



Hon. Ronald S.W. Lew, U.S. District Court Judge, Central District of California

“Do good.” When asked for the most valuable advice he could ever give, Judge Ronald S.W. Lew simply responded with these words passed on from his father. Recognized as a trailblazer and icon, Judge Lew’s accomplishments are countless and unprecedented: the first appointed Chinese-American federal judge outside of Hawaii, decorated Vietnam War veteran, founder of one of the nation’s largest Asian lawyers’ associations, mentor to thousands of aspiring young professionals, and dedicated family man with 14 grandchildren. Judge Lew’s accomplishments and dedication have propelled him to being one of the most respected and legendary judges.

His journey to becoming the first Chinese-American judge appointed to the federal bench on the U.S. mainland was not easy, considering his humble origins in the heart of Los Angeles’ Chinatown. Today, after 28 years as a federal judge, Judge Lew still continues to work to help those in need, guided by his simple mantra, “Do good.” It seems simplistic, but there’s much behind these words.

Judge Lew’s inspiration starts with his father, Chowlan Lew, who at 14 years old arrived in California with only a dollar in his pocket. Despite this, he opened his own laundry business and started a family with nine children, including his third son, Ronald Sing Wai Lew. The family business was in the shadows of downtown, next to the produce market, an underdeveloped and underprivileged area. By devoting himself to his family’s business, the young Ronald Lew avoided an unruly street life. It was in that family business where Judge Lew developed his work ethic, diligence, and a sense of discipline—skills that would be essential to his future success. Living in a crowded two-bedroom apartment,



Chowlan knew that his children needed an education if they ever hoped to live outside of Los Angeles’ low-income neighborhoods. Chowlan noticed how challenging it was for the growing Chinese community to assimilate itself into the rest of Los Angeles, so he gave his son two pieces of career advice. First, he told him to pursue a career in law. Second, he told him, “You will be successful and accomplish great things, but remember your own community, and never forget it. You need to give back.” These words inspired Judge Lew to help with the growth and success of generations of Asian-American lawyers and professionals.

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After receiving his undergraduate degree in political science from Loyola Marymount University in 1964, Lew enrolled at Southwestern University Law School as one of only a handful of minority law students. Despite working full-time at the family laundry, he worked toward his law degree by attending evening classes.

Looming over the mid-1960s was the Vietnam War, and after two years of law school, the U.S. Army drafted him in February 1967, cutting short the completion of his degree. He approached his service in Vietnam with trepidation, knowing full well the risks and high death toll. However, what bothered him more was when the Army changed his registered name. On his birth certificate, the order of his name was “Sing Wai, Ronald Lew.” Instead of “Ronald Lew,” he would be addressed as “Lt. Sing Wai Lew.” This change, perhaps a technical mistake, nonetheless disrespected Lew’s Chinese heritage by not recognizing the traditional way his parents named their children.

Regardless, Lew underwent officer training, where his intelligence and leadership qualities garnered him a top-three rank in his class. Following his training, Lew departed on a special mission to Okinawa, Japan, and Taiwan. It was during this time in the military that Lew faced a barrage of prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice toward Asians and the military because of the Vietnam War made life challenging for him. On several occasions, his fellow civilians spat on, harassed, or directed racial slurs at him while he was performing his duties as an Army officer. Despite such incidents, Lew was honored to serve his country. He also knew that he had to make it back home for his family and community.

With his three-year tenure in the Army over, he returned to California, eager to continue law school. But a call from Washington came, requesting that he extend his Army service. By accepting a promotion to Army captain, he would serve a couple years in Europe and then return to the United States. Lew considered this offer a tremendous opportunity, but he declined the military’s offer because he was committed to resuming his law degree, as he had promised his father. Upon returning to Los Angeles, he convinced the initially hesitant dean of Southwestern Law School to allow him to continue his studies after his extended absence. Restarting law school required him to take both day and night classes, as well as study again the mandatory subjects that he completed before being drafted. After a total of three and a half years, Lew graduated from Southwestern Law School in 1971.

