



Commission President Sam Cho Reception Remarks

Tuesday, January 10, 2023

11:00 am – 12:00 pm

My fellow colleagues, esteemed guests, friends, and port family.

Thank you for being here to recognize the significance of this day.

Today's press release will read, "Port of Seattle Commission Elects Historic Slate of Officers."

And to be honest, this is one of those bittersweet moments.

Because on one hand, I am incredibly honored and proud to be the first person of color to hold the gavel as President of this institution.

But bitter because it took so damn long—111 years. The reality is that this is long over due.

Not for me, but for this body and institution. So yes, this is a historic moment.

And I'm hopeful we'll even get it done in 1 vote.

For so many years, this seat of power was occupied by old white men who saw this as more of a retirement gig than an agent for change and empowerment.

But I can say definitely today, that we have turned a corner and that is no longer the status quo.

As historic as today may be, Martin Luther King Jr. once said,

"we are not makers of history, we are made by history."

So please allow me to review the history that made this moment.

In 1985, a young man from South Korea immigrates to Seattle—Yes, through the Port of Seattle's airport—at the young age of 18.

While attending the University of Washington, he'd go back to Korea to visit family where he'd meet and fall for a beautiful young lady.

The two maintained a long distance relationship until they finally got married in 1989.

Not long after, they had their first son. Me, in 1990.

Having not finished his degree at the University of Washington, but realizing that he had to provide for his family. My dad dropped out and went into the family business of dry cleaning.

Growing up, my mom would occasionally remind me that dad's dream was simply to get my brother and me through college without having to worry about anything.

Something he never got for himself.

Now, dry cleaning wasn't glamorous work. It wasn't sexy.

But it was an honest day's work.

And an honest day's work meant an honest day's wage.

And an honest day's wage meant an honest day's living.

A living that allowed for our family to find sustenance.

But one day, my dad was approached by one of his customers with a new business opportunity. One that he believed could change his and our family's lives.

So he took the chance. He sold the family dry cleaner for just \$50,000 and pursued this new opportunity.

Now, fortunately, his entrepreneurial pursuit did find success.

And he was able to achieve his dream of putting my brother and me through college.

But little did he know, his sons would go on to achieve far more than that...

Now, I want to make it clear that I'm not bolstering my family's story because it's special or exceptional.

But rather because it should be the American standard. For every family story like mine, there are thousands of variations out there pursuing the American dream.

Whether you're an immigrant family from Somalia, or pursuing your own version of the American dream.

Or a Jewish family, that fled the holocaust.

Or a Japanese American family with deep roots in this country but was still unjustly incarcerated during a world war.

We all have our own history that made us and led us to this moment.

As a port, we have so many families that come through Seattle-Tacoma International Airport with luggage in one hand and their version of the American Dream in the other.

The cynics may say that the American dream is dead.

Well, they can come and ask me about it.

They can go ask Toshiko Hasegawa about it.

They can go ask Hamdi Mohamed about it.

The American dream is very much alive.

And I take great pride and joy in the work that we do at the Port of Seattle, not just because we are the gateway to the dream but because we are also a provider of opportunity.

In other words, the port exists to keep the American Dream alive—not just for immigrant families for but any family that calls this region home.

Whether it is by creating jobs on the tarmac or on the docks.

Or facilitating trade and commerce between the homeland and motherland.

Or cultivating a space for small and minority businesses to thrive.

The Port of Seattle is the single largest cultivator of economic opportunity in our region.

And I can say with the utmost confidence that the leaders who comprise of this commission are not just the most diverse in the history of the port.

But we are the most committed to promoting growth, economic opportunity, and sustainability for the next generation.

And so, I want to thank my commission colleagues for entrusting me with leading that effort in 2023.

I am incredibly humbled.

Now let's get to work.