

Remembering Judge Michael Kwan

We of CHSA mourn the passing of Judge Michael Kwan with heartfelt remembrance. In national news, Michael was recognized as a Utah municipal judge, a people's advocate who criticized President Trump, and received a 6 months suspension. To CHSA and Asian Americans he was the president of the Chinese Railroad Workers Descendants Association and created the movement to reclaim our history at the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Transcontinental. He carried us through the final league in the journey that Philip P. Choy and CHSA began in 1969. It was a challenge that only someone of Michael's strength of character and good-nature could achieve. Over several years he organized conferences, events and meetings, overseeing every detail, dealing with internal factions and maneuvering through political land mines, all for recovering our legacy on the national stage. Michael never touted his position, or being the proud descendant of a railroad worker, but sought only to build unity toward a goal. The reclaiming of Chinese American legacy was his duty, a civil rights act for all. It was to bring America forward, out of the exclusionary past.



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Photo of Michael Kwan, May 11, 2019, after the morning session, CRRWDA Conference Marriott, Salt Lake City, by Connie Young Yu

Michael, the judge, could not be opinionated but in a CRRWDA newsletter a month before the Sesquicentennial he conveyed this message on the rise of hate crimes across the nation: “As members of a community which has known its fair share of violence we remember those who stood with us and those who turned their backs. We have an obligation to speak out about our experiences both in the past and in the present to denounce those acts of terrorism which attack our friends and neighbors.”

On May 10, 2019, the Golden Spike 150th at Promontory Summit went off without a hitch. The monumental celebration with 20,000 people in attendance was a grand success in every way, and we fulfilled our mission. We were on the stage, Chinese railroad workers honored in America’s picture, at last.

The morning afterwards, at the Marriott in Salt Lake City, before several hundred happy celebrants of the CRRWDA conference, our leader, Michael Kwan, strode on stage to cheers. He greeted everyone in his usual calm manner and then began reading this message posted on the CRRWDA Facebook page:

“I saw your Golden Spike story this morning and started thinking. Oh, no, now we have crybaby Chinese teamed up with blacks who believe the world owes them a living. Most Chinese on the tracks were either illegal, criminals or both, but all appreciated the opportunity the white European man provided them by giving them a job.”

Michael continued reading the hate-filled obscene diatribe against Asians and Blacks, and the message that America was built by white European men and you can all go back to where you came from.

A collective gasp rose across the room. Our self-congratulatory mood suddenly dissipated. Michael added no comment and calmly convened the session. But by reading the message from an anonymous racist – he conveyed to us that the struggle is not over. What we gained at Promontory the day before was a symbolic moment, not real change. We needed to recognize the deep undercurrent of nativism and hate in our society that has always been there. It wasn’t about railroad workers and Asians achieving recognition, but our obligation to change America.

Michael was prescient, he was courageous, and he was just and kind. With his smile and wit, he made you feel better in his presence, hopeful, that we could someday overcome, truly. He was our moral compass when we had none. His death is an immeasurable loss, to his family, to Asian Americans, to our nation. Let us remember Michael Kwan, his life and work, what he asked us to build, beyond railroad tracks and his belief we could do it, if united we stand.

Written by Connie Young Yu, CHSA Board Emeritus and CHCP Advisory Board Member

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