

Names break the ice as we learn about each other

BY YUK-SEM WON

CHOOSING to run in the federal election this year was a big decision. My family and I looked at the incredible time, energy and dedication that this role demanded, especially in the many months leading up to the Oct. 21 election.

I had been building up to this my whole life: extensive learning, community work, career experience, and grassroots activism that supported the principles and values of the NDP. I was ready, willing, and able to fulfil the role as a federal candidate in the 43rd election. Then, there was the added layer of complexity that I had to consider. There was the hurdle of my name.

Our society has various ways to start building connections with others. Introductions have



ONE CITY,
MANY VOICES

Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

always been an interesting part for me.

"My name is Yuk-Sem."

I spell it.

I am inevitably asked, or see it in their expression, that they want to know where I come from.

More politically-correct introductions say: "That is a beautiful name, I have never heard it before, is it from different language/culture, what does it mean?"

If I am with someone, they look at the other person, maybe for an explanation or for them to say it again, slower. They pause, waiting for me to answer the unasked question: what kind of name is that?

"My dad is Chinese, my mom is French. My name means precious jade. I come from Hearst, 600 kilometres north of Thunder Bay. We have Chinese names out of respect for my grandmother, who named us."

Then I can get to the same point in building a conversation that Bob, Susan or Jane had with only one word.

I must admit though, that hav-

ing a non-conventional name has its advantages. I have never been at a loss for an ice-breaker when I meet people: my name is the ultimate conversation starter. My identity and heritage is a reminder of the dedication and success of my father's family who emigrated to Canada, and brought him over as a child. Every time I introduce myself, I can showcase the choice my family made to be here, and to have their family be Canadians.

My name is part of my identity. It showcases a piece of the shared history of every settler who came to this country. We all have a background that resembles, at one time, a journey that focused on hope, prosperity and making a better life in this great country. The timeline continues: immigrant, first generation, second, third, fourth. I am glad to

have my name as part of the link to my father's journey from across the world, to find new roots here, in Canada. Now five generations of my family are here, and we are both proud of our heritage and proudly Canadian.

My name is part of my story and I am proud to have had it on the campaign trail during the federal election. Every sign, flyer, article and, more importantly, every ballot was a testament to my family, our heritage, and that great country we live in.

Yuk-Sem Won is an educator, an artist, and a labour activist and was the NDP candidate for Thunder Bay-Rainy River in the 2019 federal election. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.

November 25, 2019, Chronicle Journal