

Justice Ming W. Chin

A Legacy of Public Service, Civility, and Excellence

BY JAMES LEIBSON

IN 1990, GOVERNOR GEORGE DEUKMEJIAN appointed three new justices to the First District Court of Appeal, including Alameda Superior Court Judge Ming Chin. Looking for an alternative to law firm life, I joined the First District's pool of applicants for a staff attorney position with one of the incoming justices. Serendipitously for me, only Justice Chin decided to hire new staff from outside the court. He offered me a position, and I started working for him in December 1990. Almost 30 years later, as Justice Chin prepares to retire from the Supreme Court of California, I still work for him.

My long tenure as a member of Justice Chin's staff is far from unique. Several of his current research attorneys have been with him over 20 years. One joined his staff in 1996, when Justice Chin was elevated to the Supreme Court by Governor Pete Wilson. Another first worked for him as an extern about the same time, and then returned to his staff in 1999 after two years in private practice. One of his former research attorneys just recently retired

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after 22 years on his staff. And during Justice Chin's 30 years as an appellate judge, he has had only three administrative assistants. The fact is, most who have worked for him stayed as long as they could, and eventually left for reasons like retirement or relocation.

One of the reasons Justice Chin inspires such loyalty is that he treats his staff as family. I've experienced this many times first-hand, including when he stepped under a chuppah to officiate at my wedding. I've also seen it countless other times with other staff members. When one of his research attorneys married and



Justice Ming Chin participates in a California Supreme Court Outreach Session at the University of San Francisco, his alma mater. Photos: Judicial Council of California.

moved to Southern California, Justice Chin arranged for her to continue working for him based out of the Court of Appeal in Los Angeles. When another of his research attorneys wanted to work part time because she had young children, Justice Chin created one of the court's first attorney job-share positions, even after being warned that the arrangement wouldn't work. Over the years, Justice Chin has been quite vocal about how well that decision worked out, and has encouraged colleagues both on and off the court to be open to alternative work schedules that accommodate staff needs.

The importance of family to Justice Chin is immediately obvious as soon as you walk into his office. Of course, he has received innumerable awards over the years, and has the hardware to prove it. But except for a few mementos that hold particular meaning for him, you won't find his award plaques *in* his office. For the most part, those are displayed elsewhere, in the outer hallways of his chambers. So what actually surrounds his desk? Picture after picture of his family.

This arrangement is a perfect reflection of Justice Chin. Despite his many accolades and professional success, *nothing* is more important to him than his family. To watch the Chins over the years is to bear witness to a true love story. Anyone who has ever been around Justice Chin and his wife Carol can feel the deep affection, enduring love, great tenderness, and tremendous respect between them. Carol is his rock, and he's the first to tell you so. And when he talks about his children Jennifer and Jason — as he often does — he beams. He is incredibly proud of them, both professionally as highly successful and principled lawyers, and personally as great partners to their spouses, devoted and loving parents to their children, and wonderful citizens of the community. Nowadays, as a doting grandfather, he also talks a lot about his five grandchildren. Spending more time with them is very high on his list of post-retirement activities. He also often talks with pride about his seven older brothers and sisters, most now unfortunately departed.

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This credo was instilled in Justice Chin at an early age by his parents, whom he describes as his first teachers. He speaks of them often, always with great love, admiration, and respect. He talks about how they came to America without language or money; how they remained optimistic and never gave up, despite the many obstacles they faced as unwelcome immigrants in a foreign land; and how they ultimately forged an amazing life for their large family.

But perhaps Justice Chin's military service in Vietnam is what really cemented the credo as his guiding principle. Justice Chin doesn't often talk about that service; for him, it's something very personal and private. When he does, though, he doesn't mention the decorations he received: the Bronze Star and the Army Commendation Medal. He talks instead about the 58,000 men and women who never made it home from the war, and about the commitment he made long ago to honor their sacrifice by doing whatever he could to make his community, his state, and his country better. As a tangible reminder of this commitment, and as a symbol of his deep and abiding love of country — something else he got from his parents — hanging in a frame on a wall near his desk is an American flag that once flew in Afghanistan over the home of the Navy Seal Team that carried out the successful raid on Osama Bin Laden's hideout. It was presented to him by a close family friend who had just returned home from a year of service in Afghanistan: U.S. Navy Lt. (and now U.S. Rep.) James Panetta, son of Leon and Sylvia Panetta and godfather to two of Justice Chin's grandchildren.

For Justice Chin, kaizen is more than just talk. He has devoted most of his career to public service, first as a district attorney and then as a judge for over three decades. As a judge, he has displayed his commitment to public service in many different ways. He is well known for being a prolific author of opinions that are thoughtful, clear, and often courageous. What is less well known is that through his service on countless committees, he has been at the forefront of efforts to protect and improve the judicial branch and to provide impartial justice to all. This includes pioneering work in providing continuing education to lawyers and judges, increasing diversity within the legal profession, preserving judicial independence, and addressing bias within the legal system. It also includes visionary work in bringing new technologies to the judicial system to expand access to the courts and streamline the delivery of justice. More often than not, Justice Chin has been the driver of these efforts, not just a passenger.

I want to mention one final aspect of Justice Chin's life work that both reflects his drive for constant improvement and offers insight into the person he is: promoting civility in the judicial system. Justice Chin often tells the story

that when he became a trial court judge in 1988, he told his staff, "I expect everyone who comes into my courtroom to be treated with dignity and respect. Regardless of how they're behaving or what they're doing, I want you to treat them with dignity." Over 30 years later, in 2019, when asked what advice he would give to law students and beginning practitioners, his message was much the same. "Civility," he said "should be your foundation. It's the right thing to do, and it will ultimately make you a more effective attorney. It will also make your life better." This has been a consistent theme of his remarks during three decades as a judge.

Here again, Justice Chin practices what he preaches. In the many years I've worked for him, I've never seen him treat anyone with anything other than dignity and respect. Because of this, he has always gotten along



Justice Ming Chin in chambers, January 2020.

well with his colleagues on the court, even when they disagreed about the law. Sometimes, he has even been enlisted to play the role of intermediary between colleagues who weren't getting along quite so well. Asked recently where he gets this quality, he referred, once again, back to his beloved parents. "I think everything I've done comes from a respect for other people. My parents certainly had that. They certainly gave that to me. They were wonderful at it."

Justice Chin is wonderful at it, too. I know from personal experience. It has been an honor and a privilege to serve at his side for all of these years. And it is my great fortune to be able to call him friend. ★

JAMES LEIBSON has been a staff attorney for Associate Justice Ming W. Chin of the Supreme Court of California since 1996, serving as co-chief of staff since January 2019. From 1990 to 1996, he was a staff attorney for Justice Chin while Justice Chin was the Presiding Justice of Division 3 of the First District Court of Appeal and an Associate Justice of that Division.