

An Interview with Ron Chew **by Joan H. Baldwin**

Chew was the keynoter at the 2012 NYS Museums in Conversation Conference.



Ron Chew doesn't talk much about the museum field any more. When asked, he says he works in health care. True, but not the whole story. Chew left the Wing-Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific Experience in 2007 after 17 years as director and the completion of a capital campaign so successful it makes development folks weep. But Chew's story isn't about money. It's about the potency of narrative, the power of community ownership, and the work of embracing diversity. And it's about change.

Chew, who still lives in his native Seattle, accepted an invitation from MANY/Museumwise to give the keynote address at the group's annual meeting held in Albany April 22-24, 2012. This article is drawn from his address as well as an extended interview.

A former reporter, Chew is a natural storyteller so it was no surprise when he began his speech with his own story, a childhood in Seattle's International District, and parents who worked long hours raising a family of four. Chew began working at age 13 in the same restaurant where his father was a waiter. It was there when the waiters gathered to eat at the end of business that he first heard tales of his neighborhood. "That's where I learned the power of storytelling," he says. It was a lesson that stayed with him. He studied journalism in college. After graduation he returned to the International District to become editor of the community's paper, *The International Examiner*. "I had an obsessive curiosity to learn more about the half-veiled world I grew up in," he remembers.

In 1990 Chew's understanding of his community led to a job offer, the directorship of the Wing-Luke Museum. Newly located in a former auto garage, the museum had a \$130,000 annual budget and a staff of two and a half. That was the good news. The bad news was an unexpected debt that sent board and volunteers fleeing. And although Chew could have looked outside his community for gifts and grants, he did just the opposite. Deferring his own salary to save money, he asked eight activist friends to join the board. The question he asked everyone associated with the museum was "How can we reshape programs in way that breathes life into the museum?" As a journalist used to absolute deadlines and rapidly changing topics, Chew found the pace at the Wing-Luke glacial. He wanted dialog or as he described it, "a conversation of many voices." But that wasn't all. Chew believed the museum had another role to fulfill: that it could (and should) provide strong community

leadership around ideas such as poverty, illness, and education. As he described it, the museum needed to be a place that respects the past, but lives in the future. A tall order for a museum with a tiny budget, almost no staff, looming debt and a new building, but Chew focused on five things to spark change: Develop programs that connect to today's issues and needs; embrace diversity; invest in long term relationships; cultivate community ownership and bring in the next generation.

"I had no sense of leadership skills," Chew says about the moment when he was asked to take over the museum. His initial response was no. "I thought it wasn't my thing," he says, adding "And my vision was pretty radical." Even his version of oral histories as the basis for narrative was different. No verbatim taping of biography, no signed release statements. Chew wanted theme-based interviews rather than life stories. "It creates richer, crisper content," he says, describing an exhibit called "If Tired Hands Could Talk" based entirely on video of garment workers, including Chew's own mother. He used theatre designers to plan the galleries. Unconstrained by how more traditional museums look, his designers projected video on the ceilings and empty cutting tables. The result plunged visitors into the garment worker's world with its noise, chatter, and mahjong after hours.

Chew is open about the fact that in retrospect he was the right person at the right time. Not everyone could or would defer their salary for two years. He did. But he points out that not taking a salary led to the museum being allowed to defer its rent. "Shared sacrifice allows a museum a second life," he says.

Having said yes to leadership, the first thing Chew did was redefine the museum's mission. "The old mission talked about collecting and preserving objects," he explained, adding that the new museum focused more on engagement and exploring issues. He cancelled pending loan exhibitions, which cost money and while lovely had little connection to the community beyond their Asian-ness. Instead, with a redress bill in the offing, he put together a group of residents ranging from teenagers to seniors to explore the imprisonment of Japanese citizens during World War II. Not surprisingly, the exhibit's strong narrative dredged up never-before-told stories of internment, and connected to a larger community dialog around the much-discussed issue of racial profiling. The exhibit opened fifty years after President Franklin Roosevelt's internment order. For some of the International District's elderly residents it was the first time they had spoken about their experience. For teens involved in the exhibit, it was the first time they had heard about internment. More than 50,000 visitors came to see the show. Needless to say, it was an extraordinary success; not only did the community shift from the role of disinterested observer to stakeholder, but it established a template of narrative-driven exhibitions.

Chew's next project was diversity. For years the Wing Luke had had a mindset not dissimilar from many small history-based museums: that the museum's own community is not as important as visitation from outside and that luring tourists also attracts big-time collectors. The museum had made an effort to reach the

community through exhibits, but Chew suggests that by offering what it thought the community wanted rather than asking what it wanted, meant that many efforts fell flat. Although he's by nature optimistic, Chew is frank about the diversity problem. "Embracing diversity is arduous," he says, adding that it requires an extraordinary level of openness. The Wing Luke sought people to increase its diverse voices, sometimes for ethnic-specific projects, sometimes for more general ones. In those situations, Chew points out, the first voices were the people involved not outside scholars. "True diversity demands fair representation," Chew says.

Next Chew spoke about his mantra of personal relationships being the key to giving. He believes that the one-on-one, me-to-you, you-to-your-best-friend trumps the idea of the cause every time. People believe and trust other people and will give because of them. "What are the things you care passionately about?" he asks, before answering, "Respect, trust, and openness." Chew is also a great believer in equal partnership. He hired staff at the Wing Luke who were great communicators with impressive collaborative instincts. And their skills eventually brought funding that allowed the museum to hire the field's more traditional subject specialists. The rest, as they say, is history.

Chew offered up two final ideas necessary for change: First, cultivating community ownership. "No museum is credible or viable unless community supports it," he said. Taking a leadership role in the community's problems brought stakeholders to the museum. Last, Chew believes no museum can function without the next generation as active participants. "Each of us lives in our own time," he says, reminding his audience of Brokaw's Greatest Generation, the Encore Generation also known as Baby Boomers, and most recently the Millennial Generation. The question, Chew asks, is how to build bridges and transcend differences, to share knowledge, skills and perspectives, and not to let longing for the past blind us when grieving over what is lost. "People in museums are thoughtful, but inward looking," Chew adds later. "They look back with nostalgia about the past that can be fatal. You need to look to the future because it's not going to be around forever." A moment later he adds, "It's all a journey and you play different roles." He continues that he sees the Wing Luke's ascendance as a group project, not his legacy. Asked about leaving the museum field at the peak of his career, he says, "They don't need me. Your legacy is what you impart." Chew believes that everything about the Wing Luke will (and should) change, except perhaps its values. That will be his legacy.

"My heart is still in museums," Chew says, but he adds he has had many lives, and it was time to leave the Wing Luke. While his heart is still there, he is frank about problems he sees in the museum field in general, particularly in the area of leadership: "It's a female-dominated ghetto that doesn't treat people with respect."

After a stint teaching at the University of Washington's museum studies program, which he describes as safe, but isolating, Chew is currently director of the International Community Health Services Foundation, (ICHS) an organization responsible for ensuring accessible health care for the International District

community. For anyone who knows Ron Chew, the ICHS vision/mission statement, might prompt a smile. Its vision: Healthy people, stronger families, vibrant communities. Under core values, ICHS states that it “makes a difference today with tomorrow in mind; that it is committed to excellence; that it respects and embraces all; that it is accountable and ethical; and that it serves one another and meets customer needs.” Who does that sound like?