



WHAT'S WORKING

A Message From DJJ Director Andy Block

Aug. 4, 2016



“I Am So Proud Of Him.”

CSU 24–Lynchburg Probation Supervisor Joe Gong and Deputy Director for Residential Services Jack Ledden swap memories of their time together 20 years ago under much different circumstances at the Prince William County Home for Boys.

20 Years Later, Jack Ledden, Joe Gong Credit Each Other For Their Success

“There’s someone who works for me that says you changed his life.”

Deputy Director of Residential Services Jack Ledden turned to see who was saying the words that every juvenile justice professional longs to hear at some point in their career. He was surprised to see that it was CSU 24–Lynchburg Director Bob Wade, who was attending a recent training session with Ledden at the Virginia Public Safety Training Center.

“He’s wondering if it’s OK if he says hello to you,” Wade continued.

Completely mystified and now insatiably curious,

Ledden followed Wade over to CSU 24 Probation Supervisor Joe Gong, who was participating in the training.

“Uh, I just wanted to talk to you,” Joe began nervously. “I was one of the kids at the Prince William County Home for Boys when you were the manager of it back in 1996. I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciated what you did for me.”

Ledden was awestruck. As the physically fit 35-year-old man in front of him continued to talk about his memories of two decades earlier, it all came flooding back: The early morning trips to the local gym with grumbling teen boys in tow; the trip to Ocracoke Island in North Carolina where

they camped on the beach; the work on the water trenches at Camp Rapidan, President Herbert Hoover's retreat in the Shenandoah Valley.

"It was unbelievable," Ledden says. "Joe is a walking, talking, living, breathing example of the reason we do what we do. And the fact that he chose to go into the field of juvenile justice himself after all he went through ... that's just incredible to me."

Joe readily acknowledges that as a teenager growing up in Woodbridge, he was a "knucklehead."

"A lot of people who knew me then would be shocked to see where I am now," says Joe, who joined DJJ in 2005 as a probation officer and has been Probation Supervisor since 2010. "I was the kid that parents didn't want their kids hanging around."

It was an angry 15-year-old who entered the Prince William Home for Boys in late 1996. Joe remembers being sullen and foul-mouthed, accustomed to male authority figures who always "talked down" to their charges. But the group home experience was different. "This was the first time where residents were expected to hold each other accountable," says Joe. "And Jack was a strong presence. Getting respect is a big deal for kids in that situation, and Jack always respected us. He always had time to talk to you. He didn't always agree with you, but there was always respect. Because of that, we opened our minds to a lot of what he said."

A turning point came for Joe just a few days before he was scheduled to be released from the home. Someone handed him a newspaper article describing a drive-by shooting in which the victim died. Joe recognized the names of those charged with the crime as five of his friends



CSU 24–Lynchburg Probation Supervisor Joe Gong became familiar with courtrooms from both sides of the law.

he used to hang out with.

"Fortunately, the people at the home helped me process that moment," he says. "I realized that if I were still hanging with them, I could have been there. That's when I decided I wanted nothing more to do with that life."

He moved to Massachusetts where he could live with a supportive grandmother as he completed his GED. While he wasn't going to school, he worked at a local fast food restaurant to earn money to pay the fines he owed. He then returned to Virginia where he spent the next seven years earning an AS degree from Northern Virginia Community College and a bachelor's degree in psychology from Longwood University.

Joe fulfilled his longtime desire to go into criminal justice when he landed his first job as a probation officer with the Stafford office of CSU 15. "After I got my GED, I asked myself, What jobs could I do that I respect and that could make a difference? I thought back about all the people who had helped me. I decided I wanted to be one of them."

"He has so much to offer to our youth today, because he's lived it," Ledden notes. "All we have to do is say, 'Look at him: He did it, and you can, too.'"

With about three years remaining before he retires, Ledden can say with conviction that what Joe did for him was equally as profound as Joe's experience with Jack.

"Every once in a while, I'll run into one of the kids I worked with back then," he says. "Some bring their families, or I'll see a newspaper story about one of their achievements. But I don't think anything can top this one – I am so proud of him. It's amazing what he's done."

