

Remarks by the
HONORABLE RONALD T. Y. MOON
at the
SECOND ANNUAL AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
YOUTH AWARD CEREMONY

Saturday, July 17, 2004
10:00 a.m.
Supreme Court Courtroom

GOOD MORNING, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

I am pleased and honored to be here again this year to participate in the ACLU Youth Awards Ceremony and welcome you to your Supreme Court. As I indicated last year, this courthouse -- otherwise known as Ali'iōlani Hale -- was built in 1874, and this year, we celebrate its 130th birthday. Since its construction, this building has stood as a symbol of fairness and justice for the people of Hawai'i. It is, therefore, fitting that we gather here today to recognize three outstanding young people who have demonstrated a strong commitment to promoting civil liberty awareness. I commend each of the honorees for learning to work within their government structure -- whether it be their school's government or the state government system -- to attain their goals. The successes that you have achieved are indeed a testament to their intelligence, diligence, commitment, and perseverance. I have no doubt that the path they have taken has been filled with many challenges, and I congratulate each of them for having successfully met those challenges.

Each of today's honorees share a strong commitment to civil liberties, which is clearly demonstrated by their actions. Each of their projects have highlighted important civil rights issues, such as individual freedoms, gender discrimination, racial tolerance, and diversity awareness. It is this last issue -- diversity awareness -- that I would like to briefly speak to you about this morning and share with you some of my own personal experiences that have led to enhancing my understanding of the need for diversity awareness.

Indeed, the diversity of America's people has played a major role in making this country both strong and dominant. Unfortunately, this same diversity has been the source of discrimination and bigotry -- an ugly part of this country's legacy that still exists today.

Utilizing data from the 2000 Census, demographic experts project that there will be -- within the lifetime of our honorees -- no race or ethnic group that will dominate in numbers. In 1950, census figures indicated that the percentage of Whites in the total population was approximately 90 per cent, which decreased to 76 per cent by 1990, and dropped even further to 69 per cent according to the 2000 census results. The latest Census Bureau calculations show that California has now joined New Mexico and Hawai'i where the White population is not the majority. By the next census survey in 2010, it appears that Texas, with a current-52 per cent White population, and perhaps others, will join the ranks of non-White majority states.

The reality of our changing demographics -- as borne out by these statistics -- is that citizens throughout our nation will undoubtedly find themselves increasingly living and working with diverse groups of people. I, therefore, believe it is imperative that we not only be aware, but take stock, of our own attitudes about those whom we may view as (quote) "different" (unquote), as well as take the time and effort to learn about their culture, customs, and traditions.

After graduating high school over forty years ago, I found myself headed for Iowa -- a place I knew nothing about except that there were a lot of farms that grew primarily corn. I had spent all my life in Hawai'i, surrounded by a culturally diverse community. Therefore, you can imagine the cultural shock I experienced upon arriving in Iowa as I had never seen so many White people in one place! Needless to say, I was not prepared for the expressions of prejudice I received for the first time in my life. For example: I recall walking into a restaurant and not being waited-on; having a barber refuse to cut my hair; and approaching a taxi cab parked at the curb and, just as I reached for the door of the cab, having the driver accelerate away when he evidently saw my face. And then there was the time I was turned down for a date by a Caucasian schoolmate because of her sorority's so-called "White-only policy."

Being stereotyped, however, was not always negative. One evening, while walking back to campus with a White classmate after a movie, a car load of teenage boys taunted me by calling out names like "Jap, Chink, and Gook." When my friend and I responded -- admittedly, with some vulgarities, -- they stopped their vehicle and five of them exited. My friend immediately advised them to be cautious, pointed to me and said, "This guy had to have his hands registered with the police as lethal weapons when he came to town. He knows martial arts." With that, they all jumped back into the car and took off! They didn't know, of course, that I probably could not have bent -- much less broken -- a corn stalk with my bare hands!

Although things improved as time passed and I developed some life-long friendships during my stay in Iowa, I believe -- in hindsight -- that, had I taken the time to learn about Iowa, its community, culture and people before moving there, I wouldn't have felt so isolated and my assimilation would probably have occurred much sooner and with a lot less stress. Looking back, I realize that, had I gone to school in a foreign country -- or just visited one as a tourist, -- there's no doubt in my mind that I would have done some research about the people, their history, culture, and so forth. And truly, for me, Iowa in 1958 was like a foreign country -- thousands of miles away from home and traveling over nine hours just to get to California and another twelve to fourteen hours to Dubuque, Iowa, since we were still traveling by propeller airplanes, not jets.

I am convinced that had I taken the initiative to learn about the people, I would have had a better understanding of their reactions to my ethnicity. It was, after all, 1958 -- the Korean War, which had been over just five years earlier, and the war with Japan, having ended eight years before that, were still fresh in the minds of many students, teachers, and town folk. It never occurred to me until some years later that many Iowans had relatives, friends, and acquaintances who fought against the Japanese in the World War Two and against the North Koreans and Chinese in the Korean War; many lost dear friends and loved ones.

I also came to realize that those who demonstrated or harbored negative feelings towards Asian Americans probably did so because they were unaware of the positive contributions they had made to the security and development of the United States. For example: As we know, the most decorated United States military unit for heroism and bravery in the history of this country -- the famed four-forty-second Regimental Combat Team -- consisted of Asian Americans, who were predominantly Japanese Americans with a few Korean and Chinese Americans. They were intent on proving their loyalty and allegiance to America and fought courageously in Europe, winning battle after battle, against Hitler's army -- in spite of the fact that the families of Japanese American soldiers back in the United States -- labeled as national security risks -- were being rounded up and relocated to concentration camps. After the war, newspapers all over the country carried stories about the four-forty-second as the only military unit among those returning from overseas battlefields -- up to that time -- to be personally reviewed and honored by a President of the United States.

Ladies and gentlemen -- As the demographics throughout our nation continues to shift, our ability to develop a mutual respect for and understanding of each other is becoming more and more critical. I, therefore, urge everyone to increase your level of diversity awareness by taking stock of your own attitudes, including any preconceived notions, prejudices, and stereotyping, with regard to all ethnic groups and, as importantly, to take every opportunity to learn about their culture, customs, and traditions.

In closing, I commend the ACLU for providing our young citizens – through its Youth Award program – with the opportunity to learn how it is possible to make a difference if you have the knowledge to navigate your way to effectuate change.

On behalf of the Judiciary, I extend my sincere congratulations to Youth Award recipient Jana Pierce-van Loon and finalists Samantha O’Hanlon and Christen Brown. I applaud and commend each of you, including your teachers, counselors, and your families, for your outstanding accomplishments.