos Verdes High School when my children studied Chinese eight years ago."

Friends keep encouraging Tom to get more involved in local politics, perhaps run for city council or mayor. He brushes off the idea with a smile.

"Many people have asked me to run for political office... I'm too much of a free speaker to be successful, I think. Still, political action is tremendously important to me. I was 19 when I left Hong Kong, which was then a colonial society. I wanted to experience democracy, and I've always been glad I came here to try it. I can't imagine who I might be if I had stayed." *PEN*