**WOK & ROLL | Peter Kwong**

**A walk down memory lane at Career Day**

I recently was invited to speak to the students at Osceola High School on their Career Day. They have more than 500 students in the school, and it made me feel young again to be around all these energetic teenagers. How many years ago when I was at their age?

I was amazed to find that there were 30 or more speakers who were willing to talk to the students about their career paths. Many of those speakers are alumni. It just amazes me that living up here in the Northwoods, folks are from here, and they remain living here their whole lives. For whatever reasons, whether they moved away to live or work in other states or countries, they always find their way back home.

Roots are deep here. If not for my granddaughter, the move up here would never have happened, and the new roots would not have started.

I did much volunteer work while living in Milwaukee, with Junior Achievement, SCORE, which is the Service Corps of Retired Executives, and the HCCW (Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Wisconsin). How a Chinese guy got involved with the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce is another story, as I don’t even speak Spanish. My Spanish is limited to:

* Hola – How are you?
* Muy bien – very good
* Dame una cervesa, por favor. – Give me a beer, please.
* Donde esta el baño – Where is the bathroom?

Somehow, I got by with those four phrases every place I went in the Hispanic communities. I even survived working in Guatemala as a consultant. But that was a long, long time ago. It was a different world then. There would be a guard carrying a shotgun in all shops and restaurants, especially in front of a bank. Did I feel safe? Perhaps.

One morning, I heard firecrackers going off early in the morning. When I asked the concierge what they were celebrating, he answered, “No señor; that was machine guns going off.” I left that afternoon and never returned.

To tell the story of my career was a trip, just where to begin? To walk down memory lane once again after all these years, with all those young, wondering eyes staring at me, it was some experience indeed. So I told them about coming from Hong Kong. They were amazed at the story of how Hong Kong became a British colony a hundred years ago.

I don’t mind repeating it again, as it is some great story.

At the end of the 18th century, China was so corrupted and weak (the empress used the money for defense to build a summer palace instead) that all the countries around the world wanted to have a piece of this juicy meat. Britain, at that time, was using Hong Kong to import opium from India to China. There were opium dens everywhere, and all the youngsters were getting "stoned" instead of being productive.

The governor of Hong Kong finally had enough, and decided to gather all the opium, and burnt it all in downtown Hong Kong. It must have been one heck of a party, with everyone nearby inhaling the fumes. Needless to say, the British were ticked, as their fortune went up in smoke, literally. So, in protest, they sent an army to fight the Chinese soldiers. Guess who lost?

The mighty Chinese lost to an army which was one-thousandth the size. Unlike the Japanese, who demanded zillions in gold and silver — which they used later to build up an army to start WWII — the British just asked for Hong Kong to be ceded to them for 99 years. So, for 99 years, Hong Kong belonged to the British Empire, and was governed by their rules.

Can you imagine if the Columbian drug lords, who sold drugs to our kids, won a war against the U.S., and wanted to take Wisconsin for 99 years to be governed by their rules? Ridiculous as it seems, that was the truth with the ceding of Hong Kong.

I told the story many times about my journey to the States, and how and why I chose the U.S. to become my destination for further education. While growing up, we had banquets for distant relatives who had immigrated to the States earlier. Just to show off that they had "made" it upon their visit back to Hong Kong, they would hand me a crispy $5 bill as "lucky money" when we met.

Twenty-five cents a month was my allowance, and this stranger was handing me a $5 bill. What to believe? Yes, America was the place to be, where everything must be paved in gold. Little did I know, until later, the truth about all these relatives — they worked in sweatshops, living in tight quarters with many others for years, then saved up enough money and returned home just to show others that they made it. I was fooled.

Since it was Career Day, I asked the students what was the difference between a career and a job? One of the students answered, “A job is something that you have to do to earn a living; make money working so you can pay bills. A career is something that you enjoy doing; you can utilize your passion and have fun just working.” Wow, so nice to hear that from a 15-year-old. A career is something that you enjoy doing, fulfilling your dreams, and devoted to helping others in the process. I was deeply touched.

I got into the hospitality field starting as a dishwasher, and then moved up through the ranks to become prep cook, line cook, then a waiter, bartender, and finally became a manager, supervisor, and director of operations and whatever. It was a long journey indeed, but I enjoyed every step. Students mentioned what they wanted to be — a doctor, an artist, an engineer, a zookeeper, a designer ... I looked at them with admiration. At their age, I had no idea what my career would be.

Somehow, I shared with them my two bits of wisdom — “Happiness is not about making a lot of money. You’ll find true happiness if you:

* Know what you are doing,
* Believe in what you are doing, and
* Love what you’re doing.

Wish them all the best in choosing their paths.

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