

34Remarks Given By
Frank F. Islam
On
naisA Global Awards

November 10, 2017

Good Evening:

Distinguished Guests, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for that kind introduction. To begin, I want to thank Dr. Jamie Youngee Sheen and the board of naisA Global for selecting me to receive this award and to congratulate them on the excellent and important work that naisA is doing.

I am truly privileged and pleased to be one of the honorees this evening. I am especially privileged because of being here with the other two honorees – Dr. Sachiko Kuno and Dr. Wallace Loh.

It is said that a person is known by the company he keeps. In receiving this award this evening I am in exceptional company. And, I might add company that highlights the opportunity and greatness of this great nation.

Think about it: an immigrant from India, an immigrant from Japan, and an immigrant from China sharing the stage as honorees tonight. It is proof that the United States is the land of opportunity.

As we know in convening here this evening, though, the United States and its businesses are not perfect. There is still a need to level the playing field - or to borrow a phrase from the white paper that Dr. Sheen wrote “to break through the bamboo ceiling”. This will ensure that Asian American students and young professionals have an equal opportunity to climb to the top and to become executives and leaders in their respective fields of endeavor.

Dr. Sheen’s paper shows that Asian Americans excel in their academic performance. Her paper notes and I quote, “however, despite all of their academic accomplishment, Asians have not been able to break into the upper ranks of industry leadership. They remain severely underrepresented in leadership positions.”

This lack of representation is highlighted on naisA’s home page which points out that Asian Americans account for 25% of Ivy League students and 50% of the Silicon Valley workforce but constitute only 2% of Fortune 500 CEOs, 3% of US attorneys, and 2 % of college presidents.

These discrepancies are disturbing. They can only lead me to conclude that when it comes to acknowledgement and advancement in the workplace Asian Americans are being bamboozled.

It's time to end that bamboozling and to give those outstanding Asian American students and young professionals the assistance they need to break through the bamboo ceiling. One of the best ways that can be done is through the naisA mentoring – protégée program.

Mentoring can be critical to success in business. I say that because I was mentored at two pivotal points in my life.

My first mentor was Wolfgang Thron a college professor of mathematics from the University of Colorado. Dr. Thron told me that I had great potential and encouraged me to leave India and to go to school at the University of Colorado so that I could pursue expanded opportunities and get a cutting edge education in the emerging field of compute science.

I trusted Dr. Thron's advice. So, even though it was scary, at the age of 16, I decided to leave my family and friends in India with just thirty five dollars in my pocket.

Time does not permit great detail on my college years. Suffice it to say that I loved Boulder and I got my bachelor's and master's degrees in computer science to pursue my life-long dream of owning my own business.

I did not come from a family that owned a business. I had no personal experience or role model in business.

Therefore, I decided to do my apprenticeship and to learn the ropes by going to work for large IT companies. During that period, I had the good fortune to meet my second mentor, Dick Bishop.

He was my mentor in business. He taught me the ins and outs of managing information technology contracts with the government and inspired my entrepreneurship. Dick helped me develop the knowledge, skills and abilities required to succeed in business.

Based upon his mentorship, I felt ready to go out on my own and I acquired a company in 1994 for \$45,000. With the help of a wonderful management team that I recruited over time, we built that business from 1 employee – me – to more than 3,000 employees with annual revenue of more than \$300 million dollars. The team of talented managers were central to everything. Success in business is team sport. So, when people asked me how I became successful, it was not me but we who made it happen.

In 2007, after 13 years, I sold the company to Perot Systems. That sale allowed me to move on to the next stage of my career to philanthropy and civic engagement. In many ways, the process of sharing and giving back is much more rewarding than any of the money that I have earned throughout my business career.

In summary, mentoring has meant much to me. I would not be what or who I am without the mentoring that I have received on business and other fronts.

I recognize what a difference mentoring can make for the mentee and for the mentor. That is why I was thrilled when naisA Global informed me they were giving me this award.

I was even more thrilled when I did the research and saw the good work naisA has done. Seeing that it has 480 current mentors and over 2,400 active protégées is a testimony to what it has already accomplished and the platform that it has built for future success.

Given my own background and personal experience, I would like to throw one idea into the pot for naisA's consideration. That is that it develop a mentoring program for Asian Americans who want to be entrepreneurs and start-up or build their own businesses.

There have been numerous studies over the past several years that show that the rate of business start ups by Asian Americans has grown substantially. This growth has been especially strong in the engineering and technology fields. I am confident that if naisA developed a mentoring program focusing on would-be entrepreneurs it would drive that growth much higher.

In closing, let me tell you about another mentor of mine. That is President John F. Kennedy.

I never met President Kennedy personally. But, I grew up with him. He was a source of inspiration for me in my youth.

He has grown to be even more of an inspiration to me as I have learned more about him by serving on the board of trustees of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the advisory board of the JFK Library.

In 1958, before he became President, John F. Kennedy wrote a book titled *A Nation of Immigrants*. In that book, JFK observed:

The abundant resources of this land provided the foundations for a great nation. But only people could make the opportunity a reality. Immigrations provided the human resources. More than that, it infused the nation with a commitment to far horizons and new

frontiers, and thereby kept the pioneer spirit of American life, the spirit of equality and of hope always alive and well.

What makes America great is that we are a nation of immigrants.

President Kennedy also famously said in his inaugural address, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

As we approach 2018, one of the key things that we can do to ensure that Asian Americans are fully prepared to answer that call to and to be leaders in moving the United States and its citizens to those "far horizons and new frontiers" is to support naisA Global and its programs.

Again, it has been my privilege to be here with all of you and my fellow honorees. Thanks for giving me this time to share my thoughts. God bless each and every one of you.