

Profile: QC President Designate Frank H. Wu

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Body

Amidst the pandemic, we, as members of the Queens College community, look towards our leaders to guide us through the uncertain future. Soon to be taking office, Queens College President Designate Frank H. Wu, shared his views on how to move forward during this crisis, while going into his personal journey through higher education.

Wu is set to be the College's 11th President in its 83 year history. When prompted to comment on the matter, Wu responded by discussing how he initially sought out the Presidency. Wu says that friends had notified him of the ongoing search last year, towards the end of the summer. He fondly notes the encouragement from his colleagues, stating, " [my colleagues said] Frank this is for you, because your whole life has been about diversity, civil rights and education." Wu further explained, "I did not want to be just a college president, I wanted to be, and am humbled to be coming in as the president of Queens College, because of what it stands for. The 180 languages spoken in the borough, the #7 train, the diversity you see [everywhere]..."

Wu's rather successful career stems from his fierce beliefs for equality. As an author of the work, "Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White" (2002), his advocacy for Asian Americans has always been prominent throughout his career. However, this passion for celebrating diversity and being a large advocate wasn't one that was common when Wu was young.

Wu spent his childhood in Detroit, Michigan during the 1970's. As Wu casually describes it as, "[the 70's] was an age before the internet, before cable television and before MTV." On a more serious note, Wu adds, "It was [a time] before diversity... it wasn't acknowledged, it wasn't celebrated." He recalled that during that time, he (and many others like him), were referred to as Orientals, "to suggest exoticism, like we were from halfway around the world". As Wu puts it, " I always knew that my friends' parents would never be my parents' friends". He did however mention that, despite the lack of open dialogue on diversity at the time, his childhood was not unbearable.

His childhood was just one of many instances that opened his eyes to the injustices for Asian Americans. Wu recalls that in 1982, a 27 year old man of Chinese American descent named Vincent Chin was brutally murdered the night before his wedding. The circumstances leading up to the tragic event were because of a recession America was facing, whilst in global competition with Japan. Two white men assumed Chin was of Japanese descent and attacked him, brutally ending his life. His last words were, "it's not fair".

Vincent Chin, a man Wu never knew personally, had a profound impact on his life and his subsequent career trajectory. It was the tragedy of this case that, as Wu puts it, "made me see the power of words", during a time where hate-crimes was a novel concept. Wu then began to write opinionated pieces for the local newspaper, as he was convinced that it would be through his words that mutual understanding could be formed (an optimism he still

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holds today). He recounts that his mother would often say, "don't be so controversial". Little did she know, Wu would end up building a life and a career out of being controversial.

In 1995, Wu was the first Asian American to serve as a professor at Howard University, the nation's leading black institution for higher education. He was a part of the Howard University community up until 2004, when he left to become the dean of Wayne State University Law School in Detroit, Michigan. Following a break in his career due to a health crisis in his family, in 2010, Wu served as chancellor and dean of the University of California, Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco. Wu was renewed unanimously for a second term in 2015, but stepped down in 2016 to return to the classroom, a setting he very much enjoys, up until 2019.

As for the present, Wu expressed his excitement to be a part of the Queens College community, despite the ongoing global health pandemic. He strongly hopes, like many of us, to be physically on campus, to walk back and forth, to be with the community in person. He also mentioned that the pandemic has exposed huge disparities (whether socioeconomic or other) for some of our students and that, "those of us who don't have to worry, we have to help, it's a moral imperative [that we serve]".

As a message to the readers, Wu comments, "Stay safe, stay strong, we're in this together, and I am coming because of you, and I am looking forward to working with you. I'll have a fancy title, but I'm a kid from Detroit with a fancy title and I'm going to learn to be a New Yorker. Each of you individually, but all of us collectively, and as you do that, never forget where you came from."

The Knight News gives thanks to the Office of the President and the Office of Communications for arranging this interview. We look forward to Frank H. Wu taking office effective July 1st.

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