When he started his legal career, it was challenging to find employment because many practices, especially private firms, did not hire minorities. Seeking career advice, Lew visited an old friend, Jacob Adajian (a former classmate at Southwestern Law School before the Army), at the Los Angeles City Attorney’s Office. He not only received advice on his visit but ended up receiving a job offer. He worked at the city attorney’s office for two and a half years, gaining criminal and civil law experience, but was still unable to garner respect. As an Asian in the

courtroom, many assumed he was just a party, witness, or clerk—anything but a lawyer. Despite his accomplishments, society still saw him as another “Chinaman.” Accepting the realities of society at that time, Lew decided to help new immigrants and to fulfill his father’s wish to give back to his community through pro bono work. In 1971, he started his mission of giving back by founding the Chinatown Service Center, which is now the largest community-based Chinese-American health, job training, and human resource organization in California.

In 1974, he entered private practice and turned his attention to helping the Asian-American legal community. In 1975, he was one of the founders of the Southern California Chinese Lawyers Association (SCCLA), whose mission was to establish a professional network for minorities and provide legal services in their communities. SCCLA became so successful that other associations soon followed. Japanese-American lawyers formed their own organization, quickly followed by the Filipino and Korean-American lawyers. By forming SCCLA, Lew paved the way for an even larger generation of minority lawyers. His efforts were soon noticed by Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, who appointed Lew as commissioner of the Los Angeles Fire and Police Pension Board, where he served from 1976 to 1982. Bradley, who wished to diversify the board, saw Lew as the perfect candidate.

In 1982, an opportunity arose when Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr. offered Lew an appointment to the Los Angeles Municipal Court. Although Lew did not know Brown personally, his stellar work on the pension board put him on the governor’s radar. After just over two years on the bench, Gov. George Deukmejian appointed Judge Lew to the Los Angeles Superior Court in 1984, where he served until 1987. Judge Lew’s rapid climb continued when, on the recommendation of U.S. Sen. Pete Wilson, President Ronald Reagan nominated Judge Lew on Nov. 7, 1985, to the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California. Judge Lew succeeded Judge Laughlin Waters, who assumed senior status. One and a half years later, the U.S. Senate confirmed Judge Lew on a majority vote and granted him commission on May 7, 1987.

This day proved to be historic, although Judge Lew was unaware of the precedent. As the first Chinese-American federal district court judge appointed outside of Hawaii, Judge Lew made history, but he insists it was never his goal to “become the first of anything.” Judge Lew’s motivation and inspiration were to help the communities that had supported him throughout his journey. He called his historic appointment a “tangential fact” that came from hard work and love for his country. From that point on, Judge Lew was determined to make sure that he was not the only successful Asian-American lawyer and judge, but one of many. In fact, Judge Lew was instrumental in assisting the appointment of judges across the nation who set their own precedents. He mentored Judge Alvin T. Wong, who in 1999 became the first elected Asian-Pacific-American judge in the southeastern United States. Judge Wong, a Georgia state



Commissioned Second Lieutenant U.S. Army,
December 1967



Los Angeles Chinatown New Year's parade Grand Marshal
with his wife Mamie Lew, late 1980

court judge, says, "Judge Lew has an incredible sense of proportion. He always gives practical advice. He is just a great mentor and friend and certainly was instrumental in my run for a judgeship in Georgia."

In the Central District of California, another mentee of Judge Lew is U.S. District Court Judge Dolly Gee, who became the first Chinese-American female federal judge in the country in 2010. She recalls meeting Judge Lew years ago in the 1970s during her youth when he was in private practice representing her father's Family Association in Chinatown. "Judge Lew has been a pillar of the community for as long as I have known him and has worked tirelessly in public service, and to advance the cause of access to justice," she says.

As Judge Lew continued his career, he worked to diversify the legal system, all while presiding over numerous high-profile cases, including cases against the notorious Mexican mafia, former Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos, and alleged white-collar criminals Earl Brian and John Berentson. When asked about the most difficult case he has encountered, he replied, "The one right in front of me." For Judge Lew, each case requires equal attention, as both the defendants and plaintiffs deserve a fair decision. His experiences in the Army abroad and at home taught him what suffering at the hands of discrimination was like, which strengthened his dedication to upholding the law and commitment to the U.S. Constitution. He explained that it is important for a judge to marshal facts and law while remaining impartial and noted that "law is fluid and always changing, so it is important to accommodate the changes." Regardless of the number of headaches or the length of cases, Judge Lew carefully considers every detail to reach the appropriate decisions. Judge Lew is known for his no-nonsense, thorough, and extremely fair approach toward his cases.

Throughout his professional career he has received countless awards and honors. In 1998 he was honored as Metropolitan News Enterprise's Person of the Year. In

1999, the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association honored Judge Lew with the Trailblazers award. In 2001, he received the Historymakers Award by the Los Angeles Chinese American Museum in the field of law and justice. And in 2005, he was honored by the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California as one of the Chinese American Pioneers in Law. Currently, his chambers in downtown Los Angeles is filled wall to wall with accolades, honors, photos with various elected officials and celebrities, and an impressive collection of American eagles, which are carved, stuffed, and painted.

Just as impressive as Judge Lew's judiciary work and awards is his work as a board member and adviser for numerous nonprofit, civic, legal, and community organizations, and his commitment as a mentor to young individuals. In the '70s, Judge Lew recognized that while there were many mentors within law, there were few minority mentors. Lacking a mentor of his own, he instead studied the lawyers and judges whom he respected, such as Ronald George (retired chief justice of the California Supreme Court), Armand Arabian (retired California Supreme Court justice), and Dickran Tevrizian (retired U.S. district judge). By modeling his own character and conduct after his unknowing mentors and learning from their experiences, he steadily established himself as a reputable judicial officer, community leader, and an influential voice. He counsels young clerks and lawyers who work for him to "do good work, work hard, maintain your integrity and ethics, and you too will have opportunities." Along with those he employs, he offers one-on-one mentorship through numerous community groups, including the Asian Professional Exchange Mentoring Program. In return, he only asks for his mentees to follow his mantra: "Help others, and make a difference."

Making a difference is one of his former law clerks, Debra W. Yang, who went on to become a Los Angeles Su-

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the United Arab Emirates to restructure the subject-matter jurisdiction of the courts; he traveled to Abu Dhabi to assist in the restructuring efforts.

Personal

Chief Judge Tunheim lives in Stillwater, Minnesota, with his wife, Kathryn, who is president of the Minneapolis marketing and communications firm Tunheim. They have two adult children, Elizabeth and Samuel, and one granddaughter, Isabel. He has also written a book, *A Scandinavian Saga* (Lakes Publishing, 1984), which is a study of immigration and settlement in northwestern Minnesota. ☉

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perior Court judge and then the country's first Asian-American female U.S. attorney in 2002. She discusses her relationship with Judge Lew fondly. "He is devoted to giving his time, energy, and passion to helping folks throughout his life. I was one of the lucky recipients," she says. She now serves on the management committee of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher and states that Judge Lew's influence started when she was his law clerk. "He would always ask me to do better, to push harder, to do it smarter. This address towards life has stayed with me until the present. He has been a gift to many, but in particular, to the Asian-American community at large."

When asked about his definition of success, Judge Lew does not consider financial wealth. Instead, he considers having a loving family his real priority. He boasts about his lovely wife of more than 45 years, Mamie, and his four children and 14 grandchildren, saying they are the most important part of success. With a large family and community commitments, there is very little time for himself. It was not until 1995, after his first heart surgery, that he picked up other hobbies, including golf, fishing, and traveling. While most would not sacrifice their personal lives for work, Judge Lew's dedication to his community and those he inspires is what drives him.

Now a senior judge, Judge Lew plans to continue his public service for as long as he can. He has committed his professional life to improving the judiciary and could not be more pleased with his legacy. It's hard to imagine that a young boy with immigrant parents from Los Angeles' Chinatown would pave the way for thousands of law students and attorneys. The journey of overcoming his challenges and adversities resulted in him becoming a cornerstone, trailblazer, and inspiration to generations of Asian-American judges and lawyers throughout the country. Now, as a result of his mission to help others reach the federal bench and beyond, there are more than a dozen Asian-American federal judges throughout the country. As Judge Lew demonstrates, to do truly good work requires a sense of empathy and understanding that can only be gained through one's own suffering and struggle. Judge Lew chose to find meaning in his challenging past, and he continues to find peace and a sense of purpose while "doing good." ☉