

the dots

a podcast about connecting.

Stephen Cheung Transcript

Announcer: [00:00:05] Welcome to The Dots. A podcast about connecting. The Dots is a series of conversations with artists, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and change makers who talk about how they connect the dots, and bring things together for their communities, companies, and themselves for a better life. And now your host Digital Strategist, speaker, and entrepreneur, Kathleen Buczko.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:00:32] As president of the World Trade Center Los Angeles, Stephen Cheung is charged with promoting local businesses overseas and attracting foreign investment to Los Angeles. Before that Cheung worked as the Director of International Trade for the Port of Los Angeles and served as an aid to the city's current mayor Eric Garcetti, and its former mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. Interestingly enough he's also a trained social worker and an incredibly a trusted link to Asian investment in our region. So Stephen, welcome to The Dots. Thanks for joining us.

Stephen Cheung: [00:01:03] Thanks for having me.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:01:05] Tell me a little bit about your journey. Where'd you grow up?

Stephen Cheung: [00:01:09] Well I was born in Hong Kong, I immigrated to the United States when I was about 8 years old and I came directly here to L.A. county in Hacienda Heights which is in the San Gabriel Valley.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:01:21] What was it like growing up in Hacienda Heights?

Stephen Cheung: [00:01:24] Well it's quite an interesting journey coming over here as monolingual Cantonese speaker and not really understanding the language. Moving here there was at that point not too many Chinese families in the San Gabriel Valley and where I lived but within about two/three years there was a huge transition and there were a lot of Mandarin speakers. So I actually had to learn Mandarin before I could learn English because the tutor the school district got me only spoke Mandarin, and I only spoke Cantonese.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:01:55] [laughs]

Stephen Cheung: [00:01:55] So the cultural difference really forced me to to kind of learn a lot of different skill sets and at that point I was a bit resentful having to learn yet another language before learning English. But in hindsight it's really helped me with my career development because right now I use a lot of my Mandarin skills in order to communicate with a lot of the investors that are coming to Los Angeles.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:02:17] So a path that's not always direct but [laughs] you just utilize scale.

Stephen Cheung: [00:02:22] No, not direct at all.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:02:22] No, not at all. So you came here how old were you?

Stephen Cheung: [00:02:26] I was eight.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:02:27] So eight years old. Don't speak the language. Whole new country. Tell me about your family.

Stephen Cheung: [00:02:34] So it was an interesting journey. When we moved here we were considered what they called the Astronaut families. Where my father would go back and forth between his place work in Hong Kong and our entire family immigrated here, so we would be stationed here. And that journey unfortunately our family didn't stay together and my father left the family. At that point we actually became a bit challenged financially because when you don't have the single source of income coming in anymore. It became a bit challenging. So my mother started taking, taking on random jobs in order to keep the three children fed and educated. And so it was quite a difficult journey during our childhood but her work sacrifice, her sacrifice really paid off. And now we are living somewhat of the American dream.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:03:29] So tell me about that American dream. Your mom worked and supported three kids. Did she learn the language? How did she adapt to her new country?

Stephen Cheung: [00:03:38] Well she went to adult school and she tried to learn the language. But as an adult learner, and especially with three young children to support and have to go to work and different hours. And also have to pick up her children and make sure that they're well taken care of it became a bit challenging for her to maintain her English skills. And because of the lack of English skills she had to take on really menial jobs including working as a seamstress in the sweat shop, where my sister and I are also sometimes would go there to help as well. So we know we've seen the good side of society and we've also seen the underbelly of our society as well. Which have definitely left a very strong impression on us and growing up that's really shaped my career path in terms of where I wanted to go, and what I want to do with my life.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:04:32] So tell me about that. You saw the underbelly and you went to school and became a social worker, what was your undergrad degree in?

Stephen Cheung: [00:04:39] [laughs] Well it definitely was not a direct path.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:04:43] [laughs]

Stephen Cheung: [00:04:43] So going into undergrad, I wanted to make sure that we don't experience poverty anymore. And so my mother was very a stereotypical tiger Mom I guess in that sense. And she told us many many times that if you're not a doctor, an attorney, or an engineer you're nobody. So I went into UCLA with the hopes of coming out with a degree in chemical engineering hoping to be a bio medical engineer. But two years in I got my first internship and realized that's not the path for me and I was trying to finish school as quickly as possible with the classes I took. And I graduated with a degree in Psycho-biology, which is also very interesting but I became more interested in the psychological side of things rather than the biological side of things. So I took a completely different career path coming out of college actually. My first job out of college was actually in London and I was a headhunter for accountants and financial officers for about a year. And I decided that's not the career path for me.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:05:53] Sure. That's a that's a big difference right from Psycho-biology to headhunting. Although, did it give you insight into the human psyche?

Stephen Cheung: [00:06:04] Well definitely in many ways I think the most important part was not only that job but that job in a foreign country. One of the things I wanted to do is to prove to myself that I can live in a foreign country with no support system, no friends, no family, and be able to

succeed in that harsh environment. I think I was able to survive. I don't think I can say that I succeeded. One of the issues that I didn't account for, the weather.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:06:32] [laughs]

Stephen Cheung: [00:06:32] Growing up in California I was very used to sunshine over 300 days of average sunshine, here in California. But in London I experienced something called a seasonal affective disorder which I didn't know about and I would be walking down the streets and someone would bump into me and would cry for 20 minutes without really understanding why. Later on I should have known this as a psycho-biology major. It was seasonal affective disorder that really affected my hormones.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:06:59] Yeah.

Stephen Cheung: [00:06:59] And so I ran back to Los Angeles with my tail between my legs and I decided to to really become the biggest cheerleader for Los Angeles. And I have no complaints about Los Angeles since I got back.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:07:10] Now I think once you've experienced a winter pretty much anywhere, you can appreciate the 300 plus days of summer that we have here every single day. It does make an interesting opportunity for someone to think that they've found their own path in terms of the security and the survivability of a situation to be so quickly affected by the weather.

Stephen Cheung: [00:07:39] Yeah definitely. But the other amazing thing about living in London and having some time to be away from a life that I knew as being in a different foreign country by yourself, you really are forced to start considering what you want to do with your life. And coming back I decided I wanted to do something with human services and really wanted to dedicate my career and start getting into this path of working directly with people. And I got a job at the Center for the Pacific Asian family. Which is a domestic violence shelter for victims of domestic violence. And specifically I was hired as a children's advocate. So I focus on the children that are in those situations and trying to create some sort of normalcy for them during this transition period and trying to get them the ability for the family to be resilient, and to be able to survive on their own.

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Kathleen Buczko: [00:08:54] How did your experience as a an immigrant child of a single mother inform that advocacy?

Stephen Cheung: [00:09:03] Well I think seeing that there are a lot of immigrants here who might not know that the resources that are available to them, and some of them struggle unnecessarily. And so that became a strong driver for what I wanted to do to help these families who are really going through some tough times. And I think there's an American attitude of you need to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps and very early on I realize that not everybody has boots or straps.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:09:37] Right, right.

Stephen Cheung: [00:09:37] So if you don't have that resource what can you do? And there are abilities and there are programs. There are resources here that can actually help them and they don't have to suffer through these really trying times. So knowing how it felt to be isolated, I want to

make sure that we create programs and we create services, and we help these families go through this transition time. So that became a very, very rewarding experience but at the same time I have to say it was probably one of the most challenging jobs I've ever had. Because of just what you're seeing really the most painful parts of people some people's lives at that point. So as a 22 year old I believe, 21/ 22 year old, emotionally I felt I wasn't completely prepared to to really take on that responsibility, but someone had to do it. And I think that my childhood really informed me of that type of thinking that sometimes you might not be ready for it but you don't have a choice. You just have to grin and bear it and do what you can.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:10:46] So you recognize that you may not be for example ready for something. But then in that space how did you find your voice? How did you motivate yourself through that?

Stephen Cheung: [00:11:00] Well I think it's not really I found my voice as I found a voice for others. Again, it's being able to empathize with these individuals who in many ways like you said are voiceless. They're not recognized by society because they don't fit the mold. There are a lot of stereotypes about Asian-Americans being successful, being the model minority, and being good at math or all these stereotypes that are coming in. And some of them don't fit that category and some of them do go through some challenges. And because there are many of them are not comfortable with the culture are not able to speak the language. They're not able to advocate for themselves and they're not able to ask for help and even when they're asking for help, a lot of times they don't know to ask for help from. So that became the driver for for me as well. And the voice I found was basically to help them get what they need. And in doing so I start realizing that there are a lot of different ways to get that voice heard. Some of it is through direct advocacy, one on one, working with school districts, working with individual schools, working with the Department of Public Social Services. And other ways you start seeing policies being created that can affect not just one life at a time but you can actually affect millions of people at a time. And so that's the beginning of my entry into start thinking more macro perspective into changing policies.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:12:38] So let's talk about that. You became an adviser and involved in the policy around trade and advocacy. So how did those advocacy skills then become the biggest cheerleader for Los Angeles?

Stephen Cheung: [00:12:53] Again this is not a straight path so it wasn't so quit getting there. [laughs]

Kathleen Buczko: [00:12:57] So I know Steve and that's why you're one of The Dots because you are an amazing example of how you have taken several turns and turned this into an amazing set of skills.

Stephen Cheung: [00:13:10] I think there are many very fortuitous circumstances I came upon and one of the things about growing up without a lot of resources is that I developed this really valued skills. That the skill set I have which is I, if there's one word to describe me I would say I'm scrappy.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:13:31] [laughs]

Stephen Cheung: [00:13:32] I can I can find a solution, I can find a resource somewhere. And so I think that became one of the the attributes that really helped me transition to actually my next job after the Center for the Pacific Asian family. Which is the Asian Pacific American Legal Center. A legal aid agency that we were working with at the Domestic Land Shelter to help these victims to be able to get additional rights, additional benefits, and additional services. And in that role, again it

really solidified my experience in terms of policies. For example the Violence Against Women Act was really instrumental in helping many of these women who are escaping from their abusive situation to be able to obtain their own immigration status. Their green card. So that they can stay in the country with their children. So they're not separated and they're not deported. So with that again just kind of really helped me set the direction of where I want to go. So after two years of working at the Asian Pacific American Legal Center I decided to pursue my degree in social work at UCLA. And through UCLA, it's when I start really getting into the political side and the policy side because I interned with, then there was an Assembly member that was really known for her work in foster care. And I decided to pursue that internship and later on this Assembly member Karen Bass became the first African-American speaker of the Assembly. And now she is a very well-respected Congresswoman who's still working very closely on the foster care issue. But I also saw from her that you can do so much more than just one thing. She was doing small business bills and she was very passionate about international issues as well. And through that really got motivated and inspired that there are many ways to help individuals and going all the way back to my childhood. One of the biggest struggles we had is basically the lack of job opportunities that can pay enough for us to survive as a family. So I wanted to make sure that other people will have the opportunities so the job creation aspect, the economic development aspect became a central point in terms of my career.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:15:48] And such a central point for as we focus today on families that are still struggling. Families who are facing immigration issues. How is a juggernaut like the World Trade Center, helping those families on that micro level?

Stephen Cheung: [00:16:08] Yes a lot of people when they think of the World Trade Center which is in Los Angeles in the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation. I think they only see the macro policy side but it's the mission and the work might seem very lofty and very afar. But the thing is the end goal and the end results are actually directly impacting direct jobs like what we're talking about. So what the World Trade Center Los Angeles, we really focus on attracting foreign companies that are creating good jobs to come to this region. And once they get here they have to figure out how to do business here and that's our main focus. Let's make sure that they're successful and when once they're successful they can hire more individuals here locally. And when that happens it just basically lifts the boats. And then and always and so basically as an economy as a region we have more jobs to sustain this market and it goes back again to my childhood. That also led me back to an experience I had when I was right out of grad school from Assembly member Karen Bass's office. I got a job with Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa as the West Area Director. So I was overseeing many of the community issues in the West Side of Los Angeles. And this is during the height of the recession in 2008 and I remember distinctly there was a call that I received from a person that was in the west side of Los Angeles and there were some street parking signs that were changed. And his car was towed and he was working previously in the Hollywood industry. And because of the downturn in economy he lost his job and also lost his family because he couldn't support them and he was living in his car. And when they towed his car he lost basically the last thing that really held them onto the society with him.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:18:00] Yeah, he lost everything.

Stephen Cheung: [00:18:01] He lost everything and was contemplating suicide. And it brought me back to the skill sets that I developed when I was working for the Center for the Pacific Asian family. While I also manage a hotline for for many of these clients so I have to reuse my skill sets as a social worker to really start counseling this person give them the resources. I'm happy to report that person luckily did take some of the resources and I hope he's still alive today and that he's doing well. But looking at all that you can see how it ties back in the job creation aspect really ties back into the individual survival. So if we don't have the ability to really create good jobs for the

region, there might be opportunity or chance that individuals will fall through the crack and they might end up like this gentleman who through just no fault of his own through circumstances eventually fall into the very very darkest pits. And that's why it's so important for us to make sure that whether it's government resources, whether it's job creation, whether it's just human services that there are multiple levels of services that are available to the most vulnerable population within our region.

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Kathleen Buczko: [00:20:04] Stephen what motivates you at this point?

Stephen Cheung: [00:20:08] Well I think there are many many factors. But I think it really drives back down to seeing some of the injustices that I experience as a child and also seeing the opportunities are afforded to to a person like myself. Those, the positive and the negative factors that are available to every individual. And the really thin line that can send a person from having a really a normal well lived life to homelessness is very very thin. And so I've seen many cases where one thing can leads to another very quickly and I always believed that we're all just a few steps away from homelessness if we don't have the resources then we don't have the support network. I think knowing that and knowing how fragile our situations are, that's driving me to make sure that we do our best so that people who do fall into situations can be elevated. Can be left out of those situations so that they don't think about really horrible options like suicide.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:21:32] If you could talk to the eight year old Stephen who didn't know the language, was plunked into a suburb in a foreign country. What would you tell him?

Stephen Cheung: [00:21:45] It gets better. Sometimes it's challenging. But the thing is I do see the beauty in life. I do see opportunities out there. It does get better. But you know life is not always a straight road. Sometimes there are ups and sometimes they are down . But overall I think there are many many individuals and many people out there that are willing and wanting to help and assist. And so I think to stay strong and to keep your head high and keep hope alive. I think when that happens it creates more opportunities in the future.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:22:23] So Stephen what's next?

Stephen Cheung: [00:22:26] That's hard to say. [laughs] I had my career path lined up for me when I was when I was going to college. I thought I was going to be a bio chemical engineer. Creating artificial limbs and you know saving the world that way. But I've since then been a head hunter, a worker as a children's advocate, community legal advocates, the social worker, trade specialists, a port person, an environmental person, and now international trade. So you know if a while ago I decided not to make these long term plans and enjoy life as it is. And whatever comes comes. I hope to be able to continue on this path. It's been very rewarding to be able to continue into the field of human services and to be able to help individuals. And I mentioned before that the job I had at the Center for the Pacific Asian Family was probably the toughest job I've had but also probably the most enjoyable and rewarding job I've ever had. Because it's not everyday that your

work actually can lead to a life or death situation and be able to save someone's life. That's given me really really great perspective because you know sometimes I get stressed at work now but thinking about it you know no one's lives are going to be at risk immediately. So that really helps me kind of center myself and be able to do the work I need to do. So what would with that viewpoint I'm open to what's happening next but I really do hope that it will be continued in the field of human services.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:24:10] Stephen you do not fit the mold and I think we are all better for it.

Stephen Cheung: [00:24:15] Thank you.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:24:16] Thank you so much for sharing your journey, sharing your story, and thank you so much for not taking that linear path and helping us connect the dots. We hope to keep you in tune for the future.

Stephen Cheung: [00:24:30] Excellent. Well thank you for having me on. And I wish the best for everybody.

